

Sunday Sermon – 4th Sunday of Lent – John Climacus – 2015-03-22

By Fr. Demetri Tsigas, St. Katherine, Melbourne, FL

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our parish is named St. Katherine. There are two other parishes here in Florida, in West Palm Beach and Naples, also named after the same [St. Katherine](#). She was a young, beautiful and very intelligent noblewoman who stood up for Christ and was tortured and died for her faith. The tradition of our church tells us that angels brought her relics to [Mt. Sinai](#) and that a monastery was established there. It was built up first by the [Empress Helen](#) in the fourth century and much more later under [Justinian the Great](#) in the sixth century. Through the years, it has been visited by many distinguished historical leaders, including the Prophet Mohammed who put it under his protection. (There is a document called the [Ashtiname](#) with his handprint on it.)

Today our church commemorates an Abbot of that monastery from the seventh century named John. He had become a much sought after spiritual father. He was asked by the abbot of another monastery, John of Raithu, to put in writing basic instructions for monks. The result was [The Ladder of Divine Ascent](#) which has become a classic of Orthodox Christian literature and spirituality. It contains [thirty chapters](#) which are described as rungs on Jacob's Ladder leading us to heaven. The final rung of the ladder—beyond prayer (προσευχή), stillness (ήσυχία), and even dispassion (ἀπαθεία)—is love (ἀγάπη). Though this is a manual for monastics, there are certainly spiritual benefits to be had by clergy and lay people outside the monastery as well.

This week, our church celebrates the feast of the [Annunciation](#), the announcement to a faithful Jewish teenage girl that she would become the mother of God by the Holy Spirit. According to tradition, nine months later she gave birth to Jesus Christ. The announcement of the coming of the [Divine Logos](#) in the flesh was used to celebrate the freedom that He would bring. Freedom from sin, freedom from death, freedom from the Mosaic Law, and freedom to believe in and follow Christ. The struggle for [Greek Independence](#) from Muslim rule was declared on March 25 of 1821. After having suffered under Islam for nearly 400 years, [Metropolitan Germanos of Patra](#) chose that day to declare the beginning of the struggle for political and religious freedom.

In yesterday's [Wall Street Journal](#), there was an extensive essay by a Muslim man arguing for a reformation of Islam. He acknowledges that it is NOT a religion of peace, but that it should seek to become one. He argues that just as Judaism reformed its violent spiritual tradition, likewise Islam needs to do the same. He also acknowledges that he is in fear for his life for having said so. (The statistics he quotes are that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world. Though only 3% are radicalized and willing to die or terrorize others, that's still 48 million! He also goes on to say that most other Muslims support this interpretation of Islam.)

All of these are about a struggle. We cannot truly live in this world without struggle. It comes with being alive. The question becomes what will we struggle for and how will we struggle. [Jihad](#) means struggle. Most of us are more familiar with its use to describe Muslim holy war and the propagation and defense of Islam. It also means a personal spiritual struggle for perfection. Imagine if all people of faith engaged only in a personal spiritual struggle for perfection. Imagine if all Christians did that.

The heroes of our faith from the Old Testament through the New Testament and throughout Christian Church History did exactly that. All of us are called to be heroes for Christ by personally struggling to embrace prayer, stillness and dispassion but especially humility and love.

[St. Seraphim of Sarov](#) believed that if we, "*Acquired the spirit of peace, a thousand souls around us would be saved.*" What if that were true? In my study of America's Founding Fathers, I have come to believe that they clearly understood that America was blessed by God because we were a mostly godly nation filled with mostly godly people. It seems to me that today we have mostly turned our back on God and unless and until we return to being a mostly godly people, we will continue to suffer the consequences.

Christianity is about freedom in Christ. God does not want to force anyone to join His Church. He wants us to freely choose to follow Jesus Christ. If we choose to follow Him, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and struggle to make our way to heaven, then we and those around us will be blessed in this life and in eternal life. If we turn our backs on Jesus Christ, to instead follow our own selfish and foolish way, we and those around us suffer the consequences in this life and in eternal life. If it were easy

to fast, to pray and to give generously to the poor and to the Church, we'd all be saints and the world would look like heaven on earth.

I think that's a worthy goal, a beautiful spiritual vision for my life, for my family, for my parish and for the world. I hope that you too will see it as a worthy goal and struggle to live a spiritual life in accordance with the Gospel and our Orthodox Christian Tradition. You have to freely choose that then seek out knowledge and support to fully actualize that decision.

I'm not perfect. I am a sinner doing my best with God's help to be a saint. As your priest, pastor and shepherd, I am striving to help you understand and choose to do the same. The real laser focus on the development of theology in the Orthodox Christian Tradition was on the Incarnation, the taking on of a physical nature by a spiritual god. The impact of that is not just on a hope of someday getting into heaven but of seeking to have God living and breathing in us now. When we join with others who are seeking to do the same, then God's life and breath fills the world around us and we begin to live in a physical paradise. It is this theology, this vision, which keeps me striving to be a saint in such a fallen world. I pray that you may all join me and together we can bring about a little bit of heaven on earth.

To God be the glory, now and forever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.