

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Matt 17:5

From the shining cloud the Father's voice is heard:

This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

Gospel

Mark 9:2-10; L26B

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;

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.

Reflecting on the Gospel

The readings present a compendium of themes that shape the Lenten season. The first reading concludes the cycle of narratives about Abraham (Gen 12-23), which unfold from his call, with the promise that he and Sarah will be the parents of many nations, through the covenant and the birth of a son, the bearer of the promise (Isaac), and reaches its pinnacle in God's command that

Abraham offer Isaac as a holocaust. As one of the most treasured subjects of Christian art, the denouement of the story is familiar. At the last moment "the LORD's messenger" intervenes; Isaac is spared, and the promise is renewed: "[B]ecause you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly" (Gen 22:16-17).

In both Judaism and Christianity Abraham is a paradigm of faith who "when tested was found loyal" (Sir 44:20), who "hop[ed] against hope" (Rom 4:18), and who "[b]y faith, . . . when put to the test, offered up Isaac" because he believed in a God who could raise up the dead (Heb 11:17-19). Also in Jewish tradition Isaac is transformed into a model of self-sacrifice who went willingly to his death, which is adopted by Christians for Jesus, "the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Gal 2:20; all NABRE).

"Transformation" would be a better term to describe today's gospel story, since Jesus, though

in the form of God, took on the "form of a slave" (Phil 2:6-7; NABRE), and is now transformed and seen as an exalted member of the heavenly court. The narrative is dense with biblical allusions. The dazzling white clothes are a symbol of divine presence in Daniel 7:9, while the presence of Elijah and Moses has been interpreted in a number of ways. They are symbols of the prophets and the Law; both are people who did not taste death but were exalted to heaven (Elijah in 2 Kgs 2:1-12; Moses in extra-biblical tradition); they are faithful prophets who suffered because they followed God's word.

The deeper focus of the account emerges from the divine voice: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7). The transformation follows the first of three predictions by Jesus of his death by crucifixion, which the disciples consistently resist. Peter's desire for three booths seems an attempt to substitute divine presence for the way of the cross. The same three disciples who witness Jesus's transformation fail to watch with him during his agony in the garden (Mark 14:32-42). Mark's readers and we ourselves are to hear the voice of a Jesus who says that the way to glory is only through the cross.

The narrative is also followed by one of the most dramatic stories in the gospel (Mark 9:14-29), the exorcism from a young boy of a destructive demon which the disciples of Jesus are powerless to combat. Raphael's magnificent panorama "The Transfiguration," which greets visitors to the Vatican museums, captures the sequence perfectly. While Jesus and the heavenly companions are illumined in resplendent colors, the fruitless struggle of the disciples with the demon occupy the lower right-hand corner. The eye cannot help but behold the chaos of earthly evil when looking at heavenly glory.



The transfiguration is not, as some homilists state, a kind of midpoint encouragement to the disciples, since they will continue to misunderstand Jesus and will flee at his arrest; and Peter denies him. The deeper meaning of the narrative for Mark and for us during Lent is that even after moments of transcendence and transformation, we must come back to earth, continue to hear the voice of Jesus, and follow him on the way to the cross. Experience of transcendence is juxtaposed with the struggle against evil.

The readings today encourage deep faith and trust in God.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: [Q]uestioning what rising from the dead meant.

To the point: The transfiguration takes place only a few days after Jesus makes his first passion prediction to the disciples, telling them how “the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days” (Mark 8:31; NABRE). For the first disciples, Jesus’s words must have sounded nonsensical. To rise from the dead was not something anyone in the history of salvation had done before. What did it entail? How was it brought about? Despite their confusion, the disciples continue to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. Only in living the paschal mystery with Jesus will they begin to perceive the immensity of the resurrection.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: In the first reading Abraham also receives an absurd, and disquieting, request from God. Even though he has been promised that he will “become the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4; NABRE), now God instructs him to offer his only descendant, Isaac, up “as a holocaust.” Just as Abraham is about to carry out the request, he is stopped by a voice calling him twice by name, telling him, “Do not lay your hand on the boy . . . Do not do the least thing to him.” At this time, the nations around the land of Israel practiced human sacrifice as a form of worship. Although this reading can be difficult for us to encounter, within it we find an affirmation not of death, but of life. God does not desire child sacrifice, or indeed, any harm to come to a son or daughter.

to experience: We believe in a God who brings life from death. How have you experienced this in your life?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: As Christians, we find in today’s psalm response another affirmation of the resurrection promised to us in Jesus: “I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.” A few chapters after the account of the transfiguration in Mark’s gospel, Jesus will tell the Sadducees—a religious group who denied the resurrection of the dead—that God “is not God of the dead but of the living” by citing the passage in Exodus where God tells Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, [the] God of Isaac, and [the] God of Jacob” (Mark 12:26-27; NABRE).

to psalmist preparation: Our Lenten journey will lead us to the foot of the cross and then on to the joy of the empty tomb and the waters of baptism that bring us to new birth and a life in Christ that will never end. How are you preparing yourself—body, mind, and spirit—to live these mysteries anew?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

In the first reading, God tells Abraham, “Do not lay your hand on the boy . . . Do not do the least thing to him.” How does your community teach and embrace nonviolence?

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The psalmist tells us, “I believed, even when I said, / I am greatly afflicted.” When have you persevered in faith despite difficulty or suffering?

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St. Paul asks, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” What fears do you experience in the spiritual life that this statement could help counteract?

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In the gospel, a voice from the cloud says, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” How do you take time in prayer not only to talk, but also to listen to Jesus?

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