

March 5, 2023

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalm 33

2 Timothy 1:8b-10

Matthew 17:1-9

I wonder if any of you were surprised by the readings we just heard, especially the Gospel. Were they what you expected to hear on this Second Sunday of Lent? There was nothing in these readings about fasting, sin, or repentance. Instead, from the Book of Genesis, we heard God bestow blessings on Abram as he sends Abram to a new land and a life beyond his wildest dreams. In the second reading, Saint Paul implores Timothy to endure hardships for the sake of the Gospel, for “through the Gospel,” Paul says, Christ Jesus “destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light.” And in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John – up a high mountain where his divinity is revealed quite dramatically – an experience far beyond their wildest dreams. It might seem as if we are skipping past Lent, avoiding the passion and crucifixion of Jesus, and going straight to the resurrection. But, of course, that it is not the case. We are not skipping past anything. These readings give us a perspective of Lent that forms and deepens our experience of the season. The readings offer grace, without which Lent would be unbearable. They show us that the passion and crucifixion of Jesus will lead us to something far beyond our wildest dreams. In short, these readings give us hope.

The mountaintop encounter of the Transfiguration of Jesus is recorded in all three of the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These three accounts are remarkably consistent, and we read one of them each year on the second Sunday of Lent. Each account of the Transfiguration is set between Jesus’ first and second predictions of his passion. Can you imagine the emotional roller coaster for his followers, especially Peter, James, and John?

Jesus had just told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly, be killed, and be raised on the third day. He adds that whoever wishes to follow him must deny himself and take up his own cross. Then, after six days, he takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain where they see his face shine like the sun, his clothes become white as light, Moses and Elijah appear, and they hear a voice from a cloud saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” Talk about a Rocky Mountain high! But no sooner had they come down from the mountain and gathered in Galilee, that Jesus once again tells his disciples that he will be handed over, killed, and raised from the dead. According to Matthew, the disciples were overwhelmed with grief.

As Jesus was coming down the mountain with Peter, James, and John, he admonished them not to tell anyone what they had seen and heard. They had been given a glimpse of Jesus’ glory, but without the cross, that glimpse is incomplete. Until they had accompanied Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem and experienced his passion, death, and resurrection, they would not be ready to proclaim the good news. In a similar way, we are not ready to celebrate the Easter Triduum until we have prepared ourselves through the disciplines of Lent.

The Gospels portray Peter as the disciple most vulnerable to the “highs” and “lows” of following Jesus. When Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do you say that I am.” it was Peter who answered, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” And Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon.... you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.” But after Jesus’ first prediction of his passion, Peter rebuked him saying, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.” And this time Jesus replied, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me.” On the mountaintop, however, Peter became so excited that he offered to build three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He wanted desperately to hold on to that “high” moment. But after coming

down from the mountain, Peter and the other disciples experienced more “lows” as they heard Jesus’ second and third predictions of his passion and death. There was another brief “high” as they entered Jerusalem and were greeted with adoring crowds and shouts of “Hosannah.” But this “high” was short-lived as Jesus was soon arrested, mocked, scourged, and crucified. Peter’s emotional roller coaster must have hit rock bottom when he denied Jesus in the courtyard and then fled, along with others, from his crucifixion. His ultimate high, of course, came three days later with news of the resurrection and the appearance of the risen Jesus. Though they had abandoned him at his crucifixion, Jesus appeared and forgave Peter and the other disciples with an offer of peace.

matter what happens in our lives, trust God and do not be afraid.

While typically not as dramatic as Peter’s “highs” and “lows,” we all experience mountaintop “highs” and depressing “lows” in our lives. Raising children is a good example. The birth of a child is undoubtedly a mountaintop “high” for most of us. But we quickly come down from that mountain when we bring the baby home and face a mountain of dirty diapers, sleepless nights, and colic. It is not long, however, before they reach the cute and loving years, which go by all too quickly. Then come the teenage years, which cannot pass fast enough. But sooner or later they do pass, and by the grace of God and a little luck, our teenagers mature into responsible adults – sometimes surprising us beyond our wildest dreams.

Whatever may be the source or sources of “highs” and “lows” in our lives – our children, our health, our jobs, our relationships, whatever, trust is the key to dealing with them – trust in those we love, and above all, trust in God. Even at the top of their mountain, Peter, James, and John fell prostrate in fear when they heard the voice from the cloud. But Jesus calmed their fears with a call for trust when he said, “Rise, and do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid – the most often repeated phrase in all of Holy Scripture. We should take it to heart. No