

Second Sunday of Lent—Year C

Every year on the second Sunday of Lent the Church gives us two great gifts in the readings. The first is the figure of Abraham. The second is the Gospel of the Transfiguration. Both are given to us each year, because both are supposed to influence greatly the way we live Lent.

The Church presents us the figure of Abraham, our father in faith, for two reasons. The first is because he shows us very clearly what real faith is, the type of faith to which God calls each of us. When he was 75 years old, the Lord called him while he was in Ur of the Chaldeans (modern-day Iraq) and told him to leave the land of his kinfolk and go to a land He would show him. God asked him to pack his bags, get his extended family and animals and leave behind everything, his language, his land, his friends. Abraham trusted in God and departed his comfortable, familiar surroundings, not knowing where his destination would be. That was only the beginning of the times God challenged Abraham to trust in Him. God gave him a promise, one that would have sounded crazy to Abraham and his wife, Sara, who were childless at the time. "I will make of you a great nation." How could

Abraham become a great nation if he and his wife had been unable to have children during likely fifty-plus years of marriage? Yet Abraham believed again. When they arrived in Canaan, Abraham found that the land God was going to give him and his eventual descendants was not going to come to him with a golden key. He learned that he and his family were going to have to fight for the land, against several tribes consecutively. Abraham against consented. After they were settled, Abraham and Sara tried for 10 years to have a child, to no avail. But he continued to believe. Eventually when Abraham was 86 and Sarah was 91, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, who was destined, Abraham thought, to be the one through whom God would make Abraham the father of many nations. But then 13 years later, when Abraham was 99, God decided to test Abraham's faith to the utmost. He asked Abraham to go to Mt. Moriah, a hill in Jerusalem, and there sacrifice his son, the son for whom he had waited for so long and in whom he had put so much hope. Abraham did what the Lord wanted, even though it would have seemed so contradictory to God's previous plans. He did so hoping that God himself would provide the lamb for the offering. Isaac his son carried the wood. Abraham built the altar and then

was prepared to sacrifice his own son to the Lord — something that the canaanite pagans were accustomed to do — before the angel of the Lord held his hand and told Abraham not to harm the boy in the least.

The Church gives us this story at the beginning of Lent first because we're called to have the same faith as Abraham. While God might or might not ask us to leave behind everything and go to fight to win a far away land, He does call us to leave our own comfort zones each Lent, trusting in Him completely. He calls us to trust in His Word, above all things, even if that word means going against the knowledge of biology and common sense and believing that a couple in their 80s and 90s will conceive their first child. God calls us to be willing to sacrifice everything — even people or things we love most — for God, if he asks us. "You cannot be my disciple," Jesus said, "unless you prefer me to your families to your possessions to your very life" (Lk 14:26 ff).

4) The second reason the Church gives us the story of Abraham is because what he did with Isaac foreshadows God the Father's sacrifice of His only-begotten Son 1800 years later, which is what we are preparing to commemorate at the end of Lent. The Father

had own Son carry the wood for the sacrifice, just as Abraham had Isaac carry the wood. Abraham's words, "God himself would provide the Lamb," were fulfilled when God provided the Lamb of God. The sacrifice took place on the altar of Calvary, very close to Mt. Moriah.

A question many are provoked to ask is: Why did God allow this? This answer is found hidden in the Gospel passage of the Transfiguration.

In the dramatic scene we have in the Gospel, Jesus led the same three apostles he would have with him in the Garden of Gethsemane up Mt. Tabor and was transfigured before them. A short time before this, Peter had confessed Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and Jesus had told them for the first time the way he would bring about his kingdom, not by worldly triumph, but by worldly defeat. "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Lk 9:22). That didn't register. In the transfiguration, God the Father tried to help them to understand. He allowed Jesus to take on some of his heavenly glory, which was veiled throughout his earthly life. He

allowed Moses and Elijah to appear. They conversed with Jesus not about the glory that was to come, not about Heaven, but about Jesus' suffering, Cross and death, the "exodus" that Jesus was to accomplish in Jerusalem. This exodus meant the passage Jesus would make from the slavery of death to the Promised Land of eternal life, just as Moses had led the Israelites in the exodus from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Then God the Father spoke. The first thing he said indicated his Son's true identity. He wasn't John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets, as many of the people believed. He wasn't even merely the long-awaited Messiah. God the Father thundered from heaven, "This is my beloved Son!" Then he gave a command to the three apostles with Jesus on the mountain: "Listen to Him" listen to what Jesus said about his suffering and death and believe in Him. (The apostles would ultimately not believe, however, until after they saw Jesus gloriously transfigured in his resurrected body).

The Church presents us this passage at the beginning of Lent so that we might receive the lessons God the Father wanted to communicate to Christ's first disciples on the mountain. First, we learn who Christ is: God's beloved Son. Second, we hear the

Father's only imperative in the New Testament, to listen to Jesus and believe in him and believe in everything he said and taught. Third, we discover the centrality of His "exodus," his suffering and death; like the Israelites followed Moses through the Red Sea that first exodus, we are called to follow Jesus, the Way, all the way this exodus so as to come to the eternal Promised Land. This is the burning desire of God the Father. He who thundered about Jesus, "This is my beloved Son!" loved someone in some respects even more than Son. He loved YOU more. He allowed his own Son to be brutally sacrificed on the wood of the Cross — fulfilling the prophecy of Abraham and Isaac — so that we would not have to die eternally out of sin, but could pass, in Jesus, to a new address, leaving this world and everything behind like Abraham left Ur.