

Leave the plains! Climb the mountains!

Second Sunday of Lent – 8 March 2020 – Year A

Gen 12:1-4a; 2 Tim 1:8b-10; Mt 17:1-9

“Jesus took with him Peter, James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart” (Mt)

Prologue: Mountains evoke many meanings: geographic, historic, sacral, symbolic, sites of divine darshan. God’s call to Abram to “Go!” can be understood as a Lenten invitation to desist from mediocrity (the familiar, comfort zone, plains), while the gospel passage of the Transfiguration can be seen as Christ calling us to go higher and further in our daily life.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Abraham is regarded as the ‘father’ and exemplar of the Judeo-Christian faith (Rom 3:27–4:25) with many biblical narratives of his unbounded trust in God’s providence. His name appears some 230 times in the Bible, preceding Jesus by some two thousand years. Originally Abram came from the land of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:28). Abram’s father Terah took him and Lot as far as Haran where they settled. In today’s passage, God instructs Abram: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Along with the call comes God’s promise and blessings to make Abram’s offspring a great nation and to ensure that he experiences blessings in abundance (vv.2-3). The reading ends with a simple assertion: “So Abram *went* as the Lord told him” (v.4). It’s not easy for a 75-year old man to leave his familiar surroundings, his kith and kin, and begin life anew in a totally alien, unnamed territory. However, since it is God who promises, Abram listens to God. He believes God’s words and the divine promises. He leaves what today we would call his ‘comfort-zone’ and ventures out along a path mapped by God. What follows in his life are many ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies. In all these events, it is always God and God alone whom he chooses to follow.
2. The events of the gospel passage unfold when “Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves” (Mt 17:1). Two points are significant here. First, last week’s gospel reading culminates with Jesus being victorious over the tempter-devil who took him to “a very high mountain” to look upon “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour” (Mt 4:8). Jesus resists this temptation for power. Second, this passage appears soon after Jesus has renamed Simon as ‘Peter’ and appointed him as ‘rock’ of his new community, the church (Mt 16:13-20). However, when Jesus predicts his own suffering and death in Jerusalem, Peter remonstrates and Jesus surprisingly calls him ‘Satan’! (v.23) since he is doing the same work as the tempter-devil to dissuade Jesus from walking the way of the cross to Calvary. Hence, the Transfiguration is significant for what it teaches his closest disciples: Peter, James, John.
3. Transfiguration is a dazzling darshan or glimpse of Jesus’ future glory. Note that the details of the Transfiguration coincide with the Garden of Gethsemane—the same three disciples on a hill, asleep, and awakened. Exegetes doubt whether the Transfiguration took place on Mount Tabor at all. 4th-century Christian piety persisted in specifically locating every event of Christ’s life; thus, Tabor got transmitted through Tradition. However, the mountain in

question is more likely to be Mount Hermon. Be that as it may, Moses and Elijah—who also received a darshan of God on holy mountains (Ex 31:18 and 1 Kings 19:11-13)—symbolize the Law and the Prophets. They find fulfillment in the final affirmation of God, the Father: “This my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” Peter’s suggestion, “If you wish, I will make three tents here” (v.4) is suggestive of the Jewish ‘Feast of Tents’ (Deut 16:13-15), which was a joyful communitarian celebration where everyone lived in tents for a week livened by lamps and illuminations. But, against the preceding context of Jesus’ prediction of his sufferings and death (Mt 16:21-23), the Transfiguration is but a brief glimpse of glory before the disciples will flee from seeing the gory face of Jesus atop another mount: Calvary. There, they will forsake him.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Theme of Suffering and Surrendering to Christ:

Paul exhorts his co-worker, Timothy, quite plainly: “Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling” (2 Tim 1:8-9). Timothy—who was the son of a pagan father and a Jewish mother—became a Christian along with his mother, Eunice and grandmother, Lois (vv.5). He was a faithful companion to Paul all through his second and third missionary journeys and was requested by Paul to be a missionary in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3). Paul reminds Timothy that Christ has “abolished death and brought life”; thus, he too must strive to proclaim the gospel of life, but only with the readiness to risk his life, suffer and die.

The Psalm Expressing Abrahamic Faith and Trust:

Like Abram, the trusting attitude of the (wo)man of faith is effectively expressed in today’s responsorial refrain from psalm 33—the only one from psalms 3 to 41 not attributed to David—namely: “May your [steadfast] love be upon us, O Lord, as we place all our hope in you!” (v.22).

Pope Francis’ Constant Call to ‘Go forth’ — In his very first homily to the elector-cardinals on March 14, 2013, he said: “This is the first thing that God said to Abraham: Walk in my presence and live blamelessly. Journeying: our life is a journey, and when we stop moving, things go wrong. Always journeying, in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, seeking to live with the blamelessness that God asked of Abraham in his promise.”

Food for Thought:

1. An old man was trudging towards the Himalayan heights when a rainstorm forced him to rest awhile in an inn. “How will you reach the peak with this weather?” asked a native. The old man replied cheerfully: “My heart got there first, so the rest of me will easily follow.”
2. Of his record-setting May 29, 1953-ascent to Mount Everest, mountaineer Edmund Hillary wrote, “As we started reaching closer and closer, I had to leave more and more things behind. At the last moment, I had to leave almost everything, because everything became such a burden.”
3. Nelson Mandela said, “After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.” May we ready for both, Tabor’s transfiguration and Calvary’s disfiguration.

During Lent, let’s go forth from our comfort-zones Climb the mountain Distance ourselves from the din of daily life Listen to the Lord.
