

The Second Sunday in Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 22:1-2, 9-13, 15-18
<i>Response</i>	I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 8:31-34
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	From the shining cloud the Father's voice is heard: This is my beloved Son, listen to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 9:2-10

Every year on the Second Sunday of Lent, the Church shifts its focus from the temptations of Jesus in the desert to the mystery of his transfiguration, which is recorded in all three synoptic gospels. Because it's year B, we're going to look at the account of the transfiguration in the Gospel of Mark and then we'll back up and see the meaning of the Old Testament text that's used for this week as well, and how they might actually go together in a certain sense. So let's begin. The Transfiguration is in Mark 9:2-10, and this is what it says:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them, and his garments became glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Eli'jah with Moses; and they were talking to Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli'jah." For he did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly looking around they no longer saw any one with them but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of man should have risen from the dead. So they

kept the matter to themselves, questioning what the rising from the dead meant.¹

Now if you go to mass regularly you're going to be familiar with the story of the transfiguration, but I'd still like to make a few key points about it that would've been significant from a first century Jewish perspective, which might be subtle, but really meaningful when you put them in place. So for example, number one, first thing you want to notice about this account is where it happens. It happens on top of a mountain. Now in the Bible, mountains are extremely significant. You have mount Ararat with Noah's flood. You've got Mount Mori'ah with Abraham sacrificing Isaac — we'll look at that in just a minute — you've got the mountain of Jerusalem, Mount Zion. Mountains are always treated as holy places in the Bible, and in particular they tend to be the place where God will appear, where what scholars referred to as “theophanys” take place. A theophany is an appearance of God, a kind of supernatural revelation of God. So when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to the top of the mountain, if you were a Jewish person familiar with the Bible, you might, in a sense, kind of brace yourself for something special happening, for some kind of divine revelation or some kind of divine appearance taking place, like Moses meeting God on Mount Sinai. S

o what happens is instead of say God coming down from heaven and giving the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, Jesus himself is transfigured, right. The Greek word here for transfigured is *metamorphōthē*. We get the word metamorphosis from this. So he's changed his appearance, just changed before them, and it says that his clothes became intensely white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. In some of the other Gospels his face itself is transfigured, becomes luminous, but Mark focuses on his clothing. And I think that's actually significant because whenever you look at the appearances of heavenly beings, like angels for example, in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, they will frequently be described as being clothed in white, right. So these garments that are bright as the sun are signs of a heavenly being. So you can think here of the book of Revelation. The woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12, she's in heaven, so she's a heavenly

¹ 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.

figure. And she's clothed in a garment that's obviously not just white, but supernaturally luminous, right, it's giving off its own heavenly light. So when Jesus is transfigured, Mark focuses on his white clothing in order to show that although he's fully human, we've seen it already in Mark's gospel, Jesus is also a divine being. He's someone who has come down from heaven and who has become man, right, and who has become the Messiah of Israel, the king of Israel. But what he's doing here is he's giving the apostles a kind of glimpse of the glory, the inner glory, the heavenly glory, that's hidden beneath the ordinary human appearances of his flesh, beneath his human nature. So in other words, from a Jewish perspective, the Transfiguration is a kind of theophany, but we might call it a Christ-ophany. In other words, it's a revelation of the divinity of Jesus himself, right. As opposed to God coming down from heaven in spirit, now Jesus is revealing in his humanity his divine identity, and his divine glory, and his divine power.

Now in that context, another point takes place here. We see that Moses and Elijah appear and that they're talking to Jesus on the mountain. This actually confirms what I'm suggesting about the meaning of his transfiguration. Because if you go back to the Old Testament, what Elijah and Moses had most in common is that they had both experienced theophanies, appearances of God, on top of a mountain, in this case Mount Sinai. So in the book of Exodus 34, Moses goes up the mountain and he says to God "I want to see your glory" and God tells him "you can't see my face, no one can see my face and live. But I'll put you in a cleft of the rock and I'll pass by, and you'll be able to see my backside," right. And so Moses is able to see like the rear of God's glory, the reverse, not its fullness, right, and not his face. The same thing happens in 1 Kings 19, not the exact same thing, but a similar thing takes place when Elijah goes to Mount Sinai. He goes up onto the mountain, he goes into a cave and God passes by and he comes to him in a still small voice. But when Elijah comes out of the cave to encounter God, he wraps his face in a cloak, because he knows he can't look on the face of God and live. So in other words, both Moses and Elijah are two figures in the Old Testament who had experiences of God's presence, but they couldn't look at God's face, they couldn't see God face to face. But now in the Transfiguration, they appear and they are able to talk with Christ, who has all of the glory of God, but who has also become man. In other words, Moses and Elijah, in a sense, have their longing from the Old Testament to

see God's face answered in the incarnation, answered in the appearance of Jesus, because in Jesus, God now has a human face. So that's what's going on here.

Now, with that said, Peter and James and John are awestruck. They don't know how to respond. And so Peter, who has a very solid case of foot in mouth syndrome, basically tries to come up with something to say, and it's interesting. He says here "master it's good that we're here." Now two things about that, pause. So first, the word master in the English translation, the actual Greek word here is *rabbi* which is just a customary term that you would use to describe your teacher. So for him to say *rabbi* to Jesus, when Jesus' glory has just been unveiled, is shall we say a bit of an understatement. He's not exactly expressing or giving Jesus a title that's adequate to the dignity that Jesus just revealed to him, to the glory that Jesus has just revealed. And same thing is true about his words "it's good that we're here." Jesus is revealing his divine identity, and Peter's response is well this is really good, right. Again, kind of an understatement. Okay, so Mark actually goes on to say why Peter makes this statement. He says he didn't know what to say because they were exceedingly afraid, right. So it's not just that Peter's foolish, or silly here. Peter is having the standard response to a theophany in the Bible, which is fear, in the sense of awe, at the majesty and the glory and the power of God.

So what he suggests here is to make three booths: one for Moses, one for Jesus, and one for Elijah. Now what does that mean? Well I'll be honest, it's not entirely clear what he has in mind there. On the one hand, some scholars have suggested that in the glory and joy of the Transfiguration, he just wants to stay on top of the mountain, so the tents would be like places to reside. I think a more likely explanation would be that Peter is recommending they make booths, in the same way that the Jewish people would make booths during the feast of tabernacles. So in the book of Leviticus 23, it tells us that every year there was a feast called the feast of booths, sometimes translated the feast of tabernacles. And during that feast, which would happen in the fall, the Jews would celebrate the deliverance from Egypt and the Exodus journey by making tents and living in those tents, and feasting with the fruits of the fall harvest. And in ancient Jewish tradition, the feast of tabernacles was sometimes linked with the peace and the joy and the rest of the resurrection, of the final age of salvation, of the new creation that the Jews were all waiting for. So what I think is more likely here is that Peter basically thinks he's died and gone to

heaven, as we might say. In other words, he thinks that the resurrection's now; I mean, Moses is there, Elijah's there, and the Jews had this tradition that the resurrection would be like a feast of tabernacles, right, or that tabernacles pointed forward to the resurrection. So what Peter says here is well let's make our booths, let's make our tents, let's make our tabernacles, and just, you know, enjoy this glory that we're tasting now. But there's a mistake because in doing so, he doesn't properly recognize that Jesus and Moses and Elijah aren't on the same level, right. That Jesus here is being revealed as greater than Moses and greater than Elijah, and you can see that if you go to the next verses because it says after Peter said this, a cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud saying "this is my beloved son, listen to him," right. So what's happening here?

Well God is revealing to Peter, James, and John that Jesus isn't just the Messiah and he isn't just one more prophet like Moses or Elijah, he's the divine son of God, he's the chosen one, right, he's the beloved son of the father. And if there's any doubt about that, you can see also in the image of the glory cloud, the cloud that's coming down from heaven, because in the Old Testament, in Exodus 40, that cloud, whenever it would descend, it would descend upon the tabernacle of Moses to indicate that God was present with his people, that he came down from heaven to be with his people. It was kind of the supreme sign of God's presence during the exodus. So the same thing is true here, God is now coming down to be with his people in Christ, in Jesus, as the beloved son of the father. And once that revelation of Jesus's identity is made known to Peter, James, and John, it says "suddenly looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus only." So then they go down the mountain, Jesus again enacts this messianic secret that we've talked about before in Mark's gospel. He says don't tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. And you'll notice here that the apostles don't seem to get what that means. It says that they wondered what he meant by raising from the dead, or the rising from the dead. Now you might think, why would they wonder what he meant, when he said rise from the dead? I mean wouldn't it be obvious that he's telling them that he's going to die and rise again? Well yes and no. Because you've got to remember, according to the Old Testament and according to the Jewish Scriptures, and as well as ancient Jewish tradition, the resurrection of the dead was something that was expected to take place at the end of time, at the end of the old creation, which the Jews called this world, and the beginning of a

new creation, the world to come. But what happens with Jesus is different. Instead of everyone being raised from the dead at the end of time, Jesus is raised from the dead individually, so to speak, in the middle of time. And he refers to himself as the Son of Man, a kind of mysterious title that was linked with the Messiah there. And so he posits something that might've been somewhat unexpected to them, namely that the Messiah was going to die and rise again before everyone else rose from the dead, which might have been puzzling too, given the fact that they also just encountered Moses and Elijah, who were, you know, well Elijah's not dead, he goes up into heaven, but Moses had died in the Book of Deuteronomy, there were two figures who were no longer on earth, right. So in other words, what Jesus is doing here is kind of pointing the disciples forward to the mystery of his own individual resurrection as Son of Man from the dead, and they don't quite get it yet. They don't understand how all of this is going to play out. They know their Jewish beliefs about what happens at the end of time, but they haven't figured out how Jesus himself is going to enact that in his own person through his passion, death and resurrection on the third day.

Okay so that's the gospel text here. And in this case, when we go back to the Old Testament reading for the day, we're going to see that, as I mentioned before when it comes to the readings for Lent, the Gospel and the Old Testament are on two different tracts. So what the Gospel readings are doing are kind of moving us closer to his passion, death, and resurrection, that we're going to celebrate on Easter; whereas the Old Testament readings during Lent are meant to give an overview of salvation history, right, especially for catechumens, for people who are coming into the Church, so that they will hear the major episodes of salvation history, as they prepare to celebrate the climax of salvation history, in the New Testament — which is, again, the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. So in this case, for the Second Week of Lent, the Church goes back to a very important moment in the history of salvation. And that is the famous story of the sacrifice of Isaac, what we call the sacrifice of Isaac, even though he isn't actually sacrificed on Mount Mori'ah by his father Abraham. So although, again, this is a very famous story, I'm going to read it and then I want to try to highlight a few elements here that are going to be important to understand its deeper significance, as pointing forward to Christ. So in Genesis 22 we read this:

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

And then the lectionary skips down to verse 9.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

Let's pause there for a moment. Okay so what's going on in this story? Well just on the level of history, what's taking place here is one of God's tests for his servant. What God is doing here is he's testing the faith of Abraham. What he's doing is he's seeing if Abraham will trust him no matter what happens, even if God commands him to do something seemingly inexplicable, which would be to take the life of the son that God had promised Abraham for all these years, and through whom God was supposed to give Abraham many descendents, right. If you think about it, Abraham's name in Hebrew, *Ab-raham*, means father of a multitude, and God had given him that name precisely because God told him one day I'm going to give you a son, and through your son you're going to have a multitude of descendents,

you're going to have descendants as many as the stars of heaven. And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness, Genesis tells us. And so after almost 25 years of waiting to have a child, Abraham finally has his son Isaac. And now that Isaac is a young man, what does God do? He tells Abraham okay, now I want you to take him and I want you to sacrifice him to me. Now there's tests and then there's tests, right. This is an extraordinary test of Abraham's obedience and faith, and God never does anything like this anywhere else in the scriptures. He never commands someone to offer a sacrifice of a human being. This is anomalous, it doesn't fit anywhere else. It doesn't fit with God's actions elsewhere.

So the question becomes, why is God doing this, why this kind of test? Isn't there some other way that didn't involve apparent human sacrifice that God could test the faith of Abraham? And I think that the only way to really answer that question is to look at the Old Testament in the light of the new. In other words, if all you had was the Old Testament, it wouldn't really be clear why God would ask this of Abraham. However, once we have the new testament we can also look back at this event and see that what God is doing through Abraham is preparing the world for the sacrifice of his only beloved son Jesus Christ, who he is going to send into the world to offer as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, so that all the families of the earth might be blessed through him. In other words, what God is doing here is he needs a man who trusts him so much that he will pre-enact the crucifixion 2000 years before it happens. That's the reason; that's the deeper reason for this test of Abraham. And if you have any doubts about that you can just look at the parallels.

Think about it for a second. First parallel with Christ, number one, father Abraham offers his only beloved son as a sacrifice. Well that parallels the heavenly father offering his only beloved son, Christ. Second, the only beloved son, Isaac in this case, carries the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain and then is laid down on the wood to become a sacrifice. Well this should make you think of the crucifixion, right, where Jesus carries the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain to Golgotha in order to be laid on that wood as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Third, also look at the effects of this sacrifice. What does God say to Abraham? Because you've done this, right, all the nations of the world are going to be blessed through you because of what you were willing to do. Well when does that take place? Well that's gonna happen at the cross, when Christ ascends the wood of the

cross and dies on the cross. One of the first things that's going to happen is the conversion of the Gentile Centurion, who's going to say surely this man was the son of God, and he's going to be the kind of first-fruits of the rest of the whole world coming to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the son of God. The other thing here, you might notice, I almost skipped it, but that when Isaac is saved from being sacrificed, God provides the substitute of a ram caught in a thicket, a thorn bush, by his horns. Many of the ancient church fathers saw that as a type of Christ too, because they saw Christ as the ram. The ram was a symbol for kings and kingship like David. So Christ is like that, the royal king who wears a crown made out of thorns. So just as the ram is caught by its horns in a thorn bush, so Christ wears a crown of thorns and he's going to be the substitute, he's going to take Isaac's place, in a sense, so that he will lay down his life in sacrifice so that the world might be blessed.

And then last but certainly not least, if you have any doubts about all of that, you've got to look at the mountains. I told you mountains were important, and they're not just important in the New Testament, they're important in the Old Testament. In Genesis 22, it makes clear that the place where Isaac is sacrificed is Mount Mori'ah. Well later on in the Bible, in 2 Chronicles 3:1, we have one other reference to Mori'ah in the Old Testament, and it's important because it says that King Solomon "began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Mori'ah." In other words, Abraham offers his beloved son Isaac on the same mountain that Jesus, the beloved son of the father, is going to lay down his life for the sins of the world. So there's a geographical connection. It's the same mountain, it's in Jerusalem. We don't think of it that way but that's how the ancient Jews saw it. Abraham offered Isaac in Jerusalem, so too now God the father is going to offer his beloved son on the mountain of Jerusalem. That's powerful, that is a powerful connection.

I'll never forget the first time I was teaching this, it was my first year as a professor and I pointed out that connection to my class. One of the students in the class, who had grown up a Christian but who no longer was a Christian, raised her hand and said, "Dr. Pitre, is this public knowledge, you know the connections between Mori'ah and Jerusalem?" And I said, "Well it's in the Bible. You can buy a copy at Walmart, so it's public in that sense, but it's hidden in the other sense because un-

less you really study the pages of the Old Testament, you're not going to get the significance of where Mori'ah is and what that means." But what it shows us is that God is planning for what's going to happen to Jesus on Calvary in 33 A.D., he's got that all planned out 2000 years before when Abraham is offering Issac. In fact, he's got it all planned out from eternity, right. His plan of salvation is in his divine mind from all eternity but it's going to play out in human history in ways that will help us see that once Jesus is actually executed on Calvary in the first century A.D., that this isn't something that's a shock or a surprise, it's part of God's plan of salvation going all the way back to the call of Abraham. So especially for catechumens who are preparing to receive the sacraments at Easter, this is a really important Sunday because one of the things you need to realize is that Christianity is not a man-made religion. It's not something we just made up, right, out of symbols and stories and myths. No, it's a divinely made religion, it's a God made religion. It's something that God has revealed to us and we receive it, so that we can understand that he's actually in control of all of human history. Human history is not just a series of random occurrences, it's part of his divine plan, leading up to what we're going to celebrate on Easter Sunday above all.

Alright, and then, with that in mind, the Responsorial Psalm for today is a kind of bridge between the Old and the New Testament. It's Psalm 116 and the refrain for this Psalm is:

I walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

And it goes on to say things like precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. It talks about a suffering servant; I'm your servant, the son of your handmaid. This Psalm is actually one of the psalms, we'll see this when we get to holy week, that the Jews prayed during Passover, and that Jesus himself would've sung at the Last Supper. So when he talks about walking before the Lord in the land of the living, it's pointing to the hope of the resurrection. So the Psalm here points us forward to Easter. It helps us start looking forward to the fact that, although Jesus is the only beloved son who is going to come down the mountain of the Transfiguration and go up the Mountain of Calvary to lay down his life, in the end, the story's not going to stop with his death, it's going stop with his resurrection.

So I'll close with just a comment from one of the early Church Fathers who has become one of my favorites. His name was Ephrem the Syrian. He was writing in the fourth century A.D., not long after the Council of Nicaea, and he's writing in Syriac, which is a Christian form of Aramaic, which is a language that Jesus and some of the apostles would've spoken. And in his sermon on the transfiguration, Ephrem says this about the reason Jesus did this. Like why did he perform this miraculous revelation, and why did he choose just Peter, James, and John? What's the connection here? This is what Ephrem said:

Jesus took the apostles up to the mountain for three reasons: first, to show them the glory of his divinity, then to declare himself Israel's redeemer... and thirdly to prevent the apostles' being scandalized at seeing him soon afterward enduring those human sufferings which he had freely accepted for our sake... He took them up onto the mountain in order to show them his kingship before they witnessed his passion, to let them see his mighty power before they watched his death, to reveal his glory to them before they beheld his humiliation.²

And I think Ephrem is right, because if you think about it, who does Jesus take up the mountain? Peter, James, and John, right, and just them. Well, when the time comes for his passion, who are the three apostles who actually witnessed the agony in the garden? It's only three of them. It's the same three: Peter, James, and John, the inner circle. So in a sense, what Ephrem is saying here is that in order to not scandalize them when they saw him in his weakness, in the fullness of his humanity on the mountain of Gethsemane, Jesus takes them up and gives them a foretaste of his glory and his divinity on the mountain of the Transfiguration. And so it's kind of a story of two mountains. And eventually they're going to have to come down this mountain of Transfiguration in order to go up the mountain of Calvary. And that's where we're heading right now too in Lent. Preparing ourselves to remember the passion of Christ and then to celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

² Ephrem the Syrian, *Sermon 16 on the Transfiguration* 1.3.4; trans. E. Barnecut