

FIRST READING: Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

A reading from the Book of Genesis:

The Lord God took Abram outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so," he added, "shall your descendants be." Abram put his faith in the LORD, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness. He then said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession." "O Lord GOD," he asked, "how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He answered him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Abram brought him all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not cut up. Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram stayed with them. As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram, and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him. When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. It was on that occasion that the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 27:1, 7-8, 8-9, 13-14.

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The LORD is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid?

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Hear, O LORD, the sound of my call; have pity on me, and answer me. Of you my heart speaks; you my glance seeks.

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

Your presence, O LORD, I seek. Hide not your face from me; do not in anger repel your servant. You are my helper: cast me not off.

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

I believe that I shall see the bounty of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD with courage; be stouthearted, and wait for the LORD.

The Lord is my light and my salvation.

SECOND READING: Philippians 3:17—4:1

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

Join with others in being imitators of me, brothers and sisters, and observe those who thus conduct themselves according to the model you have in us. For many, as I have often told you and now tell you even in tears, conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction. Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their "shame." Their minds are occupied with earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior,

the Lord Jesus Christ. He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 9:28b-36

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." But he did not know what he was saying. While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 2nd Sunday of Lent C

All three of today's readings deal with a mystical experience. The first is a vision that Abram had. The gospel relates the shared experience of Jesus, Peter, James and John. People seem to strive to see visions. I maintain visions to be dead ends. Their experience cannot keep people tied to them. Visions are not ends in themselves. How do they affect people? What difference do they make in their lives? How has God changed them? Paul spoke of a vision that he shared of a life lived in Christ. His experience of Jesus led him to faith and his faith prompted him to preach the gospel and serve Christ's Church. We can read in Acts and in Paul's letters the power of the faith he received.

Let me define my terms. Seeing visions is different than having a vision. Visions are subjective experiences that people can have. There is no way for anyone to verify that they have even occurred. The new television show "Ghosts," shows the problem. Only the young wife and writer can see them. From her perspective, only she sees the cast members who portray the ghosts. We see them only as she interacts with them. From anyone else's perspective we will see only the characters that portray the living. That's done with the editing of scenes. This, of course, is just a TV show and not the experience of Abram, Paul, Jesus and his party.

Having vision is different. Abram's experience was his moment of receiving God's gift of faith. He believed in God and in God's promise and trusted the Lord. He shared his vision of faith with his wife, Sarah, and his son, Isaac. They lived faithful lives trusting in God and in the promise God made to Abram as if God made it to them. Isaac then shared this vision to Esau and Jacob

to set their descendants on the path to become a world religion and to give birth to two other faiths, Christianity and Islam. The vision of one man led to God's promise to unfold. Abram became Abraham; the father of many through faith.

Private revelations and personal visions can always be faked. Where do the visions lead people? That's The question to ask of them. The vision of Paul was to live an authentic life in Christ. His vision was a movement for the whole Church to experience and then put into action. To read Paul's story in Acts is different from Paul's own words. Acts had Paul converted on a journey to Damascus and by a flash of light with a disembodied voice. Paul spoke of his process of conversion that took years. He had to pray, study and be formed to become the man whose words we now read. I look to his movement, his journey to faith rather than the special effects. They are closer to my own journey and no less powerful than being changed by a flash and thunderous voice.

Any vision or experience that reinforces itself may be a deep and very personal experience, but if it never affects how a person lives and behaves; it has little meaning for the life of the Church. In recent years we have seen a shift in Catholic piety away from apostolates, service and mission into devotions and rituals. I've heard Catholic pundits state the sign of a healthy parish is how strong their Eucharistic devotion is. That fully depends on what that means. Is it to the mystical body of Christ as people gather or for the Eucharist we keep under lock and key in the tabernacle? If one puts the cart before the horse, what does one have? The Eucharist is also an action by Jesus' Church; a meal we celebrate together. Through it we remember what God has done for us in gratitude. Through it we look forward to what we will become; the Kingdom of God.

In recent Church publications I've seen pictures of religious celebrations. People dressed in their colorful and ethnic costumes with priests dressed in theirs. Those we call vestments. Could we likewise call the ethnic garb vestments too? Both are never worn in normal, daily life. The people carried poles that supported a canopy, under which the priest carried a gold-plated monstrance. I've been there and done that, as an altar boy and as a priest. I have always sought more. It's not the ritual and fancy clothes that's important; it's the people who gather together.

I entered the seminary to become a priest not to perform religious ceremonies and rites; that's just part of the job and only a small part of my day. I chose priesthood to serve the people who gather. Together, Jesus is in our midst and in Jesus' presence we become his Church. We come to know him, together, in the breaking and the sharing of his body and blood. Bread and wine, through the mass, become the body and blood of Jesus, that his Church, which has first become Jesus' body and blood, then shares and receives together.

The Eucharist is a sacrament, which is an outward sign of an inner reality that cannot be seen, readily. For example when we meet someone new for the first time, without knowing anything about the person, if they are wearing a wedding band, we have seen a sign that they are, or were, married. The Eucharist is not an end in itself. It is the precious body and blood of Jesus and the outward sign of the identity of the Church. The Church is the mystical body and blood of Jesus. Without the identity of the Church, the Eucharist would not be necessary. It is the gathering together of Christ's Church that is the context where we celebrate the Eucharist. It is then shared as our spiritual meal.

This fulfills the vision of Jesus himself, "When two or three gather in my name, there I am in their midst." That is how we become Jesus mystical body, the Church, in accord with his vision, together. In sharing the Eucharist we fulfill another. In the gospel of Luke we can read, "Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.'" It's easy to miss the inner, unseen reality of Jesus vision when we see the outward sign.

In Genesis, God made a few big promises to Abram. Abram was getting pretty old, as was his beloved wife, Sarah. Both were well beyond their child bearing age. God's promises of many descendants and a homeland seemed pretty outlandish. It prompted Abram to challenge God, "How am I to know that I will possess it?" God responded with a ritual and a vision. This is what changed Abram. From this point onward, Abram shared God's vision and out of it Abram lived becoming Abraham years later with the birth of Isaac. Father Abraham never saw the vision's completion. He fathered but one. The vision would unfold through Abram's descendants.

The vision itself was fleeting. It was over by day-break the next morning. Yet, in God's plan, Abraham was living out his role with faith. He was a true believer for the rest of his life never knowing when God would fulfill the promises. I will note that these two promises had little to do with sin and salvation. They were not promises for another world. They were promises that would result in people to be born and live their lives in the faith of Abraham. The gift of faith we received as God's gift is the same faith gifted to Abram. He trusted that God's promise was true. He became a father at the tender age of ninety nine and Sarah a mother at ninety. How can we trust God?

When Peter said, "Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," was he truly oblivious? I think he knew exactly what he was saying. He wanted his vision to continue! This had been a wondrous awe that he felt, a spiritual rush and a high. Who wouldn't? I've never seen Jesus as Peter did; but I've met him, seen him in glimpses powerful. When I pray, I have had experiences where I know the closeness of God. It happens when I contemplate in meditation. It happens when I prepare a homily or one of these reflections. It happens when I go away on retreat. It happens at mass, sometimes, too.

Jesus and his lads shared a profound religious experience, together, on the mountain. I have had such experiences shared with others. They are moments that I wish would have lasted much longer. They are glimpses into God. As I have matured, as opposed to merely getting older, they happen often and I welcome them. As powerful as such visions can be, they have a purpose that is more than just a personal one. They have affected how I experience God's presence in the others I meet. They affect why I do what I do.

I always like to avoid getting caught up in "special effects." The transfiguration is not about how Jesus changed in appearance. It is about the transfiguration of Peter, James and John from fishermen to faithful believers. Without their transformation through faith, we wouldn't be here. The gospels were not written as contemporary journals or histories. They were written after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. They were the result of the grace of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They were written years after these events had taken place and in reflection from the perspective of faith. How does one describe the indescribable?

Who has attempted to describe what its like to fall in love? Any words will always fall short of the wonder, depth and experience of it. Poetry, music and art can convey what words cannot; but these, too, fall short. It is a mystery that only experiencing it can reveal. That's what Luke has attempted to tell us. We have witnessed the moment the lads first believed. The vision they shared implanted a vision to serve, preach and witness that has led to us and Christ's Church. We know these things to be true, only through the gift God gives to us, faith. We trust God as did Abram and through it we became the promise God made to him. We are God's children through faith. We believe what we do not see, but have experienced deeply.

Let me approach this in another way. Have you ever gotten together with family or friends, as you have done so many times, and had one of the most wonderful experiences you've ever had? All the jokes are funny. Every one is warm and open. The laughter and warmth are infectious. The meal has never tasted so good. You want this to continue forever. It does not. The next time you gather? It's all the same and blah. People are unpleasant and grumpy. You can't wait for the gathering to end. I maintain that those peak moments are signs of God being close and being gathered in Jesus' name. This is not to say that Jesus is not close during the other gatherings. We need Jesus more, in those times. Jesus gives us patience to endure them. But in those wondrous gatherings we have glimpsed what the apostles knew and glimpsed; life in the Kingdom of God.

Abram saw what the disciples saw with Jesus on the mountain top. The life of God transformed them all. In these passages they shared in the vision of Paul; they were citizens of heaven through their gift of faith. So are we, for we share their faith. God is in the process of transforming us, now, into what God wants us to become. In Jesus we become his Church and when he returns we will become the Kingdom of God.

May we live the faith, not keep it, in the grace of the Holy Spirit.

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