Spirituality
Scripture for Life



View from the Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor in Israel (Wikimedia Commons/Bahnfrend)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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On our worst days, we might say that we feel as bad as we look on our driver's license. At the other end of the spectrum, wealthy people can commission their portraits that erase blemishes and make even the plainest appear stately.

Somewhere in between lies the reality of who we are — a matter far more complex than can be captured visually or verbally. Today's Liturgy of the Word focuses on the question of how the disciples grew in knowing Jesus and how that affected them.

Rather surprisingly, the people who put together our lectionary chose Abram's relationship with God to shed light on the mystery of Jesus' transfiguration. Our selection from Genesis tells a story about changing identity. God invited Abram to leave behind everything that had defined him — his land and his kin — so that God could make something new of him.

God made five promises to Abram, each of which urged him to look beyond all he had and knew, so that he could embrace a much larger identity that would be as good for the whole world as it was for him personally.

Second Sunday of Lent

March 5, 2023

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 33
2 Timothy 1:8b-10
Matthew 17:1-9

The reading ends with the wonderful summary of a well-lived life: "Abram went as the Lord directed him."

We hear today's Gospel, mindful that this scene takes place after the events of Matthew 16. Those events included a dispute with Pharisees who asked for signs, Jesus' disappointment in the disciples' inability to understand his works and that most direct, intimate and intimidating question: "Who do *you* say that I am?" That interaction ended with Jesus telling them that his vocation (and theirs) would include suffering.

Matthew sets up the incident on the mountain six days after those events. That seemingly strange calendar note subtly places this incident in the context of the creation story: Jesus went up the mountain with his friends on the seventh day, the day of completion. After having shared hard teachings about his suffering and disfiguration, Jesus allowed them a glimpse of the future of all of creation in the Transfiguration.

Matthew, Mark and Luke give us remarkably similar accounts of this incident. When Matthew tells us that Jesus was "transfigured" before them, he uses the word that comes to English as metamorphosis. In Greek mythology, metamorphosis was what happened when the gods took on human form.

In contrast to that, Jesus, the fully human one, became permeated with divine splendor. This absolutely overwhelmed the very disciples who had so easily proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the anointed son of God. It's one thing to make a great statement about what we believe, it's another thing entirely to begin to perceive even a tiny part of what might be implied in titles like Christ or God.

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Obviously, the disciples realized that they had seen more than they could comprehend. Whatever they had thought about Jesus or the glory of God, their moment on the mountain showed them how paltry their imaginations had been. Jesus told them not to talk about it because any words they might try to use would be so inadequate as to be almost sacrilegious.

The experience on the mountain must have been the high point of discipleship for the ones who accompanied Jesus that day. Because of that, it was something they could never adequately describe.

The same is true for us. There are moments in our deepest relationships when we really know love and intimacy, when we glimpse the depth of another in ways that cannot be put into words. In those times, we realize that the truth of love is timeless, deeper and broader than can ever be described.

Being caught up in such experiences is transformative. Not only do we see and fall in love again, but we ourselves become transformed in the process.

The mystery of the Transfiguration, Jesus' self-revelation as God's beloved, offers us more than just a glimpse of his divine vocation. Jesus' appearance as God's beloved, his revelation of divinity in humanity, gives us a preview of our own destiny. It reminds us of the truth of Genesis' teaching that human beings are oriented to become ever and ever greater images of God.

This is what Paul tells Timothy when he quotes a hymn that sings about how God saves us, not because of what we do but through what happens to and among us when we love. Today's liturgy tells us that transfiguration is the destiny we all share with Christ, if only we will allow ourselves to be loved like him. That's the road to a life well lived.