

Quiet Day: Desert Spirituality in Egypt - October 11, 2025

Dr Elizabeth Ursic will be reflecting on her recent experiences in Egypt and the significance of the Egyptian desert in the Bible, the formation of our Christian faith, and the roots of our contemplative practices with the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

First Conference - Desert Spirituality in Egypt: Old and New Testament

Refuge, Trial and Transformation

OT: Abraham, Joseph, Moses

Exodus 3:14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' Other translations – "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be."

Genesis 12:10 "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe."

Genesis 41: 39 "39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.

NT: Jesus

Matthew 2:14-15 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

Mark 6:31 "And he said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a desert place and rest a while.'"

Luke 4:1-2 "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil."

Second Conference - Desert Spirituality in Egypt: Christian faith formation

Coptic Christianity – one of the earliest branches of Christianity

Began with the evangelism of Saint Mark in Alexandria, Egypt around AD 42–55

St Antony of Egypt – Father of Monasticism - the importance of love over fear.

From Life of Antony by Athanasius. "And he was constant in prayer, knowing that a man ought to pray in secret unceasingly."

“The man who abides in solitude and is quiet, is delivered from fighting three battles: those of hearing, speech, and sight. Then he will have but one battle to fight—the battle of the heart.”

Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Nicene Creed - 4th c

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

Third Conference – Desert Spirituality in Egypt: Early Desert Fathers and Mothers

Jesus Prayer - First only known as “prayers of the heart.”

Inscribed in monastic cells in Egyptian desert.

Macarius of Egypt (4th c) "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. I bless you, my Lord Jesus", or when distressed, "My Lord Jesus, help me".

Luke 18:13 “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Psalms 123:3 “Lord, have mercy.”

Philokalia (c. 600 CE) ““Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me”.

Jesus Prayer Practice

1. The oral prayer is a simple recitation, external to the practitioner.
2. The focused prayer, when "the mind is focused upon the words" of the prayer, "speaking them as if they were our own".
3. The prayer of the heart, when the prayer is no longer something we do but who we are.