

The lion and the hermit: Saint Gerasimus the Jordanite (Eva Topping)

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Once upon a time there lived in the desert by the Jordan River a very holy hermit. His name was Gerasimos. Gerasimos had become a monk when he was still young man. Because he wished to perfect his spiritual life, he left the monastery and withdrew deep into the desert, far from the noise and vanities of life in the villages, towns and cities of the world. There alone with nature and the divine Creator of the universe, Gerasimos spent most of his long life.



In the solitary stillness of the open desert the hermit could commune without interruption with God. Even words were not necessary for this communion. By day and night Gerasimos prayed and meditated silently within his heart. His hymns of praise, too, were sung in wordless silence.

Eventually he achieved such holiness that even the fierce beasts of the desert

recognized that Gerasimos was a saint. In his presence the wildest animals that roamed the desert became tame and gentle.

One day from out of the vast, trackless desert a proud lion appeared suddenly before Gerasimos' cell. The great beast approached the hermit, bowed his tawny head and held out a huge paw.

The desert lion had come to stay. He joined the tiny, isolated community which consisted of the saint, a disciple and a donkey. Guided by the saintly hermit, man and beast lived together in perfect peace and harmony.

Of his own free will the king of beasts became Gerasimos' faithful servant. One of the lion's tasks was to guard the little donkey whenever it wandered beyond the little settlement in search of fodder. Since it was dangerous for the donkey to be alone in the desert, the lion always went along to protect it.

One hot day when the donkey was grazing, looking for a few blades of green grass to eat, the lion sat under the shade of a palm tree. The heat of the day made the lion drowsy and soon he closed his eyes and slept.

While he slept, a caravan of merchants happened to pass by. Finding the donkey alone and unguarded, the merchants tied it with a rope and carried the donkey away with them.

When the lion finally awoke, the donkey was nowhere to be seen. Alarmed, he began to look everywhere for the donkey-behind the shrubs, over the hills of sand.

But he could find no traces of the missing donkey.

The waving sands of the desert had hidden the tracks of the caravan and the stolen donkey. Distressed that the donkey had disappeared while he slept, the lion started slowly to make his way home. Gerasimos' disciple first saw the lion returning alone, without the little donkey.

«Look,» he said to the hermit, «here comes our lion, but I don't see the donkey with him. He must have eaten the poor little creature.»

There being no other reasonable explanation of the donkey's disappearance, Gerasimos agreed with his disciple. The hermit then spoke to the waiting lion. «You have served us well and faithfully, even when we were unjust to you. Now it is time for you to return to your home in the desert. You are free. Go, my dear friend, go with my blessings.»

The lion understood what Gerasimos was telling him. He bowed his great head in farewell to the saint whom he had loved and served. Then he turned and left the familiar little company of hermit, disciple and donkey.

Quickly and quietly he vanished from their sight behind the curving hills of desert sand. Back in the open desert, far from the river where his friends lived, the lion felt lonely for his old companions. He missed them. So every week he came back for a visit. Each time it was a happy reunion of man and beast, the saint and his disciple, the little donkey and the great lion.

At last one day the lion came for his weekly visit and there were only two friends to greet him, the disciple and the little donkey. Gerasimos had died. Saddened by the news of the hermit's death, the lion indicated that he wanted to see his grave. The disciple led the sad lion to the place where Gerasimos was buried. A small wooden cross marked the simple grave in the desert sands.

The great tawny lion looked at the cross. Then he lay down on the saint's grave and closed his eyes in death. The faithful lion could not live without the saint, Gerasimos, who, loved not only the Creator but also all of His creatures.

Source: Eva C. Topping, *Sacred stories from Byzantium* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press) 1977