

2nd Sunday in Lent 2021 – Reflection

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The scripture readings for this weekend could be described as a tale of two mountains, each with a story that evokes strong and starkly contrasting emotions in us.

The Gospel reading is Mark's version of the Transfiguration. Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. There, the disciples were amazed to see Jesus' appearance utterly transformed and his robes a dazzling white. They saw two other figures, whom they somehow intuited were Moses and Elijah, conversing with Jesus. Mark's Gospel captures the rush of emotions that they felt: Peter breaks in to say how good it is to be there; he is ready to build tents and stay. Mark explains his impetuosity, writing "He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified." Indeed, many icons and mosaic depictions of the Transfiguration show the disciples falling down the mountainside, some of them headfirst and averting their eyes, both awed and terrified because they had encountered more of the mystery of God than their human mind could bear. And yet in their hearts they knew "It is good for us to be here." A cloud came over the mountain, and God's voice spoke words of love for his Son, and words of both invitation and instruction to the disciples: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."

Why do we hear this story during Lent? When we look at the text before and after, we understand the Transfiguration as a turning point in Jesus' the journey toward Easter. Before ascending the mountain, Jesus had told the disciples that he would suffer and be rejected by everyone. That he would be killed. And that he would rise again. After their experience of his glory in the Transfiguration, Jesus told them not to speak of it until *after* he had risen from the dead. Peter, James and John were filled with a jumble of emotions: awe, fear, wonder and confusion. Nonetheless, their faith in Jesus and readiness to follow him grew ever stronger.

The second mountain is in this Sunday's first reading, from the book of Genesis. It is a much more difficult story to listen to. Abraham hears God's voice and responds quickly, "Here I am!" We are shaken to the roots each time we hear the words that follow. Abraham hears God say "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and offer him as a holocaust on a height I will show you" (Gen 22:1-2). Bishop Robert Barron calls this "one of the most terrible episodes described in the Scriptures" meaning both filled with awe and with terror. Even after we are relieved that Isaac is unharmed, that Abraham's trust in God is rewarded, the story leaves us wondering: why would God ask such a thing? and why would Abraham be willing to obey? "How," Bishop Barron writes, "is this story anything but simply terrifying?"¹

Two mountain tops, two beloved sons. Jesus had told his disciples that only those who were also ready to give up their lives for him would experience everlasting life. Bishop Barron calls us to see in the testing of Abraham a dramatic presentation of one of the most important spiritual principles – and his words echo those of St. Benedict – that absolutely nothing is to be preferred to the love of God. The return of Isaac to Abraham is a sign of Jesus' promise: those who give up their lives for him will also have eternal life with him.

We hear the strength of that conviction in this Sunday's second reading. Writing to the Christians in Rome, St. Paul encourages us to place all of our hope and our confidence in God's promises, the God who sent his beloved son to be our savior. In both of our mountain top stories, God is audibly, visibly present. Not a God to be worshipped at a distance but God who knows our feelings, our loves, our confusions, and our hopes. A God who calls us to sing, with the psalmist, "I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living."

¹ Bishop Robert Barron, "A Light Unto My Path" for Second Sunday of Lent, *Magnificat* Vol. 22:12, February 2021.

A sonnet by poet-priest Malcolm Guite captures the impact of the Transfiguration on the hearts and lives of the disciples, a single moment when they saw the Kingdom of God as clearly as Jesus did. He titled his poem simply

Transfiguration²:

*For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The daily veil that covers the sublime
In darkling glass fell dazzled at his feet.
There were no angels full of eyes and wings
Just living glory full of truth and grace.
The Love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leapt up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through the tender skin.
Nor can this blackened sky, this darkened scar
Eclipse that glimpse of how things really are.*

As we progress through this season of Lent, we slow down. We let go of what we do not need. St. Benedict bids us look forward to Holy Easter with *joy* and *spiritual longing*. And so, in the days ahead, may we be awake to notice each time we catch a fleeting glimpse, a flash of light that glows, even in the shadow of pandemic and the tedium of isolation, a light that repeats the Good News that the Kingdom of God *is* close at hand.

Amen.

² "Transfiguration" by poet-priest Malcolm Guite, from his collection *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy sonnets for Christian year* (2012: Canterbury Press Norwich. ISBN 978-1-84825-274-5) and located online on his blog at <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2021/02/14/a-sonnet-on-the-transfiguration/> where you can hear the poem read by the author. Used for Vigils at Sacred Heart Monastery, Cullman AL as permitted by the author.