

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 9:28b–36. It is the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In this story, we hear of how Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah about the Exodus He is to accomplish in Jerusalem. After their discussion, Peter wakes up and sees only the glory of the moment. Note that the account of the Transfiguration is also contained in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and those passages are read on Liturgical Years A and B respectively. For more insights into this moment in the life and ministry of Jesus as related in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the reader is encouraged to consult the *Come Follow Me* reflections for the Second Sunday of Lent for those Liturgical Years. Here are some points for our reflection as disciples who are called to follow the Lord wherever He leads us.

Luke tells us distinctive details in his account of the Transfiguration. Each of these details helps us better understand the mystery of Jesus. First, Luke tells us that the reason Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain was to pray and that the Transfiguration took place while Jesus was praying. Second, Luke tells us that the Transfiguration occurs about eight days later (see Lk 9:28) while Mark and Matthew both state that the event took place six days later (see Mt 17:1 and Mk 9:2). Third, Luke develops the “face” of Jesus beyond this passage and establishes it as a symbol for all the events of our Lord’s passion that will occur in Jerusalem. Fourth, only Luke tells us that the content of the conversation between Jesus, Elijah, and Moses concerned the Lord’s Exodus He was to accomplish in Jerusalem. Fifth, we are informed that Peter and the others were asleep during the conversation and so they missed the context of the event and the content of the conversation. Lastly, only Luke tells us that Peter attempted to establish three booths as Moses and Elijah were departing (the motive for Peter’s initiative is to stop their departure). All of these unique elements in Luke’s Gospel are worthy of our reflection because Luke is trying to tell us something through each of them.

Let’s start with the context of prayer. We have previously noted the importance of prayer in Luke’s Gospel. Jesus prays not only as an example for disciples but also as a regular part of our Lord’s life. Jesus was at prayer following His baptism which evoked the descent of the Holy Spirit and the announcement from Heaven of His identity (see Lk 3:21). He prayed after He healed the man with leprosy and before He healed the paralytic through the forgiveness of his sins (see Lk 5:16). He was also praying after His healing on the Sabbath and before He chose the Twelve Disciples (see Lk 6:12). Lastly, He prayed just a few verses prior to this Gospel passage when He asked His disciples, “Who do the people say that I am?” (see Lk 9:18). Our Lord will continue to show how prayer was an important part of His life following the Transfiguration.

Jesus prayed in witness to the profound communion He experienced with the Father. It is His prayer that brings about the revelation of this moment. Luke wants to teach his community and us about the importance of prayer for our lives as well. Prayer is especially necessary for understanding the mystery of Jesus’ paschal mystery (our Lord’s suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension). That is why Jesus is identified as praying so much in these few verses (see Lk 9:18,28,29). Luke’s community was experiencing the first wave of Christian persecutions by the

Roman Empire. They wondered how their distressing experience could be part of God's plan for them. They also wondered if it might be a sign of God's punishment and abandonment. Luke wanted to reassure them that the Gospel message is trustworthy and that their faith is not in vain (see Lk 1:4).

Such a mystery cannot be understood based on reason, logic, history, psychology or philosophy. It can only be grasped through the experience of prayer. That is why Luke tells us in these passages that Jesus had to pray even as our Lord discussed the meaning of His own Exodus (paschal mystery) with Elijah and Moses. If Jesus needed prayer to faithfully grasp this mystery then how much more do we need prayer to understand our mission as witnesses of the Lord's death and resurrection (see Lk 24:45-48).

Why do you think Jesus prayed so much in these few verses?

What do you think Jesus is praying for in your life now?

What is a mystery of faith in your life that you have been trying to grasp and how can our Lord's example of prayer direct your efforts in a new way?

When has prayer been the only way you have been able to understand your life as a disciple of Jesus?

Next, Luke tells us that these events took place about eight days later and that the appearance of Jesus' face (countenance) was changed. These two details are related and must be understood in terms of our Lord's resurrection and ascension. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark state that the Transfiguration took place six days later in order to draw a parallel between the experience of Jesus and the experience of Moses who was on Mount Sinai and surrounded by the Glory of the Lord for six days (see Ex 24:16). Luke emphasizes eight days because that is a reference to Jesus' resurrection on the "Eighth Day". Christians in the early Church would have immediately recognized the reference to eight days as such and would have connected it to the experience of Baptism (that is the reason why baptistries traditionally have eight sides).

Connected to the time of eight days Luke also focuses on the change which occurred to Jesus' face. Luke will continue to draw upon this image a few verses later when we are told that Jesus set His face to Jerusalem (see Lk 9:51), and that the Samaritans rejected His disciples because His face was toward Jerusalem (see Lk 9:53). Luke is connecting three themes as inherently related to one another: Jesus' face, His Glory, and Jerusalem as the place of His paschal mystery.

These connections mean that the Transfiguration is not an isolated event in itself as though it were something that happened in the course of Jesus' ministry without connection to other events. Rather, the Transfiguration is a moment of insight into the glory that will be revealed later in Jesus' death and resurrection. This insight is a momentary glimpse into the divine plan for our salvation.

The disciples will need to remember the Glory of the Transfiguration especially when they face difficult moments like Jesus' persecution and crucifixion. The Transfiguration is meant

to be the moment that can sustain them and give them hope in the midst of doubt and trial.

God gives us certain moments when He reveals His love and His presence to us. These moments are meant to sustain us when we feel burdened or abandoned as well. They give us hope in the midst of trial. It might be easy to recognize the divinity of Jesus as He stands in conversation with Moses and Elijah but it will be difficult for the disciples to see that same divine presence on the cross of Calvary. There are times when we can find it difficult to recognize the presence of God in situations of distress. That is why the Lord blesses us with graced moments that reassure us of His grace and love.

What are some of your moments or experiences of God's love and mercy that sustain you in difficult times?

In what experiences or situations do you find it difficult to recognize the presence of God?

Moses and Elijah were speaking to Jesus about His Exodus (death, resurrection and ascension), which was intended to prepare the Lord for His impending trial. How does God prepare you for the trials of faith you face?

Luke tells us that that Jesus, Elijah and Moses were discussing the Exodus our Lord was to accomplish in Jerusalem for a reason. By using the word Exodus, Luke is intentionally connecting the death and resurrection of Jesus with the experience of Moses leading the Hebrew people through the desert. The Exodus is the defining event for the Jewish people. In the same way, the death and resurrection of Jesus is to be the defining event for every Christian disciple.

There are several similarities between the Exodus experience of Moses and that of Jesus which need to be understood.

1. The Exodus of Moses was a liberation from slavery; in the same way the death and resurrection of Jesus liberates us from the forces of sin and death that enslave us.
2. The Exodus of Moses began with a sacrifice in which the blood of a lamb brought salvation to the Hebrew people whose homes were marked with it; in the same way the blood of Jesus brings salvation to all who are washed in it (baptism) for eternity.
3. The Exodus of Moses involved the Passover meal; Jesus will establish a new Passover meal in His own body and blood at the Last Supper.
4. The Exodus of Moses led the people to Mount Sinai where they received the Law of God and entered into a Covenant with the Lord; Jesus is the very Word of God incarnate and will establish the new and eternal covenant in His blood on the cross of Calvary and offer us a share in it through the Eucharist.
5. The Exodus led the people into the promised land; Jesus will lead us through His death, resurrection and ascension to our heavenly homeland with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for eternity.
6. It was the experience of the Exodus that formed the Hebrew people into the People of God and taught them obedience to the Lord; the Exodus of Jesus is what forms us as the

New People of God through the waters of Baptism and our Lord's example of faithful obedience to the Father's will becomes our model for Christian discipleship.

All these similarities, and others, show us how the Exodus of Jesus far surpasses that of Moses. Now we can understand why Jesus desires so strongly to advance toward Jerusalem where He will accomplish these great graces for the salvation of the world. The Transfiguration gives us a privileged insight into the meaning of our Lord's paschal mystery so that we can desire to participate in His Exodus.

Which of the similarities means most to you between the Exodus of Moses and that of Jesus? Why?

What other similarities can you identify between the Exodus of Moses and that of Jesus?

If Jesus were telling you that He wants you to be part of His new Exodus, what would be your reaction to that invitation? What would you look forward to? What would you be concerned about?

Unfortunately, Peter, James and John were all asleep while this meaningful conversation was taking place. We are told that they woke only in time to see the Lord's glory. The image of sleep in the New Testament can be used to signify the experience of Christian death (see 1 Thess 4:14 and 1 Cor 15:18) and spiritual sloth or negligence (see Rom 13:11, Eph 5:14, and 1 Thess 5:6-9). In this passage, Luke most probably intends to tell us that Peter, James and John have become negligent and slothful in their spiritual lives. Because of their spiritual dullness and lack of watchfulness, they are unable to grasp the fulness of Jesus' paschal revelation. They can only see one part of it; namely, they see what they want to because it matches their hopes and expectations while neglecting what challenges them.

Peter was very happy to be part of this moment in our Lord's ministry and there is good reason for his exuberance. In Luke 9:18–20 Jesus posed this question to His disciples: "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Although Peter responded to that question by saying, "The Messiah of God," his answer failed to capture the full reality of Jesus' identity. Following that conversation, and just a few verses before the scene in today's Gospel passage, Jesus taught His disciples that He must suffer and die before rising from the dead (see Lk 9:21–22). Of course, where Jesus leads the disciples must follow (see Lk 23–27).

The disciples didn't like the message that Jesus would lead them to suffering and death. They wanted to follow a messiah who would lead them to victory and glory instead. That's why Peter is so overjoyed to now see only this part of the Transfiguration.

In the Transfiguration, Peter sees the reason for which he himself was following the Lord: glory. Peter wants to freeze the moment and capture the presence of Jesus where being a disciple is comfortable, rewarding, and glorious. Peter does not want to leave that mountain and follow Jesus to Jerusalem! It's almost as if Peter is saying, "Let's stop here, Lord, we've gone far enough." We might even say that Peter represents all of us when we want to experience Easter

Sunday without Good Friday.

Peter thought he had reached the destination of his discipleship — a place of glory. However, the faith to which Jesus calls us is lived in daily discipleship as we progress step by step on our journey to Jerusalem with the Lord. The Lord invites us to a discipleship that does not stop at a place that is comfortable but one that faithfully follows wherever Jesus leads.

What tempts you to stop short and settle for “good enough” when it comes to your life of discipleship?

What do you seek in your prayer and life of faith — moments of glory or the ability to faithfully follow the Lord each day?

How can you become complacent in your faith and want to stop deepening your discipleship?

How can people today be tempted to seek only glorious moments rather than sacrificial moments in their faith?

How does the image of falling sleep in faith and becoming spiritually slothful, negligent, and dull resonate with you?

How can you spiritually wake up during these remaining days of Lent?

Luke also tells us that Peter spoke up when he saw Moses and Elijah in the process of departing. Peter’s desire to build three booths clearly signaled his desire to freeze this moment and control the presence of God. Not only was Peter wanting to stay on the mountain, but he wanted Jesus and the others to stay there as well. Peter’s focus on physical buildings represented an attitude analogous to that of the Temple in Jerusalem by which people believed that the presence of God dwelled there ... and only there.

Other passages of the New Testament remind us that God is not controlled by human efforts or limited by man-made dwellings (see Acts 7:48 and 17:24). Had Peter’s desire been to honor Jesus rather than control Jesus then the Father’s response may have been different.

Peter must learn to listen to Jesus and stop trying to control Him. The same is true for us. This can be a great message for us during our Lenten Time especially if we have made resolutions for increased prayer. Prayer is meant to change us and not change God. It’s also necessary to remember that our establishment of sacred space (churches) is not meant to restrict or control God’s presence but to remind us of the importance of setting aside a time and place where we can go to meet God in a privileged way.

Perhaps this message to Peter can be a great message for us as well as we pass through these sacred days.

How can people today mistakenly think they can control God?

When have you attempted to freeze a particularly graced moment or experience in your life?

The voice of the Father corrects Peter's misunderstanding by announcing, "This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him." Peter had previously recognized Jesus only as "Master" and "Messiah" but not as God incarnate. The fact that Peter wanted to set up three booths indicates that he thought Jesus, Moses and Elijah were all equal to each other. It will take more revelation from heaven to instruct Peter since he obviously has failed to grasp the significance of this moment. It is not Jesus who is being honored by Moses and Elijah but Jesus who is the source of their honor.

For this reason the Father announces Jesus as His own divine son and He instructs the disciples that the proper response is to listen to Him. That is, don't just hear Him, but actually listen to Him. The disciples were accustomed to listening to the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) to hear the word of God. They were also accustomed to listening to the Law of God revealed on Mount Sinai but now they must learn to recognize the very word of God in Jesus and receive from Jesus the new commandment.

To "listen" to the Son of God means receiving and following the teachings of Jesus with openness, receptivity, and a desire to respond. It means being attentive to the message of the Gospel and seeking ways to apply it in our daily lives. It is also a caution that reminds us there are lots of other influences attempting to tell us what to do. These other influences include culture, friends, business influences, media, and greed among others. The Father is telling the disciples and us that we must choose to not listen to those influences but instead listen to the voice of Jesus. Every time we make a decision, we must identify and choose to follow the guidance of Jesus while recognizing and rejecting the other forces that try to lead us.

Anytime we find ourselves wondering what to do in a particular situation, this passage speaks to us. We are to listen to Jesus alone as God's only Son.

How do you seek out the guidance of Jesus in your life?

When have you consciously rejected the influence of other factors and chosen to do what is right in the eyes of God?

In what part of your life do you need to listen more to the voice of Jesus guiding you?

What are some of the other voices that try to influence you each day?

How can people today erroneously consider Jesus as equal to other religious figures like Peter considered Jesus equal to Moses and Elijah with a booth for each one? When a person has such a relativistic attitude, what is typically their ultimate guiding authority?

One last note should be made regarding what happened immediately after this graced moment on the mountain top with Jesus and the disciples. All three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell us that the very next thing Jesus encountered was a man whose son was possessed and the disciples were unable to heal him. So much for a soft return to daily life!

That may very well be part of the message about the Transfiguration experience. When we have particularly graced moments of insight into the mystery of God's plan for our lives, it is not uncommon to then be faced with challenging situations of everyday life.

It is worth reading this subsequent experience to see how abruptly our Lord goes from the highs to the lows in the spiritual life. I'm sure we can all identify with that as well. This is a common experience when people return from retreats, mission trips, and moments of intense prayer. Such a rapid change should never cause us to doubt the authenticity or reality of the spiritual graces we received. Rather, trying experiences can provide the necessary maturing process that will allow those graces to become an ever more secure part of our foundation in faith.

When have you felt the dramatic shift from a spiritually graced moment to a spiritually challenging moment?

How does the experience of Jesus and the disciples help you to understand your spiritual journey (see Lk 9:37-43)?

How can such challenging experiences cause people to falsely doubt the reality of the spiritual graces they received?

The Church emphasizes our need to refine our spiritual listening when we are invited on this Second Sunday of Lent to pray with these words: "O God, who have commanded us to listen to your beloved Son, be pleased, we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word, that, with spiritual sight made pure, we may rejoice to behold your glory, through Christ our Lord."¹

¹ Collect, Daytime Prayer, Sunday of Week II, Lent.