

Week Three:

## Saint Mary of Egypt

The beloved Saint Mary of Egypt ran away from her home at the age of twelve. It was probably an unhappy home, and Mary spent the next years trying to enjoy herself in any way she could. Perhaps she thought living this way would bring her happiness, but it didn't do so.

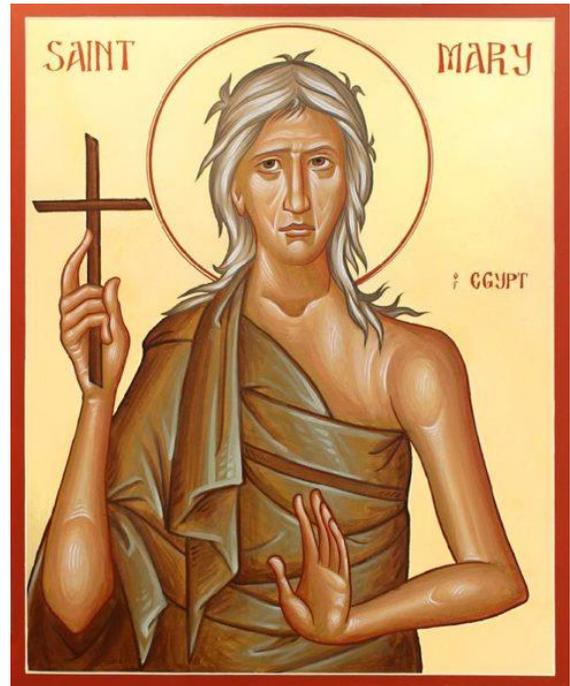
One day Mary saw a lively group of people boarding a ship bound for Jerusalem. She decided to go with them. The ship arrived on the day of the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross. Mary followed a crowd to the door of the church, but when she tried to enter, something held her back. This happened three times.

Mary saw the icon of Mary the Mother of God above the door. Suddenly she felt how far her life was from that other Mary's life, and she was deeply sad and ashamed. She begged the Theotokos to help her. Then, she was able to enter the church to worship and pray.

As she prayed, she heard a voice telling her to cross the Jordan and go into the desert. The voice told her that in the desert she would find peace. Mary did go, and it was not easy. She suffered and became ill, but she kept praying. She spent 47 years in the desert, and after all her efforts she died a holy person.

Another person in Saint Mary of Egypt's story is the monk Zossima. He hoped to become more perfect in his faith, and asked God to send him a teacher. Zossima was sure that God would provide a wise monk to teach him. He walked deep into the desert, for twenty days, expecting to find holy monks he could learn from.

Instead, he met Mary of Egypt. She told him about her life and asked him to pray for her. She then asked him to come the next year and to bring her Holy Communion, and he promised to do so. Zossima realized that this simple woman, who had become close to God through her years of prayer, was the teacher the Lord had sent.



Zossima did visit Mary the next year. They prayed together, and she received Holy Communion. But this would be the last time they would meet. When Zossima came again, Mary had died. With the help of a strong lion, the monk buried the teacher sent by God: Saint Mary of Egypt.

Read the account of Samuel being sent to anoint the man God had chosen to be king of Israel from among the sons of Jesse. It is in I Kingdoms (I Samuel) 16: 1-13. What does Samuel have in common with Zossima? *(Both men were surprised by God's choice: Samuel expected that the man chosen to be king of Israel would be one of Jesse's tall, strong sons rather than David, the youngest. Zossima expected that God would send a wise monk to teach him; instead it was Saint Mary of Egypt.)*

What words in the account of Samuel's experience can help us understand that we shouldn't depend too much on our own expectations? (In verse 7 we read that "...the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.") How can we be more open to the kinds of people God may send into our lives, especially during this Great Lent?

Saint Mary prayed in the desert for decades. Our lives are not like hers, but we too can pray. Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes about this in his book *Prayer: Encounter with the Living God*. He offers ways we can incorporate prayer over the course of each day. He goes on:

"People often justify their reluctance to pray by the fact that they are too busy and are overloaded with things to do. Yes, many of us live in a sort of rhythm unlike that of people of antiquity. Sometimes we have to do a great number of things over the course of the day. But in life there are always certain pauses. For example, we might stand at the bus stop for three to five minutes; if we take the train, for twenty or thirty minutes. We dial a number and get a busy signal—another few minutes. Let us at least use these pauses for prayer; let it at least not be wasted time."

How might we use the "pauses" in our lives as opportunities to pray?

**Note:** For more on Saint Mary of Egypt, see *Saints and the Animals That Served Them*, one of the series of Activity Books produced by the Department of Christian Education. The whole series is available for free download at [dce.oca.org](http://dce.oca.org).