

Ascend Mount Tabor!

By Rev. John Gavin, S.J.

February 25, 2024 — Second Sunday of Lent

Readings: Genesis 22.1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Romans 8.31b-34; Mark 9.2-10

As we celebrate this second Sunday of Lent, we find ourselves in a time of trepidation and confusion. War and violence threaten the stability of many regions. Christians face persecution and marginalization even in our own country. And the teaching authority of the Church now faces a crisis of credibility in the wake of years of perplexing statements. How can the faithful navigate their way through such mist and fog? Where can they find light in the darkness?

The Testing of Abraham

While Jews generally call the story from our first reading the “*Akedah*,” or “The Binding of Isaac,” Christians usually know it as “The Sacrifice of Isaac.” Both names provide insights into this perhaps troubling account. In *binding* Isaac, Abraham follows the future practice of binding the lamb for the offering in the temple, and he performs this action on his only son with complete trust in God. In the words of the first century Jewish philosopher and exegete, Philo of Alexandria, Abraham “did not divine his feelings and allot one part of his regard to his son and another part to piety to God; but he devoted the whole soul, entire and undivided, to holiness” (Philo, “On Abraham,” 198). Abraham binds his son, but in doing so he also binds himself to God – true “religion,” from the Latin *religare*, “to bind” – in offering the one source of his familial line in absolute trust. In his willingness to *sacrifice* Isaac, Abraham further points to the future offering of the only-begotten Son on the Cross. This *traditio*, or “handing over” of Isaac to God, becomes a tradition, or foundation for future generations to give themselves to the Lord. At the end of the story, God’s messenger declares, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants” – the new tradition! – “as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing – all this because you obeyed my command.”

The testing that Abraham undergoes in this passage in fact prepares him for his future trials. Only by binding himself to God and establishing a new tradition of trust could he and his descendants endure centuries of trekking through the desert, battling ruthless enemies, imprisonment, exile, slavery, and brutal domination from hostile powers. Abraham could not see clearly how his journey would lead to the fulfillment of God’s plan, and, after the near sacrifice of his son, he knew that the journey would be arduous: even the shadow of the Cross cast upon the formative past indicated the necessity to undergo the Son’s suffering on the path to redemption. Yet, the trial gave hope, since it did not end in pure immolation, but the recovery of life and a future of promise. Abraham’s experience would inspire him and subsequent generations to trust that God will give life even in the most confusing and frightening situations.

The Cross and the Light

Just before Mark’s account of the Transfiguration, Jesus speaks of his coming death and Resurrection: “And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and

the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8.31). Peter cannot accept this image of the Messiah, and he rebukes Jesus for his words. But Jesus responds forcefully, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men (Mark 8.33)." And He goes on to address the other disciples: "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father and the holy angels" (Mark 8.38).

Given the Lord's words, perhaps it is surprising that Peter would become a chosen, that is, one of the three apostles who witnessed the dazzling epiphany on the mountain. Yet, the three who accompanied Jesus – Peter, James, and John – were those who needed most the consolation of the theophany, the vision of Jesus' true divinity. Peter and James would be the future leaders of the Christian community, and John would follow Jesus right to the foot of the Cross. Their experience of the weight of divine glory – the Hebrew *kavod*, "weight" or "glory" – gave them the heft to endure their own future trials. Pope Benedict XVI wrote that, "Jesus wants this light to illuminate their hearts when they pass through the thick darkness of his Passion and death, when the folly of the Cross becomes unbearable to them. God is light, and Jesus wishes to give his closest friends the experience of this light which dwells within him." And in seeing the glory hidden in Christ's humble flesh, they will know even after the Resurrection that the Holy Spirit, though hidden, is active and visible through the eyes of faith. The theophany reveals the recovery of life and a future of promise.

The presence of Moses and Elijah also provide consolation to the troubled apostles. Moses, who is "under the earth," represents those who have died and await the future redemption and resurrection in Christ. Elijah, who did not die, but was swept into heaven by a chariot, represents the living saints who wait for the Lord. And the Apostles represent those who continue to struggle, plodding "on the earth" of unsatiated desires and uncertainties. Timothy of Antioch, in a sermon on the Cross and the Transfiguration, summarized the figures at the scene as follows: "That the saying of Paul might be fulfilled, 'In the name of Jesus every knee will bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth.' From those under the earth he led Moses up; from those in heaven he brought Elijah down; from those on the earth he established Peter and James and John." The presence of these figures demonstrate that the transforming glory of Christ knows no bounds, since it ultimately shines forth from the Cross that reaches into the four directions. The living and the dead, sinners and saints, the confused and heartbroken – all may discover hope in Christ. The Transfiguration, in uniting these five men, illuminates the future fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery and the hope of all.

Ascend Mount Tabor!

In our own confusing times, Christ invites us to ascend Mount Tabor. The Church renews this invitation to us during Lent because we are about to walk the Way of the Cross together, when we may unite our own crosses to the Lord's. We need the illumination of Christ to navigate our path through the present and impending darkness.

But where do we see the Weight of Christ's Glory? Where is our Mount Tabor? First and foremost, his glory is revealed in the Eucharist, when the Spirit opens our eyes in faith to see the Real Presence of Jesus in the humble species of bread and wine. Illuminated by this theophany, we receive a new form in the Lord: "Believe what you see; see what you believe; and become what you are: the Body of Christ" (Augustine, Sermon 272). We also come to see His Glory in the saints, his masterpieces, who gather around him throughout history and demonstrate that holiness and eternal joy are possible even for those who struggle – people like Peter, James, and John who receive Christ's invitation to ascend.

These troubled times, therefore, should not overwhelm us. Jesus has opened our eyes and offers consolation to us who yearn for the full recovery of life and a future of promise. As St. Paul reminds us, "He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will He not also give us everything else along with Him?"

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For Further Reading

- *Augustine of Hippo, "[Sermon 272](#)"*
- *Benedict XVI: "[Angelus Address](#)"*
- *Light on the Mountain. [Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord](#), ed. Brian E. Daley, S.J.*
- *Philo of Alexandria, "[On Abraham](#)"*

In Short . . .

- *Abraham's experience of binding Isaac inspired him and subsequent generations to trust that God gives life even in the most confusing and frightening situations.*
- *The Transfiguration reveals the future fulfillment of the Paschal Mystery and gives hope after Jesus' foretelling of His Passion.*
- *Christ's glory is revealed in the Eucharist, when the Spirit opens our eyes in faith to see the Real Presence of Jesus in the humble species of bread and wine.*
- *We also come to see Christ's Glory in the saints, his masterpieces, who gather around Him throughout history and demonstrate that holiness and eternal joy are possible even for those who struggle – people like Peter, James, and John who received Christ's invitation to ascend.*