

## 2nd Sunday in Lent

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 12:1-4A
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:4-5, 18-19, 20, 22
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Timothy 1:8B-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	From the shining cloud the Father's voice is heard: This is my beloved Son, hear him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 17:1-9

Now we will turn to the Second Sunday in Lent, and if you recall from the last video, I pointed out that during the Sundays in Lent the Church chooses particular passages that go with the season, with the aim of preparing us for Calvary. So we kind of move through the life of Jesus by focusing on particular episodes that are appropriate to the season of Lent. So every year the First Sunday of Lent is an account of the temptations of Jesus that we looked at last week, and the same thing is true every year for the second Sunday, which is focused on the transfiguration of Jesus, because it is going to begin to move us toward Calvary. So let's look at Matthew's account of the transfiguration, which is from Matthew 17:1-9. I am going to read that gospel text, we will unpack it and try to draw some insights into this mystery. This is not only one of the mysteries of the rosary — of the luminous mysteries, the new mysteries of John Paul II — it's also one of the most important events in the public life of Jesus. So let's read the passage through together, we will ask a few questions and we will try to unlock this mystery. Matthew's Gospel says this:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Eli'jah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them,

and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of man is raised from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

That is the end of the Gospel passage here. There are lots of questions we can ask here. A few that I want to highlight are these:

1. Why does Matthew highlight for you the timing here? He says “after six days Jesus took with Peter and James and John up the mountain.” Why is that important? He doesn't always tell you how many days have transpired before an event happens in the Gospel. So what's the significance of it being after six days?
2. Why does Jesus just take Peter, James and John up the Mountain? Why doesn't he take all 12 apostles or all the crowds up the mountain? Why these three particular figures?
3. What does it mean when it says Jesus was transfigured? Why does his face shine like the sun and his garments become white as light? What is the meaning of this, or should I say, what would that have meant to a Jew in the first century context, to Peter and James and John (they were all Jewish)? So what would be the symbolism, the significance, of this revelation of Jesus' glory? Obviously on one level it's showing his glory, his divine glory, but what would it have meant to them?
4. Why does Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus to talk with him? Why these two particular figures?
5. What does Peter mean when he says “Lord it's good that we are here” or “well that we are here”? And why do he and the other disciples respond to the voice and the cloud in the way that they do? If you remember, the bright cloud overshadows them and the voice comes out of the cloud and it says that they

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

were “filled with awe” and they fall on their faces. Why do they fall on their faces? What is the significance of that cloud coming down on top of the mountain?

6. Last but not least significantly, after they go down the mountain again, why does Jesus tell them to not tell anybody until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead?

So let's go through each one of these together. The first point that I would highlight here is just the basic issue of the transfiguration. The Greek word here for transfigure is *metamorphoō*, it is where we get the word metamorphosis from. So it signifies a radical change here. So Jesus's appearance is being radically transfigured, radically transformed, where they can see his divine glory. So this was a momentous occasion here, it's not that Jesus had like a special look in his eyes or on his face or something like that. This was a radical change, and that is why the word transfigure is an excellent way of expressing what that Greek word means. So Jesus was metamorphosed before them — that is not a real word, I just made it up to give you a feel for the power of the Greek. That is the first point.

The second point is that many of the questions that I just asked can be answered by recognizing that for a first century Jew, they would've seen several parallels between the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain and the Old Testament accounts of Moses on Mount Sinai. So that's really the key to unlocking this mystery of the Transfiguration. So if you go back to the book of Exodus, especially chapters 24 and 34, there are a number of striking parallels between Moses on Mount Sinai and Jesus on the mountain of the Transfiguration. Which, by the way, we don't know the name for the mountain. It's traditionally Mount Tabor in the Holy Land today, but the Gospel never tells us so I will just call it the mountain of the Transfiguration. So here's the parallels for example. In the book of Exodus, number one, it says that Moses went up the mountain of Sinai on the seventh day. The same thing with the Transfiguration, it takes place after six days on top of the mountain, so Jesus is acting like a new Moses. Second, when Moses goes up the mountain of Mount Sinai, he takes with him three special companions: Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu. Aaron was the high priest and Moses' brother, and then Nadab and Abihu were his two sons, they were brothers as well. So what does Jesus do? He goes up the mountain with Peter, who is kind of like the high priest of the new covenant — I don't have time to get into that right now; can get my CD

*Jesus and the Jewish roots of the Papacy* if you want to look at it — but he brings up Peter and then James and John who were also brothers just like Nadab and Abihu. Why does he bring these three up? Because he's preparing them for an experience like Moses had. When Moses went up the mountain to meet God, he brought Aaron, Nadab and Abihu; Jesus brings Peter, James and John up the mountain for the same reason.

Number three. When Moses went up the mountain of Sinai, it says that “when he came down his face shone with the glory of having been in the presence of God,” that it reflected the glory of God whom he had encountered at the top of the mountain. Whereas in the Gospel, Jesus goes up the mountain but his face is transfigured and it shines like the sun with its own light. So what's going on here? Well Jesus is both similar to Moses but is greater than Moses, because he's being revealed as the divine son of God, as the voice says from the cloud, “this is my beloved son; listen to him.”

Fourth, and this is really important and people often miss it. When Moses went up the mountain in the Old Testament, it said that the glory (the *kavod*), the glory cloud of the Lord, came down upon the top of Mount Sinai. This was the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, but later rabbis would go on to call it the *shekinah*. Southern preachers will often say “the shu-ky-nuh glory cloud,” but the Hebrew is shek-ee-noh. It is the tabernacle-ing presence of God, the glory of the Lord, in the Old Testament. The same thing happens here in the New Testament. When Moses and Elijah appear and are talking with Jesus and the disciples see them, it said “a cloud overshadowed them” and the disciples are filled with awe and they they fall on their faces. Why? Well because they know as Jews that when the glory cloud comes down, God himself is coming down to be in their presence. So this is a theophany, a revelation of God, an appearance of God happening on the top of the mountain.

Finally, in the Old Testament, when the cloud descended, it says that “God spoke to Moses from the cloud.” And the same thing is true here in the New Testament, the voice of the father speaks from the cloud and says the words, “this is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” So just like God spoke from the cloud in the Old Testament, so too he does in the New Testament. So what then is the Mountain of the Transfiguration? What is the mystery here? Well the mystery

is that this is like a new Mount Sinai. Jesus is acting like a new Moses, but he's a new and greater Moses, and he's bringing the disciples up that mountain to encounter God, to enter into the mystery of God and to also reveal to them his divine sonship. Up to this point he's only shown them, in a sense, the veil of his humanity. They see him eat, they see him drink, they see him get tired; but now he's showing them that not only is he fully man, but he is also a divine person. He's the glorious son of the Father and that's the mystery of the Transfiguration.

Now I skipped over something that I want to be sure that I do hit here. So with all of that in mind, you can now answer the question, well why are Moses and Elijah there? I'll leave Elijah to the side for a second because I think I will cover that in some other video in more depth, but for now just think about it. How fitting is it that if Moses ascended the mountain in the Old Testament to encounter God, that he be present here at this revelation of God in the New Testament as well? I guess I will tell you about Elijah, I changed my mind. In the Old Testament, not in the book of Exodus, but in the book of Kings, 1 Kings 19, Elijah goes up Mount Sinai also and also has a theophany of God, where he hears the still small voice and he encounters God on the same mountain as Moses. So these two figures who encounter God on the top of the mountain of the Old Testament are now present with Jesus for this revelation of God in the New Testament as well.

So that's the reason for their presence there, which by the way has two interesting implications, well one is not that significant but it's kind of worth pointing out. My students always ask me this. They say "how did they know it was Moses and Elijah?" Of course the Bible doesn't tell us here, but I always like to tell them that "it obviously is because of the beards," they had long beards just like in all of the Bible stories and all of the Bible pictures. So the disciples were able to recognize that — we need a laugh track here because nobody is laughing...I will laugh then. We don't know, we don't know how they recognized that it was Moses and Elijah, but Jesus here is communing and conversing with the dead, the dead saints of the Old Testament. I think that is important for us as Catholics to remember, because oftentimes Catholics get criticized for talking to the saints who have died, talking to those who have gone beyond. Some Protestant Christians, not all, will say that we are engaging in necromancy, which is the sin of divination, like trying to conjure up the dead so they can do your will. Well if that's the case then Jesus would be guilty of the same thing here, because Moses and Elijah — Elijah didn't

die, he goes up into heaven on a chariot of fire —but Moses dies. But Jesus is talking here to the Saints of the Old Testament, who in the case of Moses, has died but is alive to God. So just like Jesus can commune with those who have gone beyond the grave, so too we do as well in the New Covenant whenever we ask for the intercession of the dead, or we converse with the Saints who have passed on before us. So that is just a little side note, but I think it is important to note here as we look at the mystery of the Transfiguration.

Well with all of that in mind then, what is going on here ultimately? Well this is the disclosure, not just of the mystery of Jesus and Moses, it's really a disclosure of the mystery of the Trinity. And I am getting this straight from the Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 555, who was drawing on St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologica*, his famous work of theology, where he says that in addition to the baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration of Jesus is one of the most important revelations of the Trinity, because all three persons of the Trinity appear in the Transfiguration. The Father speaks in the voice from heaven, “this is my beloved son.” The Son is revealed through that voice and through the transfiguration of his face on the mountain, where his divine glory is revealed, and then third and finally, but not least significantly, the Spirit is also revealed in the Transfiguration. Where is the spirit? In the glory cloud, in the pillar of cloud, the pillar of fire, that comes down upon the mountain of Transfiguration just like in the Old Testament. The Spirit is always depicted through images of cloud and fire in the Old Testament. Those are images for the Holy Spirit. So all three persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are being revealed. The Catechism says that in paragraph 555: “the cloud indicates the presence of the Holy Spirit.” So just like we saw the Trinity at Jesus’ baptism: Father, Son and the dove; now we see the Trinity in the Transfiguration: Father, Son and the cloud of the Spirit. What that shows us here is that the Apostles have a great privilege that they have, in a sense, been brought into this experience of the revelation of the Trinity, which is why Peter says “it's good to be here,” “it is well that we are here.” He gives the implication there that he wants to just stay there, let's make the booths and just remain here in the glory of contemplating the Trinity, because that's what we were ultimately made for, eternal life with the Trinity, in the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But the final point of the Transfiguration, Jesus says though, is that they have to come down the mountain. It's not time yet for them to enter into the glory of the

Trinity. This is just a taste, a foretaste of Jesus' divine glory. There's another mountain he's going to have to go and climb first, and that is going to be the mountain of Calvary. So he leads the disciples down the mountain of the Trinity, the mountain of the Transfiguration, and then toward the mountain of Calvary when he tells them "don't tell anyone about this until the Son of Man is raised from the dead." So in the second week of Lent we have another shadow of Calvary looming over this experience of glory and peace and revelation of the Divine Trinity on the mountain. So that is the Gospel passage for this week.

Before we close though, I want to look briefly at the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament tell us for this Sunday? Well remember during the Lenten season, the Old Testament readings aren't chosen necessarily to correlate with the New Testament. They're actually taking us through major events of salvation history. And the reason the Church does this is because in ancient times, this is when people would be catechized on the basics of the Christian faith. So just like today people are going through RCIA during the Lenten season (the catechumens and the candidates), the Church is recovering this idea of "we want to make sure that they know, not just the New Testament, but also the basics of the Old Testament history." So last week we read about the fall of Adam and Eve, which is kind of the kickoff of salvation history, or damnation history you might say because it is when they fall. But in this case, we move to another major stage, which is the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. So if you look at that passage for just a minute, the First Reading for this week is from Genesis 12:1-3. So we go back to the Old Testament and it says this:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

So why is this passage chosen for this Second Sunday of Lent? Well because this is arguably one of the most important passages in the entire Old Testament. I

actually tell my students that this might be the most important passage in the Old Testament, because it contains the whole plan of salvation history in just three little verses, just three little verses. Because in these three verses God makes a threefold promise to Abram. First he promises him the land, that he's going to give them the promised land that he will show them, the land of Canaan. And a large part of the Old Testament is going to be taken up with getting to that Promised Land and arriving there and then maintaining that Promised Land, staying in the land. Second, it gives him the promise of descendants, of a dynasty, it says that "God is going to make a great nation of you, Abram," even though Abraham has, at this point, exactly 0 children and he's 75 years old. So this is another time where he is going to call Abram to trust in divine providence. I mean how can a 75 year old man have a single child, much less have a great nation come from his line. And then third and finally, God promises universal blessing through Abraham. And this is really the most important one of all, that all the families of the earth are going to be blessed through Abram. Why is that so critical? Well because a lot of times Christians have an idea, a false idea, that there's two gods, an Old Testament god and a New Testament god. And in the Old Testament God chose the Jews and he rejected the Gentiles, and in the New Testament he changed his mind, he chose the Gentiles and rejected the Jews. That's a common misconception. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no plan A and plan B when it comes to the Old and New Testaments. The plan from the beginning, from Genesis 12, is always through Israel to the Gentiles, that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham's offspring, through Abraham's seed, through Abraham's descendants. And that promise is ultimately going to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, because what Jesus Christ is going to do is he's going to be a descendent of Abraham and a descendent of David — he's an heir to the throne, an heir to the kingdom — and it is going to be through him that the blessing goes from Israel out to all the nations. And it is going to be through the Church that all the families of the Earth will be reunited and blessed with the gift and the graces of salvation.

So the Church here makes the First Reading from the Old Testament during the Second Sunday of Lent, it chooses this to continue telling the story. Not only did Adam and Eve fall in Genesis 3, but now in Genesis 12 God promises that all of their descendants, all the families of the Earth, will be redeemed, will be blessed, will be given the gift and the offering of salvation through a descendant of

Abraham, who ultimately of course is going to be Christ himself. And so the Responsorial Psalm for this week is Psalm 33, “we place our trust in you Lord.” Because it says in the Psalm that “the earth is full of the steadfast love [or the kindness, the mercy] of God,” because it is through the blessing of Abraham that mercy, that the love of God, is going to come not just to the Israelite, not just to the Jewish people, but to the whole world. So during this Season of Lent, as the Church is preparing catechumens to receive the grace of baptism — people who come from who knows what descent, many of them being Gentiles, descended from the nation’s, descended from the pagan people of the world — the Church reminds us here that from the beginning, God wants to give salvation to everyone, and so it prepares us to receive that salvation in the gift of Baptism at the Easter celebration.