

Homily

# *Climbing the Ladder*

St. Andrew Orthodox Church    Riverside, Ca.

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Fourth Sunday of Great Lent – St. John of the Ladder, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2000

**The Power of the Demonic Opposition.** In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. One thing is certain as set forth in the readings and commemorations of this Fourth Sunday of Great and Holy Lent. What is certain is that we struggle in this life in the midst of a horde of enemies. We are attempting to attain salvation while surrounded by a vast enemy army. This demonic host is well-armed, well-organized, and well-led. There are on the earth certain demonic fortresses and strongholds. St. John the Theologian calls these centers the “thrones of Satan.” This is what he wrote to the Church in Pergamum, “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells” (Rev. 2:13). There in Pergamum was a throne of Satan. It was a primary encampment of the demonic army. The demons, whose proper abode in the eternal bonds and perpetual darkness of the prison of hell (Jude 6), are occupying *this earth*. They are the illegitimate occupiers of middle earth, of this middle kingdom. St. John says that the “whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 St. Jn. 5:19). This army has one single goal: to steal men from God eternally. This demonic presence is set forth very clearly in the icon of St. John of the Ladder. There you see these hideous evil spirits at work. These dark beings are flying around the heavenly ladder, on which men are rising to heaven, and they are casting lassos around our feet. They are pulling men down to the abyss. The demons are also front and center in the Holy Gospel text appointed for today. They have been possessing a poor lad, nearly tearing him to pieces and causing him to be mute. They oppose all men, especially Christians who are trying to seek heaven, and especially again the monastics and priests who are on the front line so to speak of the Christian front as we can see from the icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent.

It is very good for our souls to be reminded of the spiritual context in which we live. So many of our falls happen because we have forgotten where we live. We forget that we have relentless enemies, and so we let up. We lose our concentration. We lose our watchfulness. We forget that climbing a ladder is dangerous business. What is it that someone climbing a ladder really needs but concentration and a careful step. It is when we take our eyes off the rungs, when we start gazing around us imperceptibly, when we become distracted that we miss our step and end up falling off the ladder. This is especially difficult to resist for we Orthodox Christians who live in the midst of peace and prosperity. We can very easily mistake political and social peace for spiritual peace. We can very easily mistake economic prosperity for spiritual prosperity. Then we are easy prey.

Every Lent is designed to help us live in reality, and this Sunday is of great help toward this end. We have been struggling now for four weeks in Lent. We see our

weakness and sins. We feel the pressure of the enemy army. Like the holy disciples of old we are stuck. Many of us seem to be going nowhere against the demons. It appears that we can't "cast them out." This is always a common theme in Lenten confessions about this point in Lent. We are so discouraged that the same sins are appearing over and over again, and we know inside that this is evidence of the fact that we are stuck. It doesn't seem like we can make any progress at all. No matter what we do the demon won't leave. What are we to do when we find ourselves in this circumstance?

**Breaking Through Demonic Opposition.** What should we do when we feel that we are making no progress? When we face the same falls and the same inability to conquer our besetting sins? How was the difficulty with the possessed boy overcome? He was brought to the Savior. He was brought even with the weak faith of his father, and Christ healed him. The Lord was exasperated by the father's approach because the father said, "But if you can do anything, take pity on us!" This really pushed our Lord to the limit, and He responded, "IF YOU CAN?! All things are possible to him who believes" (St. Mk. 9:22-23). *Let us not forget the context in which this very famous dictum of our Savior was uttered.* It was in the context of the inability of believers to break through the opposition of the demons. Your problem breaking the chains of the demons is not a problem for your Lord Jesus Christ. Do not exasperate Him by doubting or forgetting His immense power. He does whatever He pleases with the demons. Perhaps the very reason He has allowed you to repeatedly fall in the same area is so that you learn both your own weakness and also learn to turn to Him for deliverance and marvel at His great strength. So when you find yourself spiritually stuck appeal directly to the Lord and ask Him to arise and scatter His enemies and then wait.

Besides this you ought also hold very tightly to the Ladder on which you have been climbing. Because you feel unable to ascend another rung this does not mean that you have to slip back down to the bottom. How often does the discouragement of being unable to move forward cause us to fall into despair and lose the ground we have already made! Hold tight to where you are. Keep up your same level of devotion without letting the frustration of not moving forward cause you to lose what you have already gained.

Lastly, when you are trying to overcome demonic opposition which is keeping you from ascending you must intensify your spiritual effort. This was explained to the disciples by the Lord when He told them that this particular demon possessing the boy could not come out "except by prayer and fasting" (St. Mk. 9:29). Now the disciples were showing plenty of spiritual effort already living with the Lord. But in these words our Savior called them to a more rigorous effort against the enemy. If you are marching forward and then encounter an enemy blockade you must bring forth the ammunition. Without the ammunition you won't continue your march. In our spiritual lives there are times when we have to fast more rigorously, pray special akathists, make special prostrations, visit monasteries, make more regular confessions, give more alms. These are simply the utilization of our God-given ammunition against the enemy blockades.

Heed these instructions and you will find yourself once again moving forward up the Ladder of Divine Ascent ever making progress into the outstretched arms of your Sweet Savior Jesus Christ, Who dwells at the top of the ladder anxiously awaiting your accomplishment and the eternal embrace which shall follow for all those Who like good soldiers of the Lord heed the admonition of the Holy Apostle Paul to, "Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called" (1 St. Tim. 6:12).