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# St. Mary of Egypt

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About 500 years after the Resurrection of our Lord, a holy monk by the name of Zosimas lived in a monastery by the Jordan River. He had lived as a monk since childhood and when he was about 50 years old he began to think that he had surpassed all the other monks in virtue and that no one could teach him anything he didn't already know. To prevent such a prideful thought from taking root, God taught him a lesson.

It was the custom in the monastery that at the beginning of each Great Lent, after Liturgy on Forgiveness Sunday, the monks would cross the Jordan and scatter throughout the desert where they would stay until Palm Sunday. Each monk would spend this time alone before God, in fasting and prayer, without anyone around to praise him for his struggles.

Fr. Zosimas went far into the desert. On the 20th day, as he stopped for prayer, he saw a human shape. At first he thought the devil was playing tricks with his eyes. But when he protected himself with the sign of the Cross, he saw it clearly: thin and naked, skin baked dark and hair bleached white by the sun, it seemed to glide over the sandy hill. Overjoyed at the thought of seeing a holy man, Zosimas hurried to follow and shouted: "Slave of the True God, do not run from me an old sinner!"

"Forgive me," a voice returned, "but I cannot face you, Father Zosimas, for I am a shameful, naked woman. Please throw me your cloak so that I may cover myself and ask your blessing."

Terror seized the monk as she called him by name; how did she know it? Turning aside, he threw his ragged cloak her way. In deep humility both Saints fell prostrate before one another in the sand, asking each other's blessing. Finally the woman said, "Father Zosimas, you must give the blessing, having been in the Holy Altar so many years as a priest

Struck with awe by her divine gift of knowledge, Zosimas pleaded with tears, "Please give me your blessing, Mother. Grace is not given only to priests, but even more to those who have died to the world and live with God. For God's sake, bless me, for I need your holy prayers." In obedience the woman declared, "Blessed is God Who cares for the salvation of our souls."

"Amen," answered Father Zosimas.

Then the woman wanted to know why he had come and how Christians lived in the world. He said that by her holy prayers Christ had granted them peace, and asked her to continue to pray.

Reminding him that he, too, must always pray, she turned toward the East. Father Zosimas heard only whispers and looked at the ground in meek confusion. When he began to think her prayer was very long, he looked up to see her standing in the air about three feet above the ground. Bowing down with tears and begging God's mercy, he begged her to tell him of her life, so that the wisdom and treasure of God might not be hid.

•'My story," said the woman, "will make you run as from a snake. You must forgive me for what you will hear, for I lived a shameful life and felt no shame. At only 12 years old I ran away from my parents, threw away my purity, and then trampled upon it with every sinful person I could find. I loved to drink wine and feel pleasure and lead others into sin; and for 17 years I never tired of any kind of sinning.

"One day I saw a crowd going to Jerusalem. Since I had no money, I promised some men that I would help them pass the journey in merrymaking if they would take me with them. With crude jokes they agreed. I am amazed, Abba, that hell did not open beneath us and swallow us alive. But God desires the repentance of even the worst sinner.

"Within a few days of our arrival, I saw a large crowd hurrying to church, I was told, for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. Out of curiosity I joined them. But when my foot touched the doorstep, my body was held back by an invisible barrier. I could not enter, though I tried hard several times. Becoming tired, I let people push me aside and stood in a corner of the porch. Above me I saw an icon of the Pure Mother of God, and I began to understand that my sinful life was keeping me from entering. I turned to the icon in tears and begged the Holy Virgin to help me get inside to see the life-giving Cross, promising to give up everything and go where she would lead me after that.

"Joining the crowd again, I easily entered the Church and saw the precious Cross and the Holy Mysteries; there I saw how the Lord accepts repentance. Filled with hope, I returned to the icon where I heard a voice from on high, 'If you cross the Jordan you will find glorious rest.

'Oh Lady, never leave me! I cried, and was on my way. Someone gave me coins and I bought three loaves of bread. By the grace of God they fed me for several years; for the rest of these 47 years I have been fed by the Word of God and plants I find.

"But Oh, Father, how sinful memories attacked my mind and soul like wild beasts: dirty songs, desire for wine and rich foods and bad companions; my clothes wore out and I suffered from my nakedness. I was tempted to return to my old life. But in my thoughts I always turned to the Mother of God, and she has always kept me safe, chasing away wicked thoughts and restoring peace to my soul." With this she finished her story, begging the Abba to pray for her soul and not tell anyone about her until she died.

The next year, on the day of the Last Supper, Zosimas brought her the Holy Mysteries, and she walked across the Jordan as on dry land to receive them. Seeing such a miracle, Zosimas explained, "Glory to Thee Christ Our God, Who has shown me through this Thy slave how far away I stand from perfection." He promised to come again the following year.

Again leaving the Monastery for Great Lent, Zosimas found her at the appointed place, wrapped in his mantle, her face toward the East, lying in eternal repose. In the sand she had written her name, instructions for her burial, and a note that she had died the day he brought her Holy Communion.

Weak and without tools, Father Zosimas despaired of a way to bury the saint. But God sent an affectionate lion who dug a deep hole in the sand. Covering St. Mary's feet with tears and kisses, the holy elder committed her to the earth with prayers. The lion went off into his desert and the elder returned to his monastery where he told the story which has been kept to this day, bringing glory to God and hope to sinners.

May the merciful God give to us all St. Mary's willingness to repent, and the protection of the Holy Virgin to help us. Amen.

(Written for children by Agafia Prince)