



Your Lenten Journey

It will feel like a long month waiting for Pascha to come, especially when the rest of the world celebrates Easter at the beginning of April. It feels strange that our date for Easter is different from the rest of the world. That means that by the time we celebrate, there will be no Easter candy in the stores, no Easter baskets for sale at the grocery store and no more talk about egg hunts and special outfits. We will be in the middle of Great Lent when everyone else is celebrating Easter.

Great Lent sometimes feels like the longest time of the year. It seems like we wait forever for Pascha to finally get here. It feels so long because we are working very, very hard to change our lives during lent. We are trying to be better, slow our lives down more, and make more time for God in our lives. This change is probably something we would do every day if we lived at a monastery, but we don't live in a monastery. We live with our moms, dads, brothers and sisters. We can't pretend that we don't live in



our world, go to school, play sports, do homework and play with friends. We have to live our lives as we normally do, but if we are going through Great Lent and spending more time with God, people will notice a change in us. They will notice that we are trying harder to do good things, say kinder words and be more helpful. They will notice that we try to stay out of arguments and gossip. They will notice that we aren't just trying to be a goodie-goodie but that our heart really is good and that we are treating those around us a little bit differently. That is because we treat people the way we know Jesus would treat them if He were standing with us. Jesus is our lenten journey and helps us grow closer to God.

Sundays in April

April 4 is the Sunday of the Holy Cross: This is the middle of Great Lent, and we put the cross in the center of the church to remember where our lenten journey is headed.

April 11 is the Sunday of St. John of the Ladder: This monk wrote a book about how to climb an invisible ladder by doing good things in order to get to heaven one day.

April 18 is the Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt: We remember this sinful woman who shows us that no amount of sin can cause God to not love us, especially if we are sorry for our sins and change our ways to good.

April 25 is Palm Sunday: We remember that Jesus was proclaimed as the King of the Jews after raising His friend Lazarus from the dead.



It was the middle of March Madness and Jessie and George were not waiting for the next big game. They were waiting for their great-grandmother's 100th birthday party. They would get to miss a whole week of school for the party. They'd get to see their grandmother and their great-grandmother's church in Minneapolis, which they heard about numerous times from mom, as well as having high hopes of riding the rollercoaster at the biggest mall in the world. It was something to look forward to for two reasons. One, it was already spring in Florida, but in Minneapolis it was still winter and that meant the possibility of seeing snow. Jessie and George had never seen snow before in their lives. Once little ice chips fell from the sky and landed on plastic in their front yard. They had gathered them all together and figured that snow must just be a bunch more of these flakes all together. And two, they had not traveled in a whole year because of covid. Baba and Grammy had received their second dose of the shot and felt comfortable having visitors now. They borrowed jackets and boots and snow pants from friends and were very excited about the trip. Their bags were packed and ready for days. But that night, on the night before they were going to fly out, they got a call from Grammy that Baba had fallen on the ice and was

in the hospital. Mom was crying and Jessie and George were worried. Would it ruin their trip? Would they still get to have the party for Baba? The next morning Mom woke up early and called Grammy. Her voice sounded worried on the phone, and when she got off the phone she said that they were still going but it looked like Baba was so weak and might not even live long enough for them to get to see her. That day seemed to last forever. The ride to the airport, the flight, the ride straight to the hospital, dragged on. There was snow everywhere when they landed. There was so much snow that the hospital parking lot looked like mountains of dirty white ice. Jessie and George rode with mom in the elevator up to the fourth floor, down a long hall and around two corners to room 411. That was where they bumped right into Grammy. She squeezed everyone so hard. Then she told the boys that they should go in and pray with Baba. "Can she talk?" Jessie asked. "Yes but she is weak and she can only say a few words before she tires out," Grammy explained. George and Jessie grabbed their mom's hand and walked into the room. It was bright in there and Baba smiled as soon as she recognized the twins and their mom. She said, "I waited for you!" George began to sing the only prayer he could think of, "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death. And upon those in the tombs, bestowing life!" Jessie chimed in and so did Mom and Grammy. Baba squeezed their hands tight. Then she smiled and closed her eyes. She slept all night and Mom thought that the boys should get some dinner and sleep. They'd surely be back in the morning for Baba's birthday. But early that morning, Grammy called the house and told everyone that Baba had died early that morning on her birthday. Everyone started crying. Mom, Jessie and George all went to the hospital to see her one last time before they took her to the funeral home. As they stood there looking at this very old woman, Grammy's brother and sister all started telling stories from their childhood. They talked about cold winter days where Baba went sledding with them or took them snow shoeing to school and they were three hours late and frozen. Or the time when their cat got stuck in the tree and Baba climbed on the roof to rescue it. It was amazing hearing all the stories. Even though it was a sad day for everyone, the memories shared made the day a little bit brighter.

In the Spotlight

St. John of the Ladder was from the 7th century and the town of Climacus. He became a monk when he was 16 and eventually was appointed the abbot of St Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. While he lived at the monastery, St. John wrote lots of books giving people instructions about how to live a godly life. One of those books was called The Ladder of Divine Ascent. (That's how he got the nickname "John of the Ladder.") This book is widely read by people during lent because this book gives a good understanding of how to change from ungodly ways in order to one day be able to live with God in heaven. He says, "Nothing equals God's love!" Therefore if you do something bad, God doesn't stop loving you; you just have to get back on the ladder of doing good things and change from doing bad things.



On April 4th, when most of our friends are celebrating Easter, we will be celebrating the feast of the Life-giving Cross. There is a beautifully decorated cross in the middle of the church. We bow down before the cross three times, making the sign of the cross. And although this year we might not be able to physically kiss the cross, we still know and understand that it is a very important symbol for Christians all over the world. We wear crosses around our necks daily to remind us that we believe in Jesus, who died on the cross for us. But on this particular Sunday, the cross also reminds us that we are halfway through the lenten season. That means three weeks in and three weeks to go.

If we only have three weeks to go, we don't have much time to put the cross in the middle of our lives. The cross that hangs on our necks reminds us all that Jesus died on the cross. Our lenten journey is taking us right to that cross on Holy Friday. When we attend services on Holy Thursday evening, there will be an even bigger cross brought into the middle of the church for us as a giant reminder that Jesus was nailed to the cross and died. We will hear the priest read the gospels about how Jesus was led to the high priest, condemned, crucified and finally died upon that very cross. He did it because He wanted to show the world that God was even more powerful than death and that God was more powerful than sin as well. Even though bad things happen in our world, we know that God's love is much more powerful than any of the bad, especially all the bad that has come to us during this pandemic. With His power, we are able to change bad and become good. He died so that one day we could live with God in heaven and not have to worry about sin and death or even Covid 19 anymore.

So how do we put the cross in the middle of our lives? With only three weeks left to shape up and get that cross as our focus, we don't have much time to spare. In order to put the cross in the middle, we need to make Jesus Christ the center of our lives. We need to treat each person we meet as if we were standing and looking at Jesus Himself. Seeing Jesus crucified on the cross reminds us that He loved us so much that He even died for us upon this cross. Even though the cross brought death, it stands for life, love, victory over Satan, as a weapon of Godliness, and for everlasting joy. The cross seems like it should stand for sadness since Jesus was nailed to it, but the cross for us Christians is a constant reminder of life. Christians don't live their lives focusing on the sadness but instead we look for happiness. We look for goodness, love, and everlasting joy within all those around us. We try to change from our bad ways and become much better. We wear our cross around our neck every day to remind us that we are better than sin and sickness and death. We are better and stronger than Satan and more powerful than his crafty and bad ways. With Jesus as our center, and with treating people as if we are standing with Jesus, we will be putting the cross in the middle of our own lives as well.

Sorrow...

"Why did Jesus have to die?" Marcie asked. We do this every year. I don't like Holy Week because it is long and there is a lot of church and then on the day when we have all those Gospel readings, the cross is carried out. I watch people and they are serious and they cry. I want to cry too. I don't like Judas very much. If Jesus was the Son of God, why couldn't He just stay alive? People already loved Him," she continued. Mom listened intently to Marcie and then said, "They did love Him, but some people hated Him very much. Some people were so scared that He would become too powerful. They thought that if people put their trust and love in Jesus, then they would not put their trust and love in the king. It really is hard to understand how people could hate the same Jesus that we love so much. It is hard to understand how they

would want to kill Him. But in the days of Jesus, if you were a criminal, you were killed for your crime. Jesus's crime was that He said that He was the Son of God. In Jewish law, it was a crime to say that you were God's son. But we know that He really was God's son. Anyone who was at the tomb of Jesus at midnight on that first Easter Sunday also knew that Jesus was truly the Son of God. So for us Christians, we know that Jesus died so that we could have eternal life, a life forever with God in Heaven. This is the reason Jesus had to die." Marcie looked at mom with a tear in her eye. "I understand, but it still feels sad," she said. "You are sad because you have so much love inside of you, and that is a beautiful thing," Mom replied and hugged Marcie tightly.

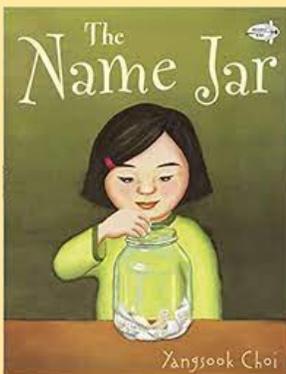


The Baba and Yiayia Corner



Zoe left the church with her head down. "Chin up," Yiayia said with a cheerful smile to her. Zoe made a strong effort to smile but she just didn't have it in her. She was working two jobs because she really wanted a car of her own. She knew it was something she would have to pay for and after she got a car, she knew that she would have gas and insurance and maintenance bills. She didn't like that she had to work so much, but it was necessary. She couldn't depend on her mom as much now that tennis season had started and her mom had matches half of the afternoons in a week. She was embarrassed and tired of asking her friends for rides to work, and the sermon this morning just hit too close to home for her. Zoe wanted to say, "never mind" to Yiayia but she knew it was disrespectful. So when Yiayia asked what had her so down, she told Yiayia that the sermon about St. John of the Ladder really had her thinking and she didn't like the thoughts swirling in her head. Father Theodore spoke about falling off a ladder and how it would physically stop a person. That person would have to get up and climb back up to the rung in order to get even higher but have to step on all the steps that were already made. He said that during Great Lent, we slow down our lives on purpose so that we can climb the ladder slowly. We have already fallen off

our ladders and lent is a time to refocus and climb with purpose. Yiayia shook her head as she agreed with everything Zoe was saying. "But why are you sad then" asked Yiayia. "Because lent is almost over and I haven't even felt like I put one foot on the ladder yet. It feels like all I do is go to school and then to work. I have no time for friends or soccer or just going to the park to take a walk and enjoy all the spring blossoms. I feel like I am running and running and running like a hamster in a wheel. If I am supposed to slow down during lent, I have missed the whole purpose of lent," Zoe said. Yiayia replied, "Well, if I recall correctly, there is a reading on Pascha night that says that even if you have waited until the last minute to get ready for Pascha, you are still invited to the Pascha celebration. I'm not saying you get a free pass this lent though. You just have to look at things differently. Are you healthy? Are you saving money? Are you working towards your goals? Are you still able to help out around the house like usual? Are you keeping your grades up? Do you still have friends? Your journey this year may be different from last, because you are different and your needs are different. You need to keep your chin up and know that God loves us unconditionally and knows we are all on different rungs of that ladder."



Books Books Books

The Name Jar written by Yangsook Choi is a picture book about a little girl named Unhei. She and her family moved from Korea to America. On her first day of school, the kids teased her on the bus about her name. So when she got to school she told her class that she didn't have a name yet because she hadn't chosen one. The next day in school, there was a glass jar on her desk. In the jar were names from all her classmates. They gave her suggestions so she could choose a name for herself. A new friend named Joe pressed for a name and Unhei showed him a stamp that her grandmother gave her that had her name on a stamp. Each day the jar filled with more and more names. But on Saturday when Unhei was in the Korean market, Joey was there and learned that Unhei already had a name. That Monday when she got to school the name jar was gone. Everyone tried to look for it. The ending is so great and I don't want to spoil it for you. It is a beautiful story, but don't just take my word for it.

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