

“This delightful book presents a year’s daily readings from the Early Christian Desert tradition, with a very helpful spiritual commentary for each date. It is a veritable pocket *Philokalia*, such as we hear about in *The Way of the Pilgrim*. Fr. David Keller has done a great service in providing this very profound source of *lectio divina* for those seriously interested in the spiritual path.”

—Fr. John McGuckin  
Professor of Byzantine Christian Studies  
Columbia University

“A must-read for all who desire to form spiritually, Keller’s rich and profound work ‘makes room’ so that open pastors, leaders, parishioners, and travelers can listen deeply and experience the overwhelming of God’s Spirit in silence and solitude. In *Desert Banquet*, Keller has indeed written a wonderful resource for everyone who desires for the Holy One to come near.”

—The Rev. Kendrick E. Curry, PhD, MDiv  
Senior Pastor, The Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church  
Washington, DC

“David Keller offers much food for daily reflection on the wisdom sayings of the ancient abbas and ammas of early Christianity, as also more contemporary wise elders. Readers of *Desert Banquet* are led on a journey to one’s own heart, in moving monthly by means of themes of beginning solitariness, through patient endurance in the grace of transformation and dealing with the vices, to the fruit of Christ-consciousness, and ending with the legacy of desert spirituality. Repeated stories take on added dimensions for living the Gospel love command of love of God and neighbor, as one is invited to ponder and practice these parables of early Christianity. The feasting over a year’s time on the delicacies of wisdom ought to nurture a deeper and richer living of the Christian life.”

—Mary Forman, OSB  
Assistant Professor of Theology  
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University  
Collegetown, Minnesota



# Desert Banquet

*A Year of Wisdom from  
the Desert Mothers and Fathers*

David G. R. Keller



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For Emily,  
who calls forth the holy and sacred  
in everyday living for so many

*and*

For the monks of  
Saint Macarius Monastery,  
Wadi El-Natrun, Scetis, Egypt,  
who welcomed me into their community,  
offering food, a cell, worship, fellowship, and wisdom;  
especially Abba Irenaeus, who became my guide and mentor.

*In memoriam:*

Abba Macarius the Great  
(300–390 CE)

and

Abba Matta El-Meskeen  
(1920–2006)

Two faithful lovers of souls



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# P R E F A C E

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## *An Inconvenient Journey*

“And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:12-13).

In November 2006 I was invited to spend five days with the Coptic monks of St. Macarius Monastery in Scetis, Egypt, and then travel with Bedouins in the Sinai desert. It was a dream come true. For years I had studied the lives of the desert mothers and fathers and tried to integrate their wisdom into my personal life and ministry. My book describing the experiences that formed the context for their wisdom had just been published.\* Yet I was reluctant to leave for Egypt.

My wife, Emily, and I had just moved from California to Ithaca, New York. The move had been exhausting for me, physically and emotionally, even though it was freely chosen and full of opportunities. The details of the transition and being “on the move” to a new location and home filled my days. Living out of boxes and endless arrangements prior to moving into a new home scattered the conventional rhythms of my life. It was an amazingly beautiful time in our lives, but I was suffering from the extended break from my usual physical and spiritual exercises. I wanted to sink into the patterns of “ordinary days,” settle down with Emily into our new home, explore a new environment, and make new friends. There was so much to do and at the same time I longed for physical and mental rest.

But the call to the desert would not go away. What should I do? Emily encouraged me, saying, “Go, David. You must do this!” She

\* David G. R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005).

was right, but it was not until I was thirty-six thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean that I came face-to-face with my reservations about going into the desert. It simply was not *convenient*. When I realized how loudly fatigue, necessary tasks, and craving for normal routines were shouting for me to stay home, I discovered how much I *needed* the desert. Sometimes I have to be *driven* into the wilderness so that my mind and heart will listen and rest in God's presence and love. The desert can be anywhere, but it is always a place where I will be stripped of self-reliance and see myself honestly. This dying reveals who I really am. In this arid landscape God offers me food and healing for resurrection and when I least expect it, angels will come to wait on me.

Yet, the desert is not an end in itself. The person I become there is the person I am called to be when I return home.

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During eight years as steward of the Episcopal House of Prayer at Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota (1994–2002), I was able to study early monastic history with Sister Mary Forman, OSB, assistant professor of Monastic Studies at Saint John's School of Theology-Seminary, and Father Columba Stewart, OSB, now director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at the abbey. Their scholarship, teaching, and encouragement gave me the confidence to write *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, published in 2005, and now *Desert Banquet*. I am grateful for their scholarship as well as the ways they continue to make the example and wisdom of the desert elders tangible in their lives.

In 2006 Bill Jamieson invited me to join him for a trek across Egyptian deserts with Rabia Tawfik and his Bedouin friends. We visited five ancient desert monasteries and experienced the Sinai desert firsthand by jeep, camel, and on foot. Rabia made it possible for me to spend five days at St. Macarius Coptic Monastery in Scetis. I'm grateful to Bill and Rabia for helping me experience a desert banquet with friends who call the desert home. And I will never forget Alaa Yehia Abed El-Al, who cared for me, a complete stranger, when I became ill in the desert.

My writing has been influenced by participants in courses, retreats, and seminars on the desert mothers and fathers that I have facilitated at the Episcopal House of Prayer in Collegeville; at Gladstone's Library (formerly Saint Deiniol's) in North Wales; and in the Oasis of Wisdom program in Asheville, North Carolina, that I direct with my wife, Emily Wilmer. Their questions, desire to enter a world so different from their own, comments, and suggestions have helped me see how much the desert tradition offers for life in the twenty-first century.

I want to thank Hans Christoffersen, publisher of the academic and trade markets at Liturgical Press, for seeing the promise of *Desert Banquet* and offering suggestions that have improved the manuscript. Stephanie Lancour, copy editor at Liturgical Press, has given invaluable and competent help in making hundreds of quotations and references as accurate as possible. Any omissions or errors are my own. And I am grateful for the creativity of Brother David Manahan, OSB, who designed the cover and caught the spirit of the book.

My wife Emily has helped me enter the desert, literally and figuratively, during the two years of reflection and writing that produced *Desert Banquet*. She and I have led courses and seminars on the desert elders together. Her support, patience, and helpful suggestions are woven into the book. I know there were times when she wanted to have equal time with Syncletica and John the Dwarf and give them “a word.” Thank you, Emily!

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*Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer.* CS 4. Translated by John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications. © 1972.

*The Lives of the Desert Fathers.* CS 34. Translated by Norman Russell. Introduction by Benedicta Ward, SLG. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications. © 1981.

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# INTRODUCTION

In 394 CE seven monks from Palestine visited men and women from various parts of the Roman Empire who had left conventional society to live in the desert. At Nitria, an isolated region west of the Nile River, they found a large community of hermits: *“We put in at Nitria, where we saw a great many anchorites. . . . Some applied themselves to contemplation, others to the active life. . . . Some of them invited us to a meal, others to learn about the virtues, and others to contemplation and the knowledge of God. Whatever ability each one had, he hastened to use it for our benefit. Indeed, how can one relate all their virtues, since one is totally unable to do them justice.”*

These early Christians were seeking a closer relationship with God in the solitude of the desert. They had left what they experienced as futile aspects of society that distorted and abused human relationships, possessions, power, and virtues. They were not rejecting society or other human beings per se. Although they had various motives for fleeing to the desert, such as avoiding taxes, prosecution for crimes, arranged marriages, or obtaining spiritual “rewards” for living a holy life, most desired a life of prayer away from the distractions and unrestrained pleasures of the dominant society. They wanted to experience God’s presence and find their way to heaven.

Instead of heaven, God gave them the desert. In their silence they experienced an intense struggle to overcome the influences of what they had left behind and move *toward* transformation of their lives. They learned that by opening themselves to God’s presence they must also come to terms with their own lives. This self-knowledge was essential to letting go of control of the self they had created and make space for the transformation that would reveal their true self, in God.

## Using This Book

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isa 55:1-2).

“[Jesus’] disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’” (Mark 8:4).

### *The Need for the Deserts of Our Lives*

The wisdom of the desert elders is a banquet in a very unlikely place. Usually we do not look in barren wildernesses for rich food and drink that bring delight to body and soul. In the twenty-first century we are losing touch with the value of the wilderness as a mentor of the spirit. We prefer abundance to austerity and in the process are in danger of impoverishing our lives. Desert solitude and deep listening take us beyond our self-reliance and extend the boundaries of our experience and vision of ourselves and life itself. Is it possible for God to prepare a banquet in the deserts of our lives? It is worth the trip to discover for ourselves.

### *The Meaning of “Abba” and “Amma”*

In Hebrew culture a name carries not only an identity but also the agency or active influence of the person named. To call a person by name is to enter into a relationship or continue an existing relationship. To address God by name is to acknowledge a genuine bond and recall God’s prior actions that have formed and sustained that connection.

The Hebrew Scriptures use the term “father” twelve times to describe what God is like in both simile and metaphor. Female images are used as well. But Jesus’ use of “Father” as a personal title was distinctive. Since he spoke Aramaic he used the word *abba*. “Ab” is the word a child uses for “father”; it is informal. In Middle Eastern cultures “abba” reflects an intimate, affectionate, respectful, and physical relationship. “Abb-a” may mean “my father” or “our father” depending on the context.

Among the thousands of people who fled to the desert and developed a variety of spiritual disciplines, some women and men emerged as wise *ammās* and *abbas*. The term *abba* or *amma* refers to these men

and women whose lives, more than words, attracted disciples. They embodied an integration of love of God and neighbor. Their authority was acknowledged because the presence of Christ was tangible in their lives. Their wisdom evolved from their interior experience of God and the experiences of daily life. Like biological mothers and fathers, ammas and abbas formed intimate and lasting relationships with their disciples, and their teaching and influence have survived through thousands of sayings and personal narratives. *Desert Banquet* is a small sample of this rich tradition. Their wisdom is a banquet prepared from the crucible of experience.

***The Desert Elders Are Faithful Guides,  
but We Must Do the Walking***

Each month *Desert Banquet* emphasizes a unique aspect of the experiences of the desert fathers and mothers. These twelve themes will introduce readers to the diverse spiritual food that nourished and shaped their lives and personal transformation. Although these themes demonstrate common values and practices, there was no single rule of life except the common ingredient of the Great Commandment: love of God and neighbor. We can learn from this experience, but the abbas and ammas cannot live our lives for us. Every day of the year readers have the opportunity to reflect on a small part of this banquet and see what it brings forth in us. The value of this reflection is discernment, not imitation.

***Keep This Desert Banquet in Context***

Do not forget that the desert elders *chose* their austere life of prayer and never sought to impose their spiritual path on other people. Try to avoid looking at their way of life through the lenses of twenty-first-century social and religious values and practices. Look into these ancient lives and spiritual struggles for wisdom that transcends the centuries. Look beyond what may seem strange or offensive to you and discover a passion for life that will feed your body and soul.

***Interiorized Monasticism***

What can we learn from the desert elders that will assist us in our life with God? Each reader should answer this question for herself or himself. When monastic life is not romanticized or abused, it offers a manner of human life that is rich and authentic. Very few people are called to live in a monastic community, yet monastic life reminds us and inspires us to discover God's faithful presence in the lifestyle

we have chosen. Monasticism is also an interior life of prayer and discipline that is the womb of our desires, words, actions, and relationships. The legacy of the desert mothers and fathers has a great deal to offer us as we discern how we may manifest an interiorized monasticism.

The desert tradition is a unique experience of Christian living. Its austere patterns of prayer and personal disciplines are freely chosen. Yet the minority of persons who follow Jesus Christ in this way manifest a dimension of human experience and spiritual maturity that can enrich, challenge, and inspire our lives today.

### ***An Experiential Response***

Although the purpose of this book is not didactic, readers are invited to discern specific ways that the lives and disciplines of the desert mothers and fathers may enrich their lives. Most contemporary persons do not have the time or personal calling to live as the desert elders lived. It would not be appropriate to mimic their lives. Yet walking through the desert for a whole year and tasting this banquet of wisdom may offer ideas and specific disciplines that will strengthen and guide your life with God. If you are attracted to a specific discipline, it will be wise to practice that discipline for a reasonable amount of time. This will help you discern its richness, even if difficult, and at the same time discover whether or not it is appropriate for you.

### ***Travel Lightly***

*Desert Banquet* is neither a study of the lives of the desert elders nor a “how-to” book on desert spirituality. It is an opportunity to reflect, one day at a time, on the wisdom of ancient and modern desert mothers and fathers. Enter the desert without expectations and let the Spirit speak.

### ***Make the Journey Your Own***

*Desert Banquet* is the result of the author’s practice of *lectio divina* (holy reading) for a full year on the sayings of the desert elders. Each day I spent an hour in meditation on a different saying and writing a short reflection. I have spent twenty years studying this rich tradition. Although that research lies in the background, *Desert Banquet* is the child of silence and listening.

After you have read the saying\* and reflection for each day, I invite you to spend some time in silence and continue to listen to the saying. Let it speak directly to you.

If you want to use the practice of *lectio divina*, a short method is described at the end of the book.

\* The sayings are in italics throughout, and their sources can be found at the back of the book after the abbreviations.



# JANUARY

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## *Withdrawing from the World*

As we have seen, thousands of men and women left the usual patterns of their relationships, activities, and responsibilities and fled to the deserts of Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. Their fleeing was a rejection of the superficial values of late Roman society that emphasized materialism, unrestrained sexual pleasures, and self-serving power structures. Their aim was to *detach* themselves from a transient lifestyle that was committed to the surface of life and earthly resources that will pass away. At the same time their goal was to *attach* themselves to a life of prayer and offer themselves completely to God in solitude. They were not simply changing the venue of their lives. They were seeking transformation to a new way of life rooted in experience of God.

The Greek word for this kind of physical withdrawal is *anachoresis*. Many of the desert mothers and fathers were called *anchorites* because they lived in solitude, apart from conventional society and desert monastic communities.

Over the next three centuries the desert elders developed a disciplined lifestyle that included many forms of physical and mental prayer balanced with limited activities that earned money for food and alms for the poor. There was no predetermined plan for the forms of monastic life that evolved, but their common experiences of God led to three basic paths toward a vision of human life based on purity of heart, humility, and love of neighbor. Life in the desert and total dependence on God led to the formation of easily satisfied needs.

During this early phase of desert monasticism there were periods of intense persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. “Red martyrdom” became the ultimate offering of a Christian’s life to God. The lives of martyrs gave courage and inspiration to other Christians.

## 2 *Desert Banquet*

When the persecutions stopped and Christianity was accepted and later took root in the empire, people looked for an equivalent way to offer their lives to God. Leaving conventional society for a life of prayer in solitude became the new form called “white martyrdom.”

Rejection of society’s futility and “white martyrdom” form the primary context for January’s focus on fleeing and withdrawal.

---

JANUARY 1

### **Always a Beginner**

*“Abba Poemen was asked for whom this saying is suitable, ‘Do not be anxious about tomorrow.’ (Matt. 6.34) The old man said, ‘It is said for the man who is tempted and has not much strength, so that he should not be worried, saying to himself, ‘How long must I suffer this temptation?’” He should rather say every day to himself, ‘Today.’”*

We often carry into a new year the baggage of past expectations, failures, sinful behavior, and unfulfilled desires to embody love for others. “This year will be different and I will try harder!” Abba Poemen reminds us that life comes one day at a time. Although it is difficult to restrain from impatience with our failure to improve, he declares that God loves us even though we are unable to “fix” ourselves. Our anxiety can be transformed from a burden to an opportunity to turn toward God. If we begin each day with thanksgiving for life and a desire to rely on God’s grace, our “suffering” will be replaced by the desire and trust that new life is possible.

---

JANUARY 2

### **Who Am I?**

*“While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, ‘Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.’ And a voice came saying to him, ‘Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.’”*

On the surface this answer to prayer seems like a denial of the goodness of human relationships and accomplishments. Arsenius was a famous fourth-century rhetorician, was tutor to the sons of Emperor

Theodosius I, and held a place of influence in the emperor's court. He dressed in the finest robes and was envied by many. Yet, like the rich young man who asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17), Arsenius sensed emptiness in the midst of the fullness of his ambitious life. His prayer articulated his helplessness in the midst of his great power. The response was an invitation to let go of attachment to the public benefits of his teaching and political influence. He could not yet see the cause of his anxiety. He must withdraw in order to find the path he desires.

---

JANUARY 3

## From Speaking to Listening

*"Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, 'Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.'"*

Arsenius withdrew from the futility of a society and personal identity that scattered his soul. The centripetal force of living on the surface of life shredded his true identity and replaced it with toxic self-interest. The Greek word he used in his prayer for "salvation" literally means to experience abundant health. Simultaneously, he was fleeing from an intoxicating life and turning *toward* the healing he desired. The first step was *silence*. Solitude would create the space for a pattern of faithful *listening* to God and the centrifugal energy of the Spirit that would make transformation possible. The desert elders called this "resting in God." It is an environment of grace in which we place ourselves in God's hands in order to find ourselves and our reason for being alive. We cannot answer the questions, Who am I? and Why am I here? by ourselves.

---

JANUARY 4

## Taking Time for Silence

*"A brother questioned Abba Arsenius to hear a word of him and the old man said to him, 'Strive with all your might to bring your*

*interior activity into accord with God, and you will overcome exterior passions.’”*

Arsenius had been told to flee and *be silent*. That must have been a tall order for a famous rhetorician. But during his years in solitude Arsenius learned that all speech and exterior activity have their origin in the heart, the psychic and spiritual center of every human being. Silence is the auditorium where the voice of God speaks to our hearts directly. This personal experience of God’s Spirit enables us to bring our “interior activity into accord with God.” We see God as God is and ourselves as God has created us to be. Silence is radical because it requires letting go of our efforts to control our lives. In that “death” we experience a fullness of life we cannot create for ourselves. Silence is the space where our unrestrained “passions” will be transformed into love of God and our neighbor.

---

JANUARY 5

## Making Space for God

*“[Abba Arsenius] also said, ‘If we seek God, he will show himself to us, and if we keep him, he will remain close to us.’”*

Arsenius was exhorted to flee, be silent, and *pray always*. His withdrawal from the busyness of palace life was not simply to “get away from it all.” He was not exchanging one pattern of life for another. His deep longing was for *transformation*. This may seem odd for a person who had made it to the top. Twenty-first-century voices might say, “Get real, Arsenius!” That is precisely what he wanted, but he learned in his silence that it would not be one more achievement to add to his list. The path toward transformation depends on someone else. One of the earliest prayers of the desert elders is, “Bind my head and my heart in you, Holy One, and may I remain in your company this day.” Each step toward reality is taken, one at a time, in the constant presence of God and relies on that relationship for everything.

## Shedding Self-Reliance

*“One day Abba Arsenius consulted an old Egyptian monk about his own thoughts. Someone noticed this and said to him, ‘Abba Arsenius, how is it that you, with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?’ He replied, ‘I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not know even the alphabet of this peasant.’”*

How long did it take for Arsenius to let go of the heavy burden of being in charge of his life and gain the freedom to sit at the feet of a peasant? He left the emperor’s palace in 394 CE and died in his remote desert hermitage in 449. Toward the end of those fifty-five years, his companions in the desert gave a brief glimpse of how difficult it must have been: *“The old man used to say to himself: ‘Arsenius, why have you left the world? I have often repented of having spoken, but never of having been silent.’”* The sacrifices of silence and listening are openings to newness of life. In our society it is often difficult to find silence or to listen. Many voices compete for our attention and in this mixture of words it is possible to miss what we may need to hear the most. Which voices should we trust? We tend to rely on our own experience and knowledge, yet, there are many twenty-first-century peasants speaking today. Can we be silent and listen?

## Fleeing Is Not Trading Places

*“It was revealed to Abba Anthony in his desert that there was one who was his equal in the city. He was a doctor by profession and whatever he had beyond his needs he gave to the poor, and every day he sang the Sanctus with the angels.”*

The desert mothers and fathers left the futility of conventional society in order to find solitude and seek God in the desert. Was this simply frustration with the people and places where they lived? Were they exchanging a flawed human existence for a more perfect spiritual way of life? For some, the answer was yes. But the majority learned that a change of venue, by itself, did not change their lives. Antony

the Great was born in central Egypt and withdrew to the desert over one hundred years before Arsenius left Constantinople. His life of intense and austere solitude and prayer inspired many followers. Yet, his desert hermitage was not an end in itself because the place needing change was within him. The boundaries of God's grace have no limits. Where are our hermitages today?

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JANUARY 8

## **Desire for Solitude Is Not Rejection of the World**

*"It was said of Abba John the Dwarf, that one day he said to his elder brother, 'I should like to be free of all care, like the angels, who do not work, but ceaselessly offer worship to God.' So he took off his cloak and went away into the desert. After a week he came back to his brother. When he knocked on the door, he heard his brother say, before he opened it, 'Who are you?' He said, 'I am John, your brother.' But he replied, 'John has become an angel, and henceforth he is no longer among men.' Then the other begged him, saying, 'It is I.' However, his brother did not let him in, but left him there in distress until morning. Then, opening the door, he said to him, 'You are a man and you must once again work in order to eat.' Then John made a prostration before him, saying, 'Forgive me.'"*

Humor is often the chalice of wisdom we prefer not to drink. Singing with the angels may sound great, but our song is sung closer to home. Eventually, John the Dwarf's life of solitude prepared him to mentor novice monks in the hard work of caring for other people. In the Christian tradition there has always been a healthy tension between contemplation and action. Our desire for intimacy with God is a natural part of our lives and the gospels narrate Jesus' pattern of going off to pray alone early in the morning and in the evening. This was a constant pattern in his life of prayer. So it is easy to understand why John the Dwarf, like all "newcomers" to contemplative prayer, wanted to spend all his time in the presence of God and the angels. What he had not learned is that in Jesus' life intimacy with God was the womb that gave birth to his love of neighbor and his active engagement in the needs of the world. Prayer and action are soul mates.

## People Are Not the Problem

*“The same monk [Arsenius] used to say that there was a certain old man who had a good disciple. Through narrowmindedness he drove him outside with his sheepskin. The brother remained sitting outside. When the old man opened the door, he found him sitting, and he repented, saying, ‘O Father, the humility of your patience has overcome my narrowmindedness. Come inside and from now on you are the old man and the father, and I am the younger and the disciple.’”*

The easiest response to frustration with difficulties in human relationships and the superficialities of society is to “get away from it all.” One of the hardest lessons the desert elders learned when they fled to the desert was that they could not flee from themselves. They left society and their possessions behind, yet arrived with lots of “old baggage.” The more they encountered God without distractions, the more they learned about themselves and the need to unpack their own pride and faults. Transparent self-knowledge is difficult to embrace, but it leads toward humble patience. The desert elders sought heaven, but God gave them the desert’s solitude; they would have to wait for heaven. In that solitude they had to come to terms with their “baggage” because as long as it remained it would stand in the way of what they truly desired. Knowing ourselves is the first step to embracing God.

## Fleeing Leads to Surprising Places

*“The old man was asked, ‘What is the good of the fasts and watchings which a man imposes on himself?’ and he replied, ‘They make the soul humble. For it is written, “Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins.” (Ps. 25.18) So if the soul gives itself all this hardship, God will have mercy on it.’”*

Many people fled to the desert to escape taxes or punishment for crimes. Some found more than safety and anonymity. Moses the Robber did not have to flee to the desert. He lived there already, wandering in the vicinity of monastic sites stealing and committing murder.

Late in life he became a monk and a disciple of Isidore the Priest, an abba who “specialized” in difficult novices. Moses had much to leave behind and regret. These painful memories afflicted him so much he placed his helplessness to resolve them within a pattern of austere fasting and solitary nights of prayer. In this patient dependence on God his soul was healed and forgiven. He had fled into grace. Patience is not a popular virtue in the twenty-first century. We prefer rapid and efficient progress. What we miss in our haste is the opportunity for inner growth guided by God’s grace.

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JANUARY 11

## The Desert Does Not Yield Its Treasure Easily

Amma Syncletica said, *“My children, all of us—male and female—know about being saved, but through our own negligence we stray away from salvation. First of all we must observe the precepts known through the grace of the Lord, and these are: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your soul . . . and your neighbor as yourself’ [Matt 22:37 and 39]. Whatever people say by the grace of the Spirit that is useful, therefore, springs from love and ends in it. Salvation, then, is exactly this—the two-fold love of God and of our neighbor. . . . Well, what do we need for the present moment? Obviously, austere asceticism and pure prayer.”*

Syncletica’s early life in the fourth century was lived in the shadow of Alexandria’s esteemed Christian catechetical school. But in her prayer she learned that “useful” knowledge springs from experience of God. She reminds us that the disciplines of our life of prayer lead us from “our own negligence” toward a *desire* for love of God and our neighbor. We all have the freedom to “stray away from salvation.” In the midst of daily distractions and temptations Syncletica advises us to focus on “austere asceticism and pure prayer.” In this context “austere asceticism” means a freely chosen pattern of prayer and meditation on Scripture that will help us be good stewards of our souls. This will keep us from straying and preserve our desire for love.