

Second Sunday of Lent -- Feb. 27-28, 2021

History provides us with many stories of the presence of God being hidden in something or someone ordinary. For example, St. Francis of Assisi meets a leper who turns out to be Christ. Every parish has someone or something that stands out as a “God experience.”

Many of us have had mountaintop experiences that we may or may not identify as experiences of God. It could be the joy of a family reunion, a good day when everything seems to go do well, pride in the accomplishments of our children. All of these can be moments of transfiguration when the true meaning and beauty of life is revealed.

Recently we have been making a practice at beginning our council meetings with everyone sharing an experience of God that day or recently in their life and letting those stories lead us into our opening prayer. It has been very uplifting to do this. Recognizing the presence of God in these special experiences can make God real and faith real.

As we reflect back on these mountain-top experiences, we might ask why did God give us these experiences? Was there a special feeling in them that we were supposed to remain in? Were they meant to help us through some difficulty or prepare us for a future difficulty? I want us to look at what is the central purpose for the transfiguration experiences that God gives us in this life.

Every year on the Second Sunday of Lent the Church presents us with the story of Jesus’ Transfiguration in which the glory of Jesus divinity is revealed to the three apostle, Peter, Jams and John. Just before this event, Jesus had shared with his apostles that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again. This was hard for the apostles to hear.

Six days later, Jesus takes three of the apostles up a high mountain and there is transfigured before them – they see the glory of his divinity and also appearing with him are Moses and Elijah. It is a frightening yet beautiful experience for them and the apostles would like to remain

in that experience, but then cloud overshadows them and voice declares: “This is my beloved Son; listen to Him.”

Then everything is gone except for Jesus standing with them, and they began going down the mountain as Jesus tells them to not speak about this experience until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. Meanwhile the apostles are wondering what does “rising from the dead” mean?

So, it was a great experience, but it seems there is more to come and more to the story. Yet what was the purpose of Jesus in sharing this experience with them, and what is the purpose of such experiences given to us in our life?

Today’s first reading gives us some answer to the question. It tells the story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, through whom God had promised earlier he would bring forth numerous descendants. And how do we see Abraham respond? Without any questions he obeys God and goes forth to the place where God will show him and make the sacrifice of his son.

The reading said that God was putting Abraham to the test, but did not God know what Abraham would do? Of course God did. But Abraham, who did trust God, needed to know how **far** he was willing to trust God – how far he was willing to listen to God.

When we think of our own challenges – lack of faith, health issues, family troubles, financial difficulties, sinful patterns, etc, we have to ask, “How far are we willing to go to carry out God’s will, as revealed in the scriptures, Church Tradition, and teaching of the Church? Do I really believe that God can be trusted with every aspect of my life, or do I still demand to be in charge? We might set aside some time this week to read and reflect on today’s first reading.

Today’s responsorial psalm applies directly to the incredible story of Abraham’s call to sacrifice his only son Isaac. The Psalmist declares: “I believed, even when I said, I am greatly afflicted.” His vows, he declares, were made in public, “in the presence of all the people, in the house of the Lord.” This is in fact what we as the

people of God do every day at Mass in the penitential rite, our profession of faith, with our “Amens” and what we did at the beginning of Lent in publicly receiving ashes on our heads that were visible to all during that day. These are all aids to strengthen our faith and our resolve to serve the Lord. In fact, every sacrament is an experience of God’s presence with us and every sacrament transforms our lives. And sometimes the experience is not our own but that of another that strengthens us. For example, in today’s second reading Paul gives us his wonderful testimony that nothing can separate us from the great love of God for us.

All the mountain top experiences and aids to our faith and assurances of faith that we may receive are great, but the real **test** of their effectiveness is not in the powerful feelings that they may bring forth in us, but in the capacity that we allow them to bring forth in us to listen to Jesus’ difficult message of self-sacrifice after the experience is over.

The apostles and disciples had been hearing and listening to Jesus every day and we can and do the same, but not let it affect them or us. “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to Him.” He can speak and we can choose not to listen or to ignore Him. Are we ready to listen to **all** of what the Lord is saying to us – not picking and choosing what is easy to do? In reflecting on our response to that question we might start with the words of the Lord that we are most uncomfortable with.

The message of this Sunday is that even after moments of transcendence and transformation we must come back to earth, continue to listen to the voice of Jesus, and follow him on the way to the cross. As followers of Christ, we are called to constantly keep in tension Jesus’ power and his vulnerability. We can understand his glory only through lens of his cross.

The glimpses of glory that we receive from God are real. They do come to us through the Scriptures, the Sacraments, prayer, daily life and service to others. Yes, like Peter, we would love to build a “home” on the mountain, where glory resides, and the cares of the earth below are far away. But these short glimpses of glory should be enough for us as it was for the apostles. Jesus

would not let Peter build the tents nor will he allow us to be untouched by the realities of life's trials and sufferings. It is these special experiences that develop our faith and trust and so enable us to come down from the mountain with Jesus and put our faith into action. If you are willing to go up the mountain with Jesus, are you also willing to let him lead you down to bring his glory into the world?

As Martin Luther King said to a crowd of people shortly before he was killed: "We have got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."