

Of God, sunsets and sunrises, the priesthood, things that matter, and turkeys.

Dec 13-15 2017, Indian Creek, Texas.

It is always good to get away to the ranch in Indian Creek Texas. It is a place that a friend allows me to go to once in a while. I have gone to it many times after I have gone the Hughes unit (prison), which is in Gatesville Texas, about an hour and a half from the ranch.



A view from the ridge in daytime, and two sunsets.

I consider every time I go to this ranch to be a pilgrimage. The best times are in the early morning from before first light through the sunrise, and at sunset.

The best place to see the sunset is at the top of the ridge overlooking the Colorado River. Sometimes the sun reflects in the water, so you see two sunsets.

Of course, I go up to see sunsets because I think of and pray for my son +Daniel (<http://www.orthodox.net/daniel>) . He once said that he wanted to be the orange part of the sunset just like his niece Sophie, who once said that when asked “what do you want to be when you grow up”.

I am very serious when I'm looking at sunsets. This is not a time to talk. It is a time to pray, and also to reflect on things. Perhaps, sometimes, I think more than I pray, but that's because I'm a beginner. I take my prayer rope, and I pray for +Daniel, but I also think that in the midst of such beauty and quietness and serenity -- there is a question.

Why am I not serene? The Psalmist asks: “Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why dost thou disquiet me?” (Ps 41:5) That is an important question, not only for the answer but also because it shouldn’t even be asked. Or, perhaps I should say, in this world we ask this question because of our sins and our ignorance, but in the next world there is no sickness, nor sighing, but life everlasting.

Out in the middle of Southwest Texas on the top of ridge, things come into a little bit better focus. The sky is so big, and I’m so small, and God created the entire universe and yet, because He can do anything, He desires to dwell in my insignificance. That should be *much more* important to me. It should inform every decision I make, every thought I have. Unfortunately, it does not. At least, there are times when I remember this, such as looking at sunsets on the top of the ridge in Southwest Texas, over the Colorado River.

Sunsets are time to take stock of the day, to try to collect oneself. It is so calm and beautiful that I wonder what was it that I got so upset about, or why I was lazy, and did this or that or about the time I squandered. It is more of a time of self-reflection, and a desire to be better.

Sunrises on the other hand -- if you do them right-- (if I do say so myself) -- are a time of long waiting and girding oneself. I’m getting ready for battle. Actually, I’m in the battle.

We came out on Thursday morning, about 5:15 AM, before first light -- it was cold, completely dark, and very quiet. We didn’t even hear the sound of the jet planes, that obnoxious sound that pollutes the quietness of the wilderness, even in the very early morning. Sunrise would be at 7:30 AM.

There is a lot of waiting for sunrises. It seems like it’s taking a very long time and it is dark a very long time. The same metaphor comes to me every time I wait for a sunrise in the deep dark. There is much in our life that is not right, and we must wait. The sun will come – it always comes. Sometimes it does not come when we want it to come. It comes slowly. Sometimes it seems to come very slowly.

During these times of waiting, I pray the Jesus prayer, especially for +Daniel. I have a rule which I follow with my 300-knot prayer rope. For the first 100, I pray the standard Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me”. The second 100, I pray the Jesus prayer for my son +Daniel. Sometimes I say that all the words: “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on +Daniel”. Other times I just say: “Lord Jesus have mercy”, or even, just “Jesus have mercy” and try to hold Daniel in my heart. No matter what I say, the prayers are for +Daniel.

The last hundred I pray for the whole world. There are so many people that have so many needs. I know hundreds of them, personally through parish labor, going to prison and also email, phone calls, Facebook, and because of +Daniel.

There is a lot of pain out there, and loss, and brokenness. I can't help any of them. I won't pass them by like the Levite and the priest, but even when I stop to help them, I do not have the power. Only Jesus Christ has the power. So, for the last hundred, I pray: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on the whole world", or sometimes I say: "on everyone". When I pray more prayers, it is just this last prayer generally. This is true with the exception of sunrises and sunsets when usually I pray more for +Daniel.

There will be much waiting in order to see +Daniel again, in order to know beyond a shadow of a doubt how he is. I know that a lot of people don't understand this. They've been taught a different way outside of the tradition of our church. I just know that I still love +Daniel, I will not stop loving +Daniel, so why should I forget +Daniel? Is not the most important thing that we can do for those we love is pray for them? So, I pray for +Daniel. Therefore, I never forget my son.

There have been reports – multiple reports - of those who feel that they have received some help from +Daniel. I do not disbelieve them, but, since I'm a weak man and know almost nothing, I just continue to pray.

We have a comforting tradition in our church. If we pray for someone who "does not need prayer", they pray for us. So, to put it in a crude way, praying for Daniel is a win-win.



A flock of turkeys, about 45 minutes before sunrise, Indian Creek Texas.

Why do we bustle about? Truly, our busy-ness is in vain. Only one thing matters.



Matthias, lifting iron!

One morning, a large flock of turkeys taught me that. Matthias (my son-in-law – by the way, he is very strong) and I were in a deer blind, waiting for first light and then the sunrise overlooking a field, which had a deer feeder behind it. Perhaps 30-45 minutes before the sunrise, while it was light enough to see, a large flock of turkeys came. There are at least 100. I saw two toms that were displaying constantly. The hens didn't appear to be too interested, so they appeared to try to outdo each other. Their foolishness will soon be forgotten. Only Matthias and I saw it, and it certainly wasn't important to the birds. Only God will remember that.

How many things do we do that are forgotten, even by God? Of course, I speak metaphorically: God does not forget anything but only some things remain. What will I do that remains? I also saw a tom that was harassing one of the hens, and she would squawk and run away. All that foolishness will be forgotten.

We act like turkeys many times. We display, and have much too of a high opinion of ourselves. Because of this, we get offended at the slightest things, or we depend on ourselves too much, not understanding that we know so very little. We are blind to the realities in front of us, and we do things that do not matter.

Southwest Texas has been a long around for a long time. It'll continue to be around for a long time after I die. Trees will die, decompose, and be replaced by new trees. The Colorado River will sometimes be high and sometimes low and sometimes be barely a trickle. The animals will live and die, mostly in secret away from the eyes of men. I am 59. In 25 years Matthias will be my age. I may or may not witness that birthday. I have lived the greater part of my life, and much of it has been acting like the turkeys that I observed from the deer blind.



Holy Saturday Liturgy

I am a priest, and a poor one. It is necessary to have priests, because God desires it. There are so many people, but there are not enough good people to be good priests. In our ascetical literature it is clear that those who are watchful and are priests are very afraid of offending God and are very careful. Their preparation for the liturgy is longer than the liturgy itself. They recognize the liturgy as a time when God is so close to the human heart that we can, and should feel him in our nostrils. (Job 27:3) We should experience Him, and totally lay aside all earthly cares and be literally an inhabitant of the Kingdom of Heaven.

There are men, much holier than I, who had great fear when they served the liturgy. They served completely in their hearts. They had attentiveness, humility, purity. And with all of these virtues, they still stood in fear, in rapt attention, as they obeyed God, and did the things that a priest is commanded to do. I only resemble these men in that I also do the things that I am commanded to do, but I do not do them with complete attentiveness or humility or purity.

How is it, that unworthy men do things that are worthy of God? I do this every time that I serve the liturgy. I'm a sinful man, and often distracted, and my prayers weak, and yet, when I extend my right hand, and ask the Lord – no -- demand (with fear) -- that the Holy Spirit come upon the gifts, He obeys me. This is an outrageous idea!

It is no wonder to me that people disbelieve this idea, even though Jesus Christ spoke of it quite clearly in the sixth chapter of John and the entire tradition of the church from the beginning has believed literally: “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53), and also: “Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” (John 6:54-55) They either disbelieve it by being inattentive and not careful, and therefore not caring too much about praying while they're in the liturgy, or they disbelieve it entirely, because they have been taught another doctrine that does not understand the infinite.

There are many ideas that Christians hold – true Christians – that are outrageous and therefore are disbelieved by many. That God could become man of a virgin, that this pregnancy would cause the virgin to be so filled with God that she would not want anything mundane, and remain a virgin, that bread and wine can be transformed into the body and blood of Christ to feed his beloved, that a church filled with weak and sinful men could be free from error and endure without change from the times of the Apostles – these are all outrageous things.

The most outrageous thing is that man, who struts about like a turkey and is ignorant, and blind, can be filled with God and can know Him. Truly, the most outrageous idea is that “a man shall draw nigh and the heart is deep.” (Ps 63:6) Deep in the heart of Texas, I often think many such thoughts. I'm confused as to the reason why I don't always think such thoughts.



St Paisios, the Athonite.

There is a prayer from St. Paisios the Athonite that I found, and I say every day. Sometimes I say it many times a day, as a sort of Jesus prayer. It is: "**Lord, I'm a wretch, but save me, and the whole world too**".

This is the essence of life. We are wretches – that is absolutely true. God created us to know Him, and nothing can frustrate His desire, except our stubborn, life-long stupidity. So, we should go through life thinking that we are wretches, and yet God will dwell in our hearts. Somehow that's very easy to think this at the top of a ridge at sunset in Indian Creek Texas, or in a deer blind, looking at turkeys.

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