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March 12, 2017

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Behold!” That’s a key word in today’s story of the Transfiguration. It means more than “Look!” or “OMG!” It’s more like “Take a very good look, and then look again, because there is more here than you can grasp.” Interestingly, that word wasn’t used for the description of the change in Jesus’ appearance, as if an intensely bright face and dazzling clothes were not so unusual for the itinerant preacher from Nazareth. Instead, the word was used for the arrival of Moses and Elijah, for the cloud that overshadowed them and the voice that spoke.

“Behold! Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him.” What an interesting description. The disciples receive a vision of the ancient prophets conversing with Jesus. It’s as if to tell the disciples, “Behold, this Jesus whom you know is rooted in the best, the deepest of your tradition.”

Moses and Elijah “were conversing with him,” making it seem as if they were consulting, as if he were the revelation they had been awaiting. Their presence is all the more mysterious because they are two whose fame includes the fact that nobody saw them die — and they were conversing with the one who would overcome death.

“Behold! A bright cloud cast a shadow over them.” The “bright cloud” might seem like a wonderful oxymoron, but it’s not such an unusual biblical image. In the Hebrew Scriptures God’s glory frequently became visible as a cloud, and in Exodus 13 we hear that God led the people with a cloud by day and fire by night, symbolically confusing their certainty and lighting their darkness. “Behold the bright cloud,” seems to be the ultimate invitation to risk stepping into mystery.

“Behold! From the cloud came a voice.” This final call heralded some clarity. From that moment on, the disciples were empowered to speak like prophets, with all the certainty of Jeremiah they could say, “The word of God came to me and declared that Jesus is God’s beloved Son. We must listen to him.”

What the disciples beheld on the mountaintop was what psychologists of religion call a “peak experience.” It was a moment when they understood the truth of who Jesus was for them in a way that was deeper than words could express. No miracle, no preaching, no philosophical argument can produce the interior conviction that such an encounter brings. A bit like falling in love, it’s a life-changing experience that can’t be pinned down any more than Jesus, Moses and Elijah could be housed in tents on the hill. In the truest sense of the phrase, you had to be there.

Most people have at least a few mountaintop moments in their life, times when they know that God is near, that love is the ultimate value, that faith is worth the risk, and in fact, that faith is a promise that demands that we risk all.

Abraham had a mountaintop moment when God called him from his homeland to go off into a most improbable future, a future in which he and his elderly childless wife would become the parents of a people of God too numerous to count. Paul had such a moment when he was stopped short in his persecution of the body of Christ.

We know their stories because those moments changed their lives and although the intensity of the experience was fleeting, it changed them and they remembered it forever.

Behold! That’s the vital word. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote in her poem, *Aurora Leigh*,

Earth is crammed with heaven,

And every bush is aflame with God,

But only those who see take off their shoes,

The rest sit around and pluck blackberries.

We can only see what we are open to seeing. There's more of God around us than we can take in, but we can also miss it all. Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain after they had been with him, after they had been enthralled with the force of his goodness and repelled by his prediction that he would suffer rejection and a shameful death. They loved him and that was enough to open them to more. They were ready to begin to behold who he was in the sight of God. All that was left was to learn to listen to him.

This second week of Lent invites us to behold the Christ of our tradition, to remember our peak moments of faith, and most of all, to listen to him.

GENESIS 12:1-4a

The call of Abraham is a pivotal point in salvation history. If we haven't recently studied Genesis we may not be aware that God spoke to Abraham after ten generations of divine silence. It wasn't that God hadn't been active, but the last time God had actually spoken to humanity was after "the Flood." Then God gave the word of promise that humanity would never again suffer such devastating waters (Genesis 9:8-17).

When God addresses Abraham, the plot of Genesis takes a great, unexpected turn. Until this moment, we had been reading the story of God's interaction with humanity and all of creation. It was a universal story. Now out of all of humanity, God addresses one particular man and calls him to take part in a new chapter in history. It was time for a particular people to become more intimately involved with God.

God's call to Abraham was a revelation in the sense that God was letting Abraham in on the divine plan. As would happen later with the young Mary of Nazareth, God's invitation came without warning and enticed Abraham to become part of a wholly unanticipated future. There is no doubt that the call was costly. The author makes a point of that by emphasizing that God summoned Abraham to leave the land of his kinfolk and his father's house, that is, the place where he was known and enjoyed the benefits of "citizenship" as well as the relationship that gave him a name and an inheritance. In brief, God invited Abraham to let go of everything except his barren

wife for the sake of a future rich in descendants and renown.

This is not the story of a refugee, Abraham's trek was a going forward, not a running away. To what was he going? A promise. A promise that must have seemed absurd – perhaps so absurd that it could only have come from the Creator God. That intuition — the belief that God was actually calling him, together with the unearthly immensity of the promise —led Abraham to pack up.

As we enter the second week of Lent, the Church offers us Abraham as an example and a patron. Unlike the prophets who protested their call on the grounds of being too young, too unimportant or too tongue-tied, Abraham was old and settled and he had everything he could want except descendants — and having spent his younger years in the attempt to produce progeny, he surely had no reason to expect them at his age.

God invited Abraham to a new identity. Instead of being identified with a particular place, a family of origin, a nation and its tribal god, Abraham accepted the summons that would change him and salvation history. Now his primary identification would be through his relationship to the one God. His future, including his descendants as numerous as the sands, depended on nothing except the power of the divine plan.

2 TIMOTHY 1:8b-10

Paul wrote to Timothy as to his protégé, a younger disciple expected to follow in Paul's steps. Paul had just told him not to be ashamed of the apparent disgrace of the cross or persecution for the sake of the Gospel. The suffering entailed in being a disciple and the ill-repute of Christians was a serious source of inner conflict for many. This is obvious from the number of times the Christian Scriptures reminded them that Jesus' true followers will suffer the same as he did.

The sentence which opens our reading can be understood in two different but complementary ways. First, following the translation we have, the implication is that preaching the Gospel necessarily implies suffering, but the strength to bear it will come from God. That partakes of Paul's idea that "when I am weak, I am strong," meaning that when we reach the end of our strength we are finally able to allow God's power to work in and through us (2 Corinthians 2:10).

Secondly, the alternative translation is more like “bear your share of hardship for the gospel which is the strength that comes from God.” This implies that as one preaches the Gospel, the Gospel itself becomes an ever more powerful source of strength in their lives. Both interpretations imply that the preaching is a life-style and not simply an oratorical activity.

The rest of this reading, one long sentence, may well have come from a hymn known to the Christians of Paul’s day. It is a quick summary of the Gospel message presented in Pauline fashion. The hymn proclaims that salvation is ours and makes demands: it’s not just a free pass, but the call to live as a holy people. At the same time, we must remember that salvation and holiness are profound experiences of grace. God gives us the ability to live as a holy people, people who have glimpsed God’s design and for whom grace functions to allow that design to work itself out in our lives.

When we read this in the light of our reading from Genesis, we might hear Paul calling us to become like Abraham whose life revolved around God’s call and promise. The crucial distinction is, of course, that the promise to Abraham, miraculous as it was, remained earth-bound, promising a land and succession of posterity, all the true blessings of this world. Life in Christ adds universality and eternity: a never-ending promise for all people.

MATTHEW 17:1-9

The Gospels situate the story of the Transfiguration just after the incident in which Jesus invited his disciples to tell him who they thought he was and his explanation that as God’s anointed one, he was going to suffer. Now, six days later, Jesus brings his three core disciples to a new experience of him, one that counterbalances any dread they might have had, given what he taught them about his fate.

Matthew and Mark specify that the Transfiguration happened six days after the above mentioned events. Among the possible explanations for underlining the time, one train of thought suggests that it may reflect on the seven days of creation so that this experience was a Sabbath encounter with God par-excellence. Other obvious allusions to the six days and other details of the story are Moses’ six-day experience on the mountain of God, the cloud of God’s glory which covered the mountain and how Moses’ face glowed from his encounter with God (Exodus 24 and 34). While many things can be inferred from all of that, at the very least we are

aware that the evangelists wanted to be sure that their listeners could see Jesus' transfiguration in the light of their salvation history. The Transfiguration recalled God's previous visits. Moses and Elijah as Jesus' companions placed him firmly in the line of the Hebrew Scriptures with two of the greatest prophets, two whose demise was mysterious, to say the least. (According to Deuteronomy 34:6, Moses was buried by unknown people in an unknown place and according to 2 Kings, 2:11, Elijah departed from earth in a fiery chariot.) In other places Matthew has said specifically this was to fulfill the prophecy, in this case, the details speak for themselves.

More than showing Jesus' roots in Israel's tradition, the Transfiguration was a new revelation of Jesus' identity. The three men with whom Jesus chose to share this experience had been with him for some time. They had seen his deeds of power and had heard his preaching. They had walked with him and presumably tried to imitate him in his relationship with God and his way of being with others. They had allowed Peter to speak for them in naming him the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and they had heard Jesus' corrective to Peter's rejection of his coming suffering. Understood in the light of Jesus' passion predictions, the Transfiguration was a revelation that divine glory didn't mean what the disciples thought it did in terms of worldly success. Jesus was going to suffer shamefully. At the same time, suffering and death were not, as they thought, signs of failure and lack of divine blessing. The Transfiguration, an event described in Matthew, Mark and Luke, might well be understood as a demonstration of what John's Gospel described as Jesus' glory on the cross.

Obviously, the disciples didn't comprehend their mountaintop experience. Peter offered to build shelters. But before he could make a move, God's voice pierced the clouds saying everything they needed to know: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." That was exactly the same message the heavenly voice had spoken at the time of Jesus' baptism — then directly to him, now to the disciples, except for the three additional words: "Listen to him."

Planning: 2nd Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

This first readings for today as well as for the next two Sundays present us with key figures in salvation history: Abraham today, Moses next week, and David the week following. Today's passage from Genesis recounts God's call to Abram (later renamed Abraham) to leave his homeland and go to a land that God would show him. Abraham is seen as our father in faith (for Jews, Christians and Muslims) because he responded to God's call with complete obedience.

All four Scripture passages call us to put our trust in God as did Abram. The psalm refrain proclaims, "Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you." The second reading encourages the early Christians to be faithful to their call and trust God in difficult times. The voice from heaven in the Gospel urges the apostles to listen to Jesus, to trust his words even more than Moses or Elijah.

This suggests a theme of trust to be reflected in the choice of music and the composition of prayers this weekend, as well as the preaching, of course. But another theme is also revealed in the readings, that of pilgrimage or journey. Abram goes to a land he does not know; Jesus is going up to Jerusalem and eventually to his resurrection. We are all called on a journey of faith, a pilgrimage of conversion to a "holy life" (second reading). So that theme also might be reflected in the music choices and prayer texts this week. Both themes could come together, too, since we need to trust in God as we make the journey. In fact, it is only such trust that enables us to die to self so as to come to a fuller life in Christ. Change always involves some dying, and we can only embrace that if we trust that new life will follow.

Penitential Rite: If you have candidates preparing for full communion with the Catholic Church who will be welcomed at Easter or soon thereafter, this Sunday is a good day to celebrate a penitential rite with them (RCIA #464). Planners should work with those who are preparing them for full communion to prepare this rite. It should fit well with the themes discussed above, since they are also on a journey of deepened conversion. It is important to remember that candidates are not catechumens or the elect. Candidates are part of us already through baptism, and they are traveling a journey that all the baptized are called to take each year in Lent. As you make sure that comments and prayers reflect their proper status, emphasize the call to the entire faith community to deepen their own conversion to Christ.

Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

As we begin the second week of Lent, we encounter Abram moving to a new place, the disciples struggling to understand Jesus, and the early Christians trying to figure out how to live the Gospel. If our own understanding about who Jesus is remains a struggle with ongoing questions, let us not be discouraged. If our hearts are open, we can trust that there will be people and experiences to help us along the way.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you gradually taught the apostles who you are: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you shared your identity in the Transfiguration: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you reveal yourself to all whose hearts are open: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: My friends, as we seek to live the Gospel let us now pray for the needs of the whole world.

Minister: For all who profess the Christian faith: that our understanding of Jesus may deepen and grow... as a penitent people, we pray,

- For peace in our nation and healing for our planet torn apart by conflicting world views...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who struggle to understand Jesus and are challenged by living the Gospel...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those who succumb to the vices of abusive power, greed or prejudice...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For families, churches or communities disrupted by differing understandings about fidelity to Jesus...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For those preparing for reception into the church during the Easter season...as a penitent people, we pray,
- For all in need: the sick, the dying; and for those who have died...(names)...as a penitent people, we pray,

Presider: Gracious God, as you shower us with the gifts of knowledge and understanding give us open hearts to receive them. When distracted by the demands of life, help us to continue to understand and follow Jesus. Fortify us with love and compassion especially for those whose understanding is different from our own. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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