

Great Lent: A Retreat into the Desert

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As we approach Great Lent, it is important to ask ourselves what Lent means to us and what role it will play in our lives this year. Each year it will be different depending upon whether we have grown spiritually the past year, regressed spiritually, or stayed the same. If we are ready to push ourselves more spiritually, then now is the time to find ways to deepen our Lenten experience in a way so that we can become closer to God. The Orthodox Lenten experience offers each person an opportunity to experience a more intimate relationship with God, an opportunity to cast off and turn away from sin, and increased knowledge of oneself. The accomplishments that we could achieve during Lent will be part of our life long after Lent is over.

Nevertheless, for each one of us, Great Lent should mean a journey into the desert. The desert being referred to here is not the physical desert, but rather the one inside each one of us. A desert is thought of as an isolated place, one however that contains tranquility and peace. It is a place where there are little to no distractions and where one can find it easier to focus. We must discover inside of us the spiritual desert of our heart. The place we are called to retreat to in order to have our encounter with God and to dialogue with Him. This “retreat” into our inner desert involves two steps. The first is withdrawing from the world (physically going into a quiet room) and the second step is delving into ourselves so that all external sound and sight is blocked out and we focus solely on God and the activity of our spirit. It is then that we have entered our desert. The duration of this activity may be different for each person. When just starting our first ventures into the desert it may be only for 15 minutes, however over time we may extend it to half an hour or even an hour for some.

It is during this time in the desert that we open our hearts to God and seek communion with Him. It is during this time that we can more clearly see the obstacles that exist in our life between us and God. It is during this time that we can more clearly hear the Holy Spirit. It is during this time that we become more introspective and that we gain more insight into ourselves. We see our sins more clearly in the desert. It is a critical time where we must decide do we push ourselves to make the needed changes that will be revealed to us or do we turn away and choose to stay the same? What is revealed to us during our time in the desert are things that we can apply throughout the year daily, not just during Lent.

Our daily ventures into our inner desert, combined with fasting and the Lenten services, can result in a powerful transformation in each one of us. Great Lent is an annual pilgrimage that we are all called to make. The desert is a beautiful place to visit, how many of us have missed the desert within ourselves? The desert awaits, God calls to it, will we respond?

