

Second Sunday Lent
March 1, 2015

In today's first reading and Gospel, we're called to witness two very different mountain experiences: that of Abraham and the one Jesus shared with Peter, James and John.

Abraham's story is shocking, to say the least. He and Sarah had waited a long time (they were well into their nineties) for the birth of Isaac. In every sense of the word, Isaac's birth was a miracle; he was a beloved only son, and yet God was asking for his life? And Abraham was ready to obey?

These are very difficult questions and yet we see that Abraham responded with great faith, a tremendously deep faith in the goodness of God. The lesson for us then is that courage comes from faith.

Besides the central theme of faith, there is a secondary but very important theme of sacrifice that we cannot overlook.

Sadly, it was customary among the ancient Near Eastern civilizations to sacrifice children by fire to a god called Molech among the Canaanites, Milcom among the Amorites, Muluk in the Mari texts, to name only a few examples

Although child sacrifice was strictly forbidden among the Israelites (Lev 20:2-5), there were low points in Israel's in history when some of its kings resorted to this evil practice.

And it goes without saying that the value of Abraham's sacrifice was not in any way diminished by the fact that he didn't take his beloved Isaac's life. Indeed, his

willingness to offer back to God the most precious gift he had ever received was more important than any blood offering. With the substitution of the ram, Israel was to learn that God did not require human sacrifice and could not be manipulated by it.

In the Gospel, Mark tells us that Jesus also went up a high mountain with Peter, James and John and was transformed before them. As if to affirm the fact that God was revealing Himself, a cloud appeared.

Because you see the cloud was a traditional symbol of the divine presence, and the voice from the cloud identified Jesus as God's Son and called upon Jesus' disciples to listen to him.

Now besides the importance of the theophany itself, the experience of the disciples underscores the importance of getting away from it all so as to gain a perspective that can't be had in the midst of the fray. Maybe the Psalmist said it best when he said: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10).

Both of these mountain narratives set the theme for Lent as a time to ease ourselves out of the hustle and bustle of everyday activity so as to pray quietly, seeking God's will and then asking for the strength to make it our own.

On our "mountain," we can rethink priorities, set goals and evaluate our relationship with God and with others. It is also a time for realizing that God is God and I am not. God is at once unknowable and yet willing to be known intimately – and when we come to grips with that, we can surrender ourselves to the mystery and trust even when reason and common sense warn otherwise.

Abraham's faith was deeply tested on the mountain; his unmatched trust in God, his unquestioning obedience resulted in his being blessed abundantly.

Peter, James and John's experience on the mountain was at once thrilling and terrifying. So compelling was their experience with Jesus that they wanted to make it last as long as possible. And if we had experienced something as wonderful as the Transfiguration, we probably would want to make it last as long as possible too.

But mountaintop experiences are not perpetual. They are pauses that renew and refresh us.

Then, when we are called to descend from the mountain and face anew the demands of life, we'll find that we are better equipped to do so.

In our complex, difficult and often violent world, we need hope, too. We need a foretaste of the glory of resurrection. We could use a transfiguration experience to see us through.

But our experience of transfiguration can come in many ways. It can come in prayer that is open to the Spirit. Our transfiguration experience can come from within the community: God's faithful people connecting us to God's promises from the past, brought into the present.

Or, last but certainly not least, we might be the transfiguration experience needed by someone else. God worked through Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John and countless others to bring the hope of God's presence and full life — despite rejection, violence and death. So too can God work through us to bring hope to all whom God places in our lives.