

February 25, 2024
Second Sunday of Lent
Mark 9:2-10

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

Background:

Each year the Church uses one of the synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration as the Gospel text for the second Sunday of Lent. This year the text of Mark is paired with a passage from Genesis that describes how God intercedes as Abraham is about to sacrifice his son Isaac. Where Abraham is not required to sacrifice his son as a demonstration of his faithfulness to God, God demonstrates his faithfulness to the covenant with us by being willing to sacrifice his son.

The transfiguration of Jesus is based in part on some schools of mysticism that believe that humans and animals can also change form. The word for transfiguration, (metamorphose) literally means to change form. Movies like the Lord of the Rings trilogy and Harry Potter contain contemporary expressions of this understanding. In the Jewish tradition the righteous will take on a new heavenly form. It is not uncommon to encounter people who hope that their heavenly body will be significantly different from the one that they now have on earth. In the text here, Jesus is transfigured not in the sense of taking on a totally new form, but in the sense that the way he appears to the disciples is dramatically different.

The fact that Peter, James, and John are present and witness this event makes it an historical event, not one that takes place only in the spiritual world. Nor is it a vision or dream of some moment in the future when the fullness of God's presence will be revealed. Jesus is the only one who is changed, and he is the only one who enters into a dialogue with Moses and Elijah. But the disciples are participants in the event as it unfolds. They witness and participate in what is taking place: they see the change in Jesus' appearance, they recognize Elijah and Moses, Peter addresses Jesus, they are overshadowed by the cloud, and they hear the voice from heaven speaking to them. What is taking place occurs in such a way that they can experience it and participate in it. But it is only Jesus who is transformed and engaged in some kind of dialogue with Moses and Elijah.

Mark's community would have recognized many of the elements as being similar to their religious heritage. Both Moses and Elijah ascended a mountain and there encountered the presence of God. Both underwent a kind of transformation. When Moses returned with the tablets on which the commandments had been written, his face had become so bright, after he had spoken with God, that he had to cover it so that people could look at him (Exodus 34:29-35). Elijah, when he died, was taken from earth in a flaming chariot (2 Kings 2:11). For the people of the day, Moses and Elijah represented the law and the prophets, the whole of their religious tradition.

The cloud is another familiar image from the Hebrew Scriptures that expressed the presence of God. For example: God spoke to Moses from a cloud, while in the desert a cloud led the people and would descend upon the tent whenever Moses entered to confer with God, a dark cloud totally enveloped the temple at its dedication so that the priests had to leave, and the Jews believed that when the Messiah returned the cloud would once again descend upon the temple.

Peter's suggestion that they build three tents on the mountain reflects the custom associated with the feast of Tabernacles, when the Jews remember a period of their history of living in tents as they wandered in the desert. By the time of Jesus, the feast not only celebrated an important aspect of their liberation from slavery, but also took on overtones of hope for a time when they would be liberated once again. Peter's suggestion that tents be built may be an expression of hope that Jesus is initiating the time of final liberation. However, Jesus' exhortation as they come down the mountain to tell no one of the experience "except when the Son of Man has risen from the dead" reminds Peter that there will be no glory before Jesus' rejection and death. As Mark's community hears the description of Jesus' transfiguration, their own hopes for the future are also touched. Jesus' note of warning would help them maintain some hope as they hear Mark describe Jesus' rejection and death.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of being on mountains? Has there been an experience of being on a mountain that stands out for you? What do you remember about that experience? What were some of the emotions associated with that experience?
2. Have you had experiences that you might describe as mountaintop experiences?
3. Do you have places where you have felt or feel close to God?
4. Are your experiences of God's closeness mirrored in some way by events in the scriptures?
5. How might the experience of the disciples be similar to yours, and different from yours?
6. As you reflect on this Gospel today, do you feel more like the disciples on the mountain with Jesus or like those waiting for them at the bottom?
7. Might this Lent be an invitation to climb the mountain and walk with Jesus to Jerusalem? How can you use this Lent for the journey?
8. Can you talk to God honestly and openly about whatever arises in you from this Gospel, and about changes you most long for at this point of your life?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fscs-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the Readings for February 25, 2024, the Second Sunday of Lent

God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am!" he replied. God said: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you."

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the Lord's messenger called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" "Here I am!" he answered. "Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger. "Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son." As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son. Again the Lord's messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said: "The Lord declares, that because you did not withhold from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies; in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—because you obeyed my command."

*I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living. I believed, even when I said,
"I am greatly afflicted." Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones.
O Lord, I am your servant, the son of your handmaid; you have loosed my bonds.
To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the Lord.
My vows to the Lord I will pay in the presence of all his people,
In the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem.*

Brothers and sisters: If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us; who will condemn? Christ Jesus it is who was raised—who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. He was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

Excerpts from Genesis 22:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 116:10, 15-19; Romans 8:31-34; and Mark 9:2-10

Friends,

Once again this is after a day's delay. Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for February 25th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this second Sunday of Lent we hear from Mark's Gospel about the Transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain, where his clothes became dazzling white, and Elijah and Moses appeared, conversing with Jesus. Then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

The other readings also have references to mountain experiences, and to being in the Lord's presence, and to God's will regarding father and son in the face of the needs of God's people. In the first reading from Genesis, God puts Abraham to the test, telling him to offer up his son Isaac on a mountain height as a sacrifice. Abraham

prepares to do as commanded, at which God puts a halt to it and instead tells Abraham, "Because you did not withhold from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly, with countless descendants. In your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing—all because you obeyed my command." Psalm 116 proclaims, "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord," and it adds, "I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living." In the second reading, from the letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "God did not spare his own Son, for us. Christ Jesus, who died and was raised, intercedes for us at the right hand of God."

Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus as he is transfigured in the Gospel. Moses represents the law in the Old Testament, and Elijah represents prophecy. They appear with Jesus, witnesses to the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, fulfillment in the person of Jesus. It is neither Moses nor Elijah who is featured in the first reading, but instead we have Abraham's mountain experience, preparing to offer his son. In the verses immediately before this Gospel in Mark, Jesus has just begun for the first time to teach his disciples that he will be rejected, suffer, and be killed. The Father's words from the cloud, "This is my beloved Son," have echoes in the first reading words of God to Abraham, "you did not withhold from me your beloved son," and in the second reading where Paul says, "God did not spare his own Son." The fulfillment of the law and the prophets occurs when God's Son is not spared as Abraham's was.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!