

A PATH IN THE

# WILDERNESS

PRAYING THROUGH LENT  
WITH THE DESERT  
FATHERS AND MOTHERS

CHRISTOPHER KLOFFT

## INTRODUCTION

The Middle East around the 4<sup>th</sup> century was the central location for the birth and expansion of monasticism: the practice where men and women chose to leave the cities and journey into the wilderness either to live alone or in communities. There, they practiced lives of strict asceticism, that is, praying, fasting and engaging in manual labor all for the express purpose of radically following Christ. The more spiritually experienced (and usually older) men and women came to be known as “Abbas” and “Ammas”—titles of both respect and affection. Less experienced monks, or wannabe spiritual seekers, and even just the curious from the cities would travel into the desert to speak with these men and women to get counsel on how to live the spiritual life. The Fathers and Mothers would offer “a word,” a pointed piece of advice to help the questioner in their walk with Christ.

The words of these spiritual masters were collected into *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Remarkably, their influence on the Christian spiritual life endures. Their words might be unfamiliar to us, and the life of an ascetic in the desert might seem far removed from our experience. The emphasis placed on humble submission to the will of a spiritual father might grate against our modern insistence of absolute autonomy. Rather than being challenged by their writings, we might be tempted to dismiss them. Yet doing so would be a missed opportunity.

While the Desert Fathers and Mothers may seem foreign to us, their wisdom, psychological precision and merciful common sense remain applicable to us today. *A Path in the Wilderness* gives us an opportunity to sit with them and receive a word, that we, too, might grow closer to Jesus Christ this Lent.

These reflections are arranged first with the words of the Desert Fathers and Mothers themselves (A Word From the Desert), followed by a daily reflection, brief prayer and then the Word of God (A Word from the Lord). The Fathers always called their students to Scripture; we do well to let them lead us there also.

*Christopher Klofft*

## ASH WEDNESDAY

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

I put out my foot to ascend the ladder, and I place death before my eyes before going up it. — **Amma Sarah**

Lent is a journey, but it is meant to be an ascent towards the glory of Easter. We begin our reflections with a word from one of the Desert Mothers. Amma Sarah gives us a vision of the whole Lenten experience summed up in a single sentence.

Amma Sarah puts her foot to the ladder with a simple resolve. She doesn't dwell on what she's leaving behind; she commits to the climb. Once one starts climbing a ladder, there are only two directions to go: upwards towards one's destination or downwards towards where one began.

She includes another provocative detail in her image: She puts death before her eyes. This does not refer to the hazard of the climb; it refers to what she is leaving behind. Lent is a reminder that we are dead in our sins. We need the saving action of Christ to truly live. Take this season as an opportunity to strike outwards and upwards towards the God who constantly reaches out his hand to save us.

*Lord, I come before you today with resolve to let you work in me this season. Give me the grace to make good on this effort.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

...return to me with your whole heart,  
with fasting, weeping, and mourning.  
Rend your hearts, not your garments,  
and return to the LORD, your God,  
For he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love,  
and relenting in punishment.  
Perhaps he will again relent  
and leave behind a blessing... **Joel 2:12-14**



## THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

Men turn their minds either to their sins, or to Jesus, or to men. — *Abba Elias*

This Lent, we have choices. As a penitential season, we should reflect on our sins, but if we dwell on them in an obsessive fashion, we fail to open ourselves up to God's healing grace. We could easily fall into the rote ritual practices and "give things up" without reflecting on why. Or we could turn our hearts, minds and bodies over to Jesus and allow him to transform us this season. Again, this choice is ours.

*Lord, your will be done, today and through this whole season.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil. *Deuteronomy 30:15*

## FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

In all temptation, do not complain about anyone else, but say about yourself, "These things happen to me because of my sins." — *Abba Or*

It is so easy for us to put the blame for our struggles on other people. We rant, but all complaining really does is heighten our frustration. Lent invites us to turn inward to deal with our decisions that have contributed to our misery and the misery of others so that Christ might heal us.

*Lord, I turn my life over to you this Lent. Heal me.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

See, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits...  
See, you fast only to quarrel and fight...  
Is this the manner of fasting I would choose...? *Isaiah 58:3-5*

## SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

As far as you can, do some manual work so as to be able to give alms, for it is written that alms and faith purify from sin.

— *Abba Poemen*

The three pillars of Lent are fasting, almsgiving and prayer. In this word, Abba Poemen specifically calls out the importance of alms, but note how one is empowered to give alms: by manual work. For the monk, this was a literal task: The monk produced goods (often handmade reed baskets) to sell in order to give alms to those in need.

Two thoughts arise from this. The first is that we should always remember who we work for in our jobs. Of course we earn money to sustain ourselves and our families and to provide a certain level of freedom from anxiety so that we might have the peace to pursue our relationship with Christ. But our means are not only for us; we have a responsibility to help those who are suffering or in need, those who lack the resources to live a truly human life.

The second thought is the importance of manual labor: the work of our hands and bodies. While our jobs may not actually require much physical exertion, the Abba highlights the importance of our bodily presence and work in the process of our sanctification. This Lent, take time to exercise, to eat well (not just less) and to reach out and embrace someone who needs God's presence in their life.

*Heavenly Father, help me to understand how I can best use the resources you give me to build your Kingdom in my life and in the lives of others.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

If you lavish your food on the hungry  
and satisfy the afflicted;

Then your light shall rise in the darkness,

and your gloom shall become like midday. *Isaiah 58:10*



## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

[A demon] said to [Abba Macarius], “All that you have, we have also; you are distinguished from us only by humility; by that you get the better of us.” — *Abba Macarius, the Great*

On this First Sunday of Lent, we traditionally read the Gospel account of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. (See Matthew 4:1-11.) This is one of the primary reasons the Desert Fathers also went out into the desert: to do combat with the devil. In the Gospel, Satan tempts Jesus to satisfy his needs by use of his divine power, thereby selfishly abusing his divine authority. In all three occasions of temptation, Jesus resists the devil with recourse to his fidelity to his Father’s will. This serves as an example for us.

“But,” one might protest, “I’m not divine like Jesus; I’m just a weak, sinful person.” Of course, and in this way we are like the demons, according to the demon speaking to Abba Macarius. But here’s the critical difference: We, unlike the demons, can submit our will to God in humility just as Jesus modeled for us. In our humility, by not trying to be the gods of our own lives, we can triumph over our weakness and sin.

*Jesus, protect me from the temptations of the demons. Give me the strength to be meek and humble.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, and he said to him, “All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan! It is written: ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him. **Matthew 4:8-11**

## MONDAY OF THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

### A WORD FROM THE DESERT

Obedience with abstinence gives men power over wild beasts. — **Abba Anthony**

Following on the account of the temptation in the desert, Abba Anthony begins our week with a word about how to deal with wild beasts. These wild beasts are not external to us, such as forest or jungle creatures; rather, such beasts dwell within us. They threaten to run over us and tear us to pieces unless we deal with them.

Of note are those beasts that are still wild but which we think we have tamed. For instance, we all have our own “pet sins” that we barely pay attention to because they have become such a part of our lives. It may be the impatience we feel towards others, or the unrighteous anger against those who think differently from us, or the sexual sins we indulge in in private that we tell ourselves are not so bad because “everyone does it.”

We can't domesticate sin. The only power over these wild beasts is to abstain from those practices that lead us away from God and to turn our wills over to him in obedience.

*Lord, give me the wisdom to recognize the “pet sins” in my life and give me the grace to root them out.*

### A WORD FROM THE LORD

You say, “The LORD’s way is not fair!” Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair? Are not your ways unfair?”  
**Ezekiel 18:25**



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# WILDERNESS

The earliest monks who went into the desert to pray and serve the Lord by living ascetic lives are a source of wisdom for those living in the modern world today. Christianity is most effectively handed on person-to-person, and the Fathers and Mothers of the desert would offer “a word,” a pointed piece of advice to help their questioner in their walk with Christ. These sayings from these spiritual masters, some of which are contained herein, had a remarkable influence on the spiritual life of the Christian church into the Middle Ages and through the modern day. Their timeless wisdom regarding spirituality, prayer and simplicity of life remains a gift to the Church.

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