

**This Sunday's Readings – the 2nd Sunday of Lent** – In today's scripture readings, we read about the beginning of and the fulfillment of salvation history.

In the first reading from the Book of Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abram (his name has not yet been changed to Abraham) designating his offspring, the Hebrews, as the chosen people of God. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 article for *The Evangelist* elaborates on this covenant – “Yahweh promises him both descendants and a land for those descendants to inhabit, then graphically "cuts a covenant" with him as a guarantee that the promises will be carried out. Notice that God does all the promising and covenant-making. Abraham's role in this event is simple. He does just one thing: "He puts his faith in Yahweh." And God credits his faith as "an act of righteousness." This marks the beginning of salvation history. Our faith goes back to Abraham, “our father in faith” (1<sup>st</sup> Eucharistic Prayer). The ceremony itself might seem strange to us. However, it was quite common at the time of Abraham. The Jewish Encyclopedia describes this type of covenant – “An agreement between two contracting parties, originally sealed with blood; a bond, or a law; a permanent religious dispensation. The old, primitive way of concluding a covenant (ברית ברית, "to cut a covenant") was for the covenanters to cut into each other's arm and suck the blood, the mixing of the blood rendering them "brothers of the covenant". A rite expressive of the same idea is the cutting of a sacrificial animal into two parts, between which the contracting parties pass, showing thereby that they are bound to each other; the eating together of the meat, which usually follows, reiterating the same idea. Originally the covenant was a bond of life-fellowship, where the mingling of the blood was deemed essential. In the course of time aversion to imbibing human blood eliminated the sucking of the blood, and the eating and drinking together became in itself the means of covenanting”.

The Gospel reading from Luke is the story of the Transfiguration, which is always assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains this – “The use of the transfiguration story on the second Sunday of Lent in the revised Roman Lectionary follows the tradition of the *Missale Romanum*. The Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist Lectionaries depart from the Roman Lectionary here and read the transfiguration story on the last Sunday after Epiphany. On that day it forms an admirable transition from the contemplation of the earthly ministry of Jesus as the manifestation of God in the Epiphany season to a contemplation of the passion as the ultimate epiphany. In the Roman Lectionary the transfiguration story serves the theme: “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.”” Here Jesus true divine nature is revealed to Peter, James, and John and Jesus is declared the Son of God just as at His baptism. However, what is the significance of Moses and Elijah, two of the most important figures in salvation history and who were themselves persecuted? They represent the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, just as Abraham marked the beginning of salvation history! What are Jesus, Moses, and Elijah discussing? They are discussing Jesus own immanent “exodus” in Jerusalem, where he will suffer, die, and rise on the third day. Just prior to this reading from Luke, Jesus reveals to Peter, James, and John that He must suffer and die. However, even after witnessing the Transfiguration, they still do not believe. They will not have that faith until after Jesus rises from the dead.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* has some very interesting and thought provoking cultural comments on today's Gospel reading – "In her recent study of the transfiguration of Jesus, Chicago biblical scholar and Dominican Sister Barbara Reid concluded that Luke's account probably contains the earliest form of the story. Two men appeared in glory and spoke of Jesus' "exodus," which he was to fulfill in Jerusalem. Peter and those with him saw Jesus' glory and the two men standing with him. The two men are most likely angels presenting an instructive message about forthcoming events for earthbound listeners. Influenced by Mark, the Lucan redactor equated these angels with Moses and Elijah and added other information from Mark. Like many historical-critical biblical scholars, Reid considers the evidence of this text as too fragmentary to provide scientifically certain results about what that experience really might have been. Such skepticism, however, is unwarranted. It is based upon the unexamined and unquestioned Western cultural biases that so permeate science as to be almost indistinguishable from it. In the ancient Mediterranean world, experiences of alternate reality in vision and trance were common.

Devotees of the healing god, Asclepius, routinely learned about their illness and appropriate therapy for it from this god in a "sacred" dream.

Prophets like Isaiah (6:1-13), Jeremiah (1:11-19), and Ezekiel (1:4-28) described their experiences of God in alternate reality.

The entire book of Revelation is a report of what the author, John, experienced in an altered state of consciousness that could be called "ecstasy" or "trance" (the literal Greek is "in spirit" in Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).

In Luke's Gospel, the baptism of Jesus (3:21-22) could be viewed as an experience of alternate reality in which one could see the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and hear a voice from heaven speaking intelligibly. The Lucan temptation story, created as it is by tradition (cf. Mark 1:12-13), can also be interpreted as an experience of alternate reality in an altered state of consciousness. The transfiguration story makes good, culturally plausible sense as another such experience. It is similar to an ancient report by a translator of a book of healings by Asclepius. He took ill and went with his mother to the temple for healing. In a waking vision, she saw the god come to him, and when she woke him to relate what she saw, before she could say anything he informed her that he saw the same in his own dream. Jesus and his select circle of disciples share an experience of alternate reality. The text does not tell us what Jesus saw or heard, only that his face gave external indication of his experience. The text reports what Peter, James, and John saw and heard. The scene concludes with an assurance from heaven: "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him." A common function of experiences of alternate reality is to provide enlightenment about some puzzle, or guidance regarding a proper course of action to take. In Luke's story line, Jesus' teaching and healing activities gain for him friends (4:38-39; 8:40) and enemies (5:21; 6:46; 7:31, 39; 8:43). His fellow villagers (4:29) and others (6:11) wanted to kill him. It would take an experience like the transfiguration to set the minds of Jesus and his chosen followers at

ease. In spite of ominous signs, God was pleased with Jesus and encouraged the trio to heed what he says. Even if a scholar insisted in denying that this is what “really” happened, the scenario makes very plausible Mediterranean sense. One can only admire an evangelist who created the scene if it did not happen in actual fact. The Western infatuation with science has brought in its wake blessings and curses. No one can deny the many benefits that science produces. The challenge is not to lose precious human gifts like the capacity for mystical experiences and other experiences of alternate reality that hold an honored place in Christian tradition and piety”.

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team