



## 2nd Sunday of Lent: February 28, 2010

*Theme: Transfiguration: Lent is a time to change.*

**Reading I: Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18** Author: Moses Date: ~ 1500 BCE

**Background: Genesis:** At the beginning of this story, Abraham has neither land or children – a sign of God’s blessing. In Abraham, God decisively intervened in human history to create a people for himself. God’s choice is, on his side, a sheer act of grace; and faith is set, be it noted, not in the context of individual salvation, but in the context of a people’s history.

*Theme: The Lord made a covenant with Abraham that his vast descendents would inherit the land and citizenship in heaven.*

**Question:** o How does God transform Abraham’s life and his descendents?

**Reading II: Phillipians 3:17-4:1,** Author: Paul Date: ~ 55 AD

**Background:** According to Paul’s apocalyptic hope, the life of the age to come will not be merely a prolongation of this present life but an entirely new, transformed mode of existence. It was into this mode of existence that Christ entered at his resurrection. Both the second reading and the gospel speak of a “change.” The second reading speaks of the change of our earthly existence in the final consummation; the gospel speaks of the change of Jesus as he prayed on the holy mountain.

*Theme: Many are enemies of the cross - earthly things absorb them, but your citizenship is in heaven.*

**Question:** What does Paul mean “he will change our lowly body to conform to his glorified body?”

**Gospel: Luke: 9: 28b-36** Author – Luke, the Physician Date: ~ 80-85 AD

**Background:** The change in the appearance of Jesus’ face is reminiscent of Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 34:29). Moses and Elijah, both of whom figured in first-century Jewish apocalyptic as returning at the end, talk with Jesus about his “departure” (Greek: *exodos*), that is, his death and exaltation.

*Theme: Jesus is God’s covenant with his chosen people – past, present and future .*

**Questions:** O How is the Transfiguration similar to Jesus’ baptism?

o What was the significance of the three tents?

O What did Fr. Kavanaugh mean, “Lent rests in a transfiguration of our hearts and minds? Otherwise it is all poppycock.”

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### **Reading I:** [Gn 15:5-12, 17-18](#)

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.”

### **Reading II:** [Phil 3:17—4:1](#) or [3:20—4:1](#)

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.

**Gospel:** [Lk 9:28b-36](#)

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

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent :

Feb. 28, 2010

**Fr. John Kavanaugh**

**SJ, of St. Louis University**

*"We have our citizenship in heaven"*

Although we rarely pay attention to it, a great paradox haunts our practices of Lent. We go through these six weeks every year fairly easily; yet if we stopped to reflect seriously on what's going on, it would be a shock. To our liberated American souls, it might even seem like an earthquake.

Just look at the imagery and themes of the period. Lent starts with ashes and a warning: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." It prods to repentance: There is something wrong with us and the world. I am not O.K.; neither are you. We are insufficient. This life is not enough. Each of the six weeks brings a profound admission of our inadequacy.

This is not easy stuff for a world given to excuses and plea-bargaining. The most we admit to is making a mistake or perhaps behavioral problems. But to admit that we are in profound trouble? Why? We all know there is nothing so terribly wrong with us.

Even some of our hymnals have rewritten an old song here and there to mollify our tender egos. I've caught myself doing the same, balking before the admissions of "Amazing Grace." I've thought of rephrasing it: something like ". . . how sweet the sound that saved a nice fellow like me." Come to think of it, singing that I was once "lost" and "blind" seems to be overdoing it a bit.

Lent ends with an equally unpalatable celebration of cataclysmic failure: betrayal, brutality, cowardice, and degradation. True, it is reversed in a triumph of joy and glory, but in a way that defies all the laws of common sense. The dead, crucified one rises, his wounds glorious.

What is Lent trying to rub our faces in with all the talk of mercy, forgiveness, reform, and repentance?

We here in the real world know that we are all really rather nice guys and gals. Sure, we make mistakes now and then. But who's to blame us for our fumbling? And surely no one of us would ever deserve such a thing as hell. (I know the polls say that most Americans believe in hell, but the vast majority can't imagine themselves being there.) Surely we are not in such desperate need as the drama of Lent seems to suggest. Surely we do not need someone to die for our sins. Some of us do not even know what such a strange concept might mean.

Why do we need salvation? Why do we even need God, especially if our stomachs are full, our insurance policies paid, and we live and die with the dignity appropriate to beings that can manage their lives tidily, think straight, and at least in some ways be smart and productive?

Lent reminds us that we settle for too little, expect too little of ourselves and of God. Even the earthly promises which God made to Abraham challenged his narrow and routine attitude. Abraham had to look far beyond himself, to the sky and the stars, to imagine a future beyond all his reckoning.

When it comes to accepting the cross and the resurrection, the confines of comfort are even more stretched. We almost have to make the cross something routine and uninteresting. It is an assault upon the delusion that things are going pretty well and that we can settle down to business as usual.

What does it mean to be an enemy of the cross? Paul says it has something to do with having our bellies as our gods. More directly it means being locked into the things of this world. "As you well know, we have our citizenship in heaven; it is from there that we eagerly await the coming of our savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body, by his power to subject everything to himself."

There is another world, a higher realm, a kingdom not of this earth. There is someone other than ourselves whom we must listen to and obey, since he is the Word of God, the new lawgiver, and prophet, even more than Moses and Elijah. There is more than our frail bodies and the dust from which they came. Other bodies await us, more grand and glorious than the ones we have now. We are not the final word. Nor is our death.

Lent requires a tremendous psychological disengagement from our earthly prejudice. It is nothing but gibberish to a materialist mind. It is madness to anyone whose ultimate goal is to satisfy physical appetite.

**But the meaning of Lent rests upon such a transfiguration of our minds and hearts.** Its gestures require that we believe there is something/someone for us beyond the stars and everlasting hills. Otherwise Lent is poppycock.

## Visions of Transfigurations

In her (study) of the transfiguration of Jesus, Chicago biblical scholar and Dominican Sister Barbara Reid concluded that Luke's account probably contains the earliest form of the story. Two men appeared in glory and spoke of Jesus' "exodus," which he was to fulfill in Jerusalem. Peter and those with him saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with him. The two men are most likely angels presenting an instructive message about forthcoming events for earthbound listeners. Influenced by Mark, the Lucan redactor equated these angels with Moses and Elijah and added other information from Mark.

Like many historical-critical biblical scholars, Reid considers the evidence of this text as too fragmentary to provide scientifically certain results about what that experience really might have been. Such skepticism, however, is unwarranted. It is based upon the unexamined and unquestioned Western cultural biases that so permeate science as to be almost indistinguishable from it.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, experiences of alternate reality in vision and trance were common. Devotees of the healing god, Asclepius, routinely learned about their illness and appropriate therapy for it from this god in a "sacred" dream. Prophets like Isaiah (6:1-13), Jeremiah (1:11-19), and Ezekiel (1:4-28) described their experiences of God in alternate reality. The entire book of Revelation is a report of what the author, John, experienced in an altered state of consciousness that could be called "ecstasy" or "trance" (the literal Greek is "in spirit" in Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).

In Luke's Gospel, the baptism of Jesus (3:21-22) could be viewed as an experience of alternate reality in which one could see the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and hear a voice from heaven speaking intelligibly. The Lucan temptation story, created as it is by tradition (cf. Mark 1:12-13), can also be interpreted as an experience of alternate reality in an altered state of consciousness.

The transfiguration story makes good, culturally plausible sense as another such experience. It is similar to an ancient report by a translator of a book of healings by Asclepius. He took ill and went with his mother to the temple for healing. In a waking vision, she saw the god come to him, and when she woke him to relate what she saw, before she could say anything he informed her that he saw the same in his own dream.

Jesus and his select circle of disciples share an experience of alternate reality. The text does not tell us what Jesus saw or heard, only that his face gave external indication of his experience. The text reports what Peter, James, and John saw and heard. The scene concludes with an assurance from heaven: "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him."

A common function of experiences of alternate reality is to provide enlightenment about some puzzle, or guidance regarding a proper course of action to take. In Luke's story line, Jesus' teaching and healing activities gain for him friends (4:38-39; 8:40) and enemies (5:21; 6:46; 7:31, 39; 8:43). His fellow villagers (4:29) and others (6:11) wanted to kill him.

It would take an experience like the transfiguration to set the minds of Jesus and his chosen followers at ease. In spite of ominous signs, God was pleased with Jesus and encouraged the trio to heed what he says. Even if a scholar insisted in denying that this is what "really" happened, the scenario makes very plausible Mediterranean sense. One can only admire an evangelist who created the scene if it did not happen in actual fact.

The Western infatuation with science has brought in its wake blessings and curses. No one can deny the many benefits that science produces. The challenge is not to lose precious human gifts like the capacity for mystical experiences and other experiences of alternate reality that hold an honored place in Christian tradition and piety.

*As Jesus prayed, the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became brilliant as lightning.*

With three chosen disciples Jesus went up the mountain. Then he was transfigured by a wonderful light that made even his clothes seem to shine. Moses and Elijah stood by him and spoke with him of how he was going to complete his task on earth by dying in Jerusalem.

In other words, they spoke of the mystery of his incarnation, and of his saving passion upon the cross.

For the law of Moses and the teaching of the holy prophets clearly foreshadowed the mystery of Christ. The law portrayed it by types and symbols inscribed on tablets.

The prophets in many ways foretold that in his own time he would appear, clothed in human nature, and that for the salvation of all our race he would not refuse to suffer death upon the cross.

**The presence of Moses and Elijah, and their speaking together, was meant to show unmistakably that the law and the prophets were the attendants of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

He was their master, whom they had themselves pointed out in advance in prophetic words that proved their perfect harmony with one another. The message of the prophets was in no way at variance with the precepts of the law.

Moses and Elijah did not simply appear in silence; they spoke of how Jesus was to complete his task by dying in Jerusalem, they spoke of his passion and cross, and of the resurrection that would follow.

Thinking no doubt that the time for the kingdom of God had already come, Peter would gladly have remained on the mountain. He suggested putting up three tents, hardly knowing what he was saying.

But it was not yet time for the end of the world; nor was it in this present time that the hopes of the saints would be fulfilled—those hopes founded on Paul's promise that Christ *would transform our lowly bodies into the likeness of his glorious body*. Only the initial stage of the divine plan had as yet been accomplished.

Until its completion was it likely that Christ, who came on earth for love of the world, would give up his wish to die for it? For his submitting to death was the world's salvation, and his resurrection was death's destruction.

As well as the vision of Christ's glory, wonderful beyond all description, something else occurred which was to serve as a vital confirmation, not only of the disciples's faith, but of ours as well.

From a cloud on high came the voice of God the Father saying: *This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.*

*(Homily 9 on the Transfiguration: PG 77, 1011-1014)*

**Cyril of Alexandria** (d.444) succeeded his uncle Theophilus as patriarch in 412. Until 428 the pen of this brilliant theologian was employed in exegesis and polemics against the Arians; after that date it was devoted almost entirely to refuting the Nestorian heresy. The teaching of Nestorius was condemned in 431 by the Council of Ephesus at which Cyril presided, and Mary's title, Mother of God, was solemnly recognized. The incarnation is central to Cyril's theology. Only if Christ is consubstantial with the Father and with us can he save us, for the meeting ground between God and ourselves is the flesh of Christ. Through our kinship with Christ, the Word made flesh, we become children of God, and share in the filial relation of the Son with the Father.

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## REFLECTION

Abram has been called and has lived awhile trusting the God who has invited him. He has left his homeland, but he has a bit of a complaint. Having land and having children are signs of God's loving blessing. Abram has neither and this is how the drama of our First Reading opens.

The voice of God invites Abram to count the stars and then come to know that his descendents will be even more than all the visible array. Abram both makes a statement of faith and doubt at the same time. God has told him that he will possess a great land having many riches. Abram asks reverently about how he will know. This tension is resolved by the ritual of covenant-making.

The animals are halved and the two parties agreeing to the history of the relationship, the promises and conditions of the pact walk between the slain animals. By doing this gesture of partnership, they are saying to each other, that if the covenant is broken, the offending partner wishes that he be likewise split in half. While Abram is in a deep mystical slumber, God passes between the animals in the form of fire and pledges a great land-deal to Abram and his many offspring.

The Gospel is Luke's account of a trance-figuration. Peter, James, and John, who will be witnesses to an inglorious struggle on the night of his betrayal and arrest, are present here. They are en-clouded and befuddled by some kind of trance themselves. While Jesus was praying, Moses and Elijah appeared speaking with Jesus about the "exodus" or passing through, which was to happen in Jerusalem. Peter, not knowing exactly what he was saying, proposed their all staying up on the hill. The "exodus" would take place on another hill near Jerusalem.

There is glory present as Jesus seems to be trans-formed and there is the presence of the inglorious "exodus". There is a voice from heaven announcing a confirmation of Jesus' identity as well as a direction to listen to him. The apostles, as it was with Abram, are asked to make their acts of faith by trusting the mystery of what they had seen, or think they had seen, and what they think they heard.

The power of this Gospel is that Jesus, as the divinely-initiated covenant, walks between the glorious and inglorious. He stands on this hill in contemplation of the next. He walks between Moses, Elijah, and these three men of the earth. Instead of animals being slain and halved, Jesus will receive his being slain as a covenantal sign. Instead of professing fidelity to a pact and declaring that any unfaithfulness of the covenant would result in being halved, Jesus will repair the original fracture by being halved himself.

Lately I have heard a classification of movies, "feel-good". I am attracted to these kinds of productions. I had a wonderful Jesuit English professor early in my religious formation who told me that I was a charter member of the Silver-lining and Happy-ending Society. I was a hopeless Romantic. At certain times, I still am. I sense that many people are searching for a "Feel-Good" religion or church. Peter had the idea; build three tents there and let the rest of the world go by. I could get into that at times.

The Transfiguration as presented by Luke is not a "feel-good" experience. The call of God to listen to Jesus the beloved is a call to collapse the tents of dreams, let the cloud of glory lift, allow Jesus to become undazzling, and head back down the hill heading for Jerusalem. We would love taking the Jerusalem bypass and enjoy the silver-lined happy ending. There are good feelings in following Jesus. There are those moments of intimate communion perhaps. The deep good feeling is our walking with him through our own Jerusalem's and this is our fidelity, our act of being made "righteous".

God has made a covenant with us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This covenant comes to us with a history, promises and directions. The history is contained in our Jewish and Christian Scriptures. The promises are made in terms of the life to come. The direction is that we are to listen to God's beloved Son who tells us all that we too, share his being beloved.

# WOW Word of the Day

Transfiguration	Feb. 28
Temptation Get your food and strength from God and resist temptation .	Feb. 21
Attitude Trust in God leads to blessings. Trust in humans alone leads to woe.	Feb. 14
Rise: Get in, get out and raise men to faith	Feb. 7
Faith: God performs miracles for those who have faith and love.	Jan. 31
Word made Flesh: Jesus reads scripture in the temple that He is the Son of Man	Jan. 24
	Jan. 17
	Jan. 10
	Jan. 3