

## Layers in Lent

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With the beginning of Great Lent, Orthodox Christians will experience many services, listen to many readings, and experience things that only occur once a year. Paying attention to them, we might wonder or notice that there aren't always connections between them. Great Lent has many layers to it, many of which have built up and been added over the centuries on top of one another. For example, while the Church celebrated Great Lent for centuries, it was only after the iconoclast controversy finally ended in 843 AD that the "Sunday of Orthodoxy" began to be an annual celebration. St. Gregory Palamas lived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, so remembering his contribution to the Orthodox Church during Great Lent had to begin after that.

One of the layers is the Sunday Gospel lessons. We can assume because the readings don't seem to point us to thinking about icons or St. Gregory Palamas, etc., that they are the older layer. Notice how the reading for the third Sunday of Great Lent is about the cross and we have the procession of the Cross that day. So we can assume that this celebration has been part of the Church from early on.

We will naturally focus on some of the more elaborate or colorful dimensions of Great Lent, processions with icons, important historical figures. But what about the readings? How can we make a connection to the Sunday Gospel lessons?

Remember that Great Lent developed as the final preparation period before a catechumen was baptized at the Resurrection Liturgy on Holy Saturday night (In present practice, this Liturgy is now celebrated on Holy Saturday morning, but in antiquity this was the Resurrection Service celebrated in the evening.). When we look at the Sunday Gospel lessons, we can see how they might have guided the catechumen. The readings are not penitential, or not as penitential as the pre-Lent Sundays of the Publican and Pharisee, Prodigal Son, and Last Judgment. Rather, we can see them in the light of preparation and participation in Baptism. I've taken one sentence from each Gospel lesson for you to consider.

**Week 1.** "Follow me." The first step is to accept the invitation to follow Christ. That invitation was ultimately from Christ Himself.

**Week 2.** "Your sins are forgiven." Christ came to release people from the power of sin and death over them and restore them to a new life.

**Week 3.** "Pick up your cross and follow me." The Cross is lifted up as a symbol of hope, midway through the preparation period. But the Cross is an instrument of pain, suffering and death, a reminder that the new life in Christ requires putting away the old ways and certainly not without pain. Yet in the Resurrection Christ was victorious and the new believer will be victorious as well through the new life begun through baptism.

**Week 4.** "I believe, help my unbelief." All of us struggle with issues of faith.

**Week 5.** "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" Not coincidence that in the day just before Holy Week, with the last steps of preparation beginning, the catechumen would hear a reflection on baptism. Baptism is participating in death and rising to new life to becoming a new person, in Christ and the Church.

