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A church window depicts the Transfiguration of Christ, in which Moses and Elijah are seen with Jesus in a glorified state before the apostles Peter, James and John.
(CNS/Crosiers)



by Mary M. McGlone

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Last week, Luke invited us to be with the vulnerable Jesus as he was hungry, tempted and debating with the devil. This week, we glimpse his glory as a person wholly caught up in God. Today's readings invite us to awe and wonder.

Before we get to the revelation on the mountain, we spend time with Abram. The scene opens with Abram telling God that it's all well and good that God protects and promises him a great future, but without children, what does it matter? In response, God leads Abram out of his house, into the night where he will see something few moderns have ever witnessed. God shows Abram the stars of the sky, undimmed by electricity, with no satellites wandering among them, no smog to blur their brilliance. "Take a look!" says God, "Give me a count!"

Second Sunday of Lent

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Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 9:28b-36

Anyone who has escaped civilization's haze and gazed at stars in a clear sky knows what soul-shaking wonder they can inspire. What could Abram say? If God could create those stars, descendants would seem a rather small order! As we know, Abram believed, and descendants came — in God's good time, with collaboration from Hagar and Sarah.

This leads us to the mountain where Peter, John and James went to pray with Jesus. As they watched, Jesus' expression changed. Like a person who has fallen in love, like parents gazing on their beloved child, everything about Jesus was transformed as he prayed. Somehow, his communication with the God he called Abba permeated and illuminated every fiber of his being. Whether or not he knew it in the moment, Jesus was revealing a preview of the resurrection appearances and humanity's future of ecstatic loving union with God.

The evangelists don't tell us what the experience was like for Jesus. But they do tell us that witnessing it was overwhelming for his closest friends. They saw his glory. As he prayed, they understood him in the context of everything their people had been through, from Abram to Moses and the prophets. In Jesus, the disciples saw the fulfillment of God's long, plodding history with the chosen people. With that, they were ready to say, "Heaven on earth! No more waiting, no more wondering! We can remain right here."

They had no clue. The mountain was but the prelude. A cloud came over them. Their certainty disappeared. Then they heard the voice: "This is my chosen Son; listen to him." Now they were beyond frightened or overawed. They became silent and walked down the mountain with Jesus, their well-known friend and mysterious revealer of possibilities they never could have imagined.

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The Transfiguration teaches about our basic vocation to listen to Jesus as Son of God. At the same time, this scene subtly reveals much about the mystery of prayer. The story of the Transfiguration shows us that it was while Jesus prayed that the disciples glimpsed the depth of who Jesus truly was. Jesus was not reciting the psalms or teaching them; he was caught up in contemplation.

Lest we think that contemplation is too esoteric for ordinary folk, Pope Francis says it's really quite simple. He describes contemplation with the words, "I look at him and he looks at me." Contemplation is a matter of a heart that spends time simply

being in the presence of God. Francis says, "Everything comes from this: from a heart that feels that it is looked on with love. Then reality is contemplated with different eyes." In the light of the Transfiguration, we might say, the person who realizes that God gazes on her or him with love will begin to glow in their own unique way.

Today, we sing the refrain from Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?" That could work as a one-line summary of the effect of faith. When we take the time to allow God to love us as we truly are, we will gradually begin to realize that there is nothing to fear, and that life is made for sharing that love. Francis summarized Jesus' mission saying that knowing God's love changes everything. Knowing the love of God will change us and illuminate and permeate our work for justice, our worship, our prayer and our every relationship. That was what set Jesus aglow.

The Gospels preserved the story of the Transfiguration not to prove that Jesus was divine, but to lure us toward believing in what God offers us human beings. That's the essence of Paul's message today as well. We are invited into transfiguring contemplation. Whether we do it before the Blessed Sacrament, under the stars, or gazing at another of God's beloved creatures, God's invitation is the same: "Spend time with me and you will know your glory."

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