

Once Upon a SAINT

by Rebecca O'Loughlin



My dearest children, on February 15th this year we celebrate the Armenian feast of St. Sarkis. He was born in Greece, and joined the Roman army under St. Constantine. Sarkis was a popular captain. He was young and handsome, but best of all, he was a devout Christian and kind to everyone. He would regularly ask God for guidance, and was as quick as a bird to do whatever he thought God was asking him to do.

After one battle near Persia, the defeated local ruler (who we will call Adhur) invited Captain Sarkis and his officers to a celebratory feast.

“Come, feast with us tonight! Let us quarrel no more!” Adhur seemed eager to please.

“Let us go!” Advised Captain Sarkis’ officers, “it will show we are no longer enemies, and that we have good will toward these people.”

So they went. They were treated to all sorts of delicious foods and wonderful drinks. After the feast the officers retired to a palace room and fell asleep (they were used to sleeping on the hard ground, and didn’t need beds).

Adhur rubbed his hands with glee. He called an assassin to his presence. Her name was Ziba (or “beautiful” in Persian).

“It is time to kill those Christians who have conquered us! Get to it, you and your fellow assassins!”

You see, Adhur had chosen a group of warrior women for their incredible ability to sneak into a room without a sound. They were to kill Sarkis and his officers, and so the Roman army would soon find themselves without leaders and be easily defeated.

The women slipped into the room full of sleeping men without a sound. Ziba snuck up to Sarkis’ side. She raised her curved knife, the blade glinting in the moonlight that streamed through the window.

She paused. In Sarkis’ face she saw beauty. Not just worldly beauty, but the heavenly glow of holiness. She bent over his face and gently kissed his lips.

Sarkis’ eyes popped open. In an instant he took in the scene and knew what was happening. He sounded the alarm, and after killing Adhur, threw Ziba on his brilliant white horse and rode away. As they left, an unusual snowstorm covered the palace and kept the Persian military from following.

Sarkis and Ziba married and had a son, who they named Mardiros, which means “witness.” Ziba died before her son reached manhood, but not before becoming a devout and joyful follower of Christ. Sarkis never married again.

Sarkis spread the Christian faith wherever he went.

Emperor Constantine died, and he was replaced by his nephew, the wicked Emperor Julian the Apostate. Christians were persecuted under his command. Sarkis prayed. In a vision he saw Jesus.

Jesus raised His hand in blessing: "You must leave, Sarkis. I have a plan for you."

Sarkis never hesitated, but left immediately. He brought with him his son, and friends who had served in the military with him. King Tiran (Tigranes VII) of Armenia welcomed them. Sarkis and his companions taught about Christ and His love for them to whomever would listen, and converted hundreds to Christ.

Meanwhile, Emperor Julian kept traveling until he reached the outskirts of Armenia. King Tiran begged Sarkis to leave, so Sarkis became general of the army of the Sassanid Emperor named Shapur.

Soon Sarkis and his army went up against Emperor Julian's forces in Persia as well. Sarkis' army was small in number and quite terrified.

"We will die today!" The Persian soldiers said.

"No, we will put our trust in God, and we will not be conquered," General Sarkis replied, "but even if we were to die today, I trust in God's Will. Death is not the end. I will see my beautiful wife in heaven when I die, and there will only be peace and joy, not war."

His men were impressed with these words.

"Make us Christian!" They replied, "if we die, we want to go to heaven too!"

So they became Christian and they fought a miraculous battle, successfully pushing back the Roman army.

Some of the Sassanians were jealous, and they went to Emperor Shapur.

"Emperor," they said, "that General Sarkis you put in charge of your armies is a Christian. That means that he believes his real king is Jesus, not you. He worships only one God, who Sarkis says is more powerful than all the other gods."

Emperor Shapur frowned. "Is this true? Let us hold a feast in honor of our own two mighty gods. Then we will see for ourselves where General Sarkis' loyalties lie."

The day of the feast arrived. The Persian Sassanians believed in two gods, one good and one evil. They worshiped them both and believed that both good and evil was necessary for balance in the world. They

believed fire was the manifestation for the good god, so there was a large bowl ready to be lit from the fire from their eternal flame.

"Sarkis!" Emperor Shapur gestured with a smile, "please have the honor of lighting the fire to our god as a celebration of your victories against the Roman armies and Emperor Julian."

"I cannot." Sarkis replied, "I worship the one true God. This god of fire is not real."

Shapur's face turned red with anger. "So it is true! You are a Christian!!! Cursed be the Christian God!"

"No, cursed be this fake idol you have set up!" Sarkis ran over to the eternal flame stand, and even though it was as heavy as an elephant, he pushed it over. The flame went out.

Shapur was furious. He killed Sarkis, his son and his companions. Sarkis' body shone with light and there were angels at his death, so that many people followed Christ.

After Sarkis died he went straight to Heaven. His beautiful wife Ziba was waiting for him. She hugged him and told him she was very proud of him for remaining loyal to the true God, even though it can be frightening to be a martyr.

Do you remember how Sarkis met his wife, that she came to him in the night? In Armenia there are a variety of traditions surrounding his feast. I will name two. The first is that the three days prior to St. Sarkis Day, the people fast. Then in the evening before the feast, single men and women eat Aghablit, which is a salty bread, and ask St. Sarkis to show them their future spouse. The Aghablit is so salty that the person who eats it will be thirsty in their sleep, so the idea is that whoever they see bringing water to them in their dreams is their beloved to be. Of course this isn't really true, although it might just so happen to be true every once in a while.

Another tradition is to feed birds on this day. One of St. Sarkis' titles is "Arakahas" which means, "one who arrives quickly." He is said to answer prayers very fast, just as he always responded to God's wishes immediately.

People pray for their future spouses while feeding the birds on this day. The birds fly away and carry the peoples' prayer to St. Sarkis, who in turn presents the prayers to God.

St Sarkis feast changes every year. The next few St. Sarkis Days will be on January 31, 2026; January 23, 2027; February 12, 2028; January 27, 2029; February 16, 2030.