

Journey through Lent

Second Sunday of Lent • February 25, 2018

OLPH Theme: "This Is Love"

Opening Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others even if it has been a hectic day.

Leader: + In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

O God, come to my assistance.

All: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: God, help us to listen to you and to your Son, Jesus.

All: Keep our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts open to hear your voice.

Leader: God transfigure us as you did your Son.

All: Amen.

Insights on the Readings

Rotate around the circle, having each person read a paragraph/bullet point aloud. For each reading, begin with the bullet points and then continue on to reading the passage from a Bible.

First Reading (Genesis 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18)

- ▶ This is the story of Abraham being put to the test by God with the near sacrifice of Isaac.
- ▶ Abraham is portrayed as an obedient listener to God and a person of great faith.

Second Reading (Romans 8:31b-34)

- ▶ In this section of his letter to the Romans, Paul offers a hymn celebrating the great love of God "who did not spare his own son, but handed him over for all of us."
- ▶ Paul presents Christ as our intercessor at God's right hand.

Gospel Reading (Mark 9:2-10)

- ▶ This is the story of Jesus' transfiguration before Peter, James, and John, as narrated in the Gospel of Mark.

Reflections

Faith Tested

The first reading is the type of story which causes many people to ask, "What kind of God would ask a man to sacrifice his son?" While God's command to Abraham seems cruel, it is important to understand that human sacrifice was common in the religions of Abraham's time. What is unique is that the God of Abraham, unlike the gods of the surrounding cultures, does not want human sacrifice.

Abraham stands as a model of what it means to listen to God: "Here I am," he answered whenever God called. His devotion to God is beyond reproach. He listens to God. If Abraham had not continued listening, he would not have heard God say, "Do not harm your son Isaac." Like Abraham, we do not know in advance what this listening to God might entail of us or how our perception of God might change. It is a leap of faith. Lent is a time for us to join with Abraham, our father in faith, and say to God: "Here I am."

Lent and Mountain Top Experiences

The Gospel reading for the second Sunday of Lent presents the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top as narrated in the Gospel of Mark. The story is filled with symbolism. Mountains belonged to the gods in the ancient world. Since the gods lived in the heavens, anything close to heaven, like a mountain, must be close to the gods. From the mountains, the gods rule and proclaim. The Bible is filled with stories of mountain top experiences. They are viewed as holy sites, close to God: Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2), Moses receives the covenant from God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:16), and Elijah, the prophet, experiences God on both Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8). Or we may recall how the ancient Greeks maintained that Mount Olympus was the home of the god Zeus. Often, a high mountain symbolizes the human ascent to God. If a cloud descends while one is on the mountain, the divine and the human connect. We are reminded that a cloud descended on Mount Sinai as Moses received the ten commandments from God. On the mountain of the transfiguration, God again speaks in the form of a cloud, claiming the transfigured Jesus as his own Son.

The Disciples and the Mountain Top Experience of the Transfiguration

Peter, James and John, three of Jesus' most intimate disciples, go up a high mountain. The story is dense with imagery borrowed from the book of Daniel (see Daniel, chapter 7). In Daniel, the Son of Man comes in glory with white robes, angels, and light to judge the nations. For the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is the Son of Man, appearing and conversing with Moses. Moses is the liberator of Israel from bondage, and the mediator of God's law (Torah). Elijah is the prophet of expectation and future hope of the Messiah. This is an encapsulated history of Jesus' ancestral people and faith witnessing to the transfigured Jesus.

Peter is impetuous as usual, and seemingly oblivious to the power of the moment. He wants to capture it by erecting shrines (tents) for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter, who represents all of Mark's original community, likes the "special effects" on the mountain top and does not want to lose it. Why? Because once he descends from the mountain, Peter, like all the disciples, will set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. Yet, to really experience Jesus transfigured, Peter and all would-be disciples of Jesus must also embrace the cross, for on it Jesus was transfigured through death to new life in the resurrection.

Like Peter, we may also think it is good to be here on the mountaintop away from the hustle and bustle and pain and violence of the world below.

Listening and Transfiguring

Suddenly a voice is heard from the cloud saying: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." The voice from heaven is similar to the one heard at Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven was heard by Jesus alone: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Now the three disciples, not present at Jesus' baptism, hear the voice too. The point is that the disciples are to listen to Jesus. Jesus is more than a lawgiver like Moses and a prophet like Elijah. He is the beloved Son who has listened to God, and the disciples, in turn, are to listen to him. Jesus is identified as the beloved Son, reminiscent of Isaac, who was also a beloved son (see Gen 22:2, narrated in the first reading for today).

Listen! This is how we are to make it through Lent, to the fullness of God's vision. The way to Easter is by listening to the beloved Son, the child of God, the suffering servant, the prophet, the judge of the nations, the word of God: Jesus. In our lives, whose voice are we listening to each day? What encourages us to listen to Jesus? Who in our lives can help us listen to Jesus more clearly? How does listening to Jesus, his teachings, and his lifestyle help us to become beloved sons and daughters of God?

We are challenged in this season of Lent to listen, to obey, and to commit to Jesus. In doing so, others will see transfigured through us the glory of God, just as the disciples saw it through Jesus. The transfiguration story is not a piece of meaningless ancient literature. It is a way of life that we are called to encounter and imitate. We must learn to see the glory of God and the presence of Jesus transfigured in those who suffer unjustly and those who live risking everything to save others from despair, death, and sin. We are meant to transfigure ourselves, our relationships, our earth, and our church so that others can see God through us. We are challenged to transfigure despair into hope, sadness into joy, anguish into healing, and estrangement into a welcoming community. The Sacred Scriptures provide us with the skills needed to transfigure all of creation. Only attentive listening to our God of surprises leads us to a transfigured life.

Descending from the Mountain

The story ends with Jesus and the disciples coming down from the mountain. The three disciples are left wondering what the experience means, including the saying about rising from the dead. Often after a peak religious experience there is a need for a time of wonder and discernment. This means that the meaning of listening to God's beloved Son develops gradually. For a while, we keep the matter to ourselves, like Jesus requested of the disciples, as it will become clear in hindsight. The original disciples had to wait until after the crucifixion and the resurrection.

For Reflection

1. Reflect on when your faith has been tested like Abraham's. How did you deal with it?
2. In your own life, have you ever wanted to capture mountain top experiences the way Peter wants to in the Gospel reading?
3. To whom do we listen? Jesus? The Gospels? Others?

Closing Prayer

Leader: For the ability to listen to God acting in our lives.

All: We pray to the Lord.

Leader: For our time together today.

All: We pray to the Lord.

Leader: May this season of Lent be a time of spiritual growth for all of us.

All: Amen.

Pray together the Our Father, then exchange a gesture of peace with all who are present.

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