**Readings for February 25, 2024 – Second Sunday in Lent**

 Fastened to the Divine Presence

*Jesus gives his faithful disciples a gift – a glimpse of who he really is. Can we recognize the divinity that’s all around us, even in our everyday lives? And what does this recognition call us to do? What do we do with the gift of God’s dazzling abundance?*

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**Opening Prayer:** God of grace, we call to you from our weakness. Reveal your light to us today. Let us lean into your grace and feel your love surround us. Bless our nation and our world this week. Shower us with your transforming power. We ask this, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reading I [**Gn 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/genesis/22?1)

God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, “Abraham!”
“Here I am!” he replied. Then God said:
“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust
on a height that I will point out to you.” When they came to the place of which God had told him,
Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.
Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.
But the LORD’s messenger called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am!” he answered.
“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the messenger.
“Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God,
since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son.”
As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket.
So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son. Again the LORD’s messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said:
“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 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.”

Responsorial Psalm [**116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/116?10)

**R. (116:9) I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**I believed, even when I said,“I am greatly afflicted.”
Precious in the eyes of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.
**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the son of your handmaid;
    you have loosed my bonds.
To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving, and I will call upon the name of the LORD.
**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**My vows to the LORD I will pay in the presence of all his people,
In the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem.
**R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.**

Reading II [**Rom 8:31b-34**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/romans/8?31)

Brothers and sisters: If God is for us, who can be against 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? Who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?
It is God who acquits us, who will condemn?
Christ Jesus it is who died—or, rather, was raised—
who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

Gospel [**Mk 9:2-10**](https://bible.usccb.org/bible/mark/9?2)

Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus.
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here!
Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”
He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.
Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;
from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son.  Listen to him.”
Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them. As they were coming down from the mountain,
he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,
except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.
So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

Related Reflections

Most of us probably think we would welcome the opportunity to see Jesus in his glory. But when the disciples, Peter, James and John, witnessed the transfiguration, they were both attracted by what they saw and overwhelmed by fear. In their journey with Jesus thus far, they had learned to revere him as master and teacher, and they had walked the dusty roads of Palestine with him as companion and friend. Here, on the high mountain, however, they catch a glimpse of his divinity, and it is an awesome sight indeed.

Not only do they see Jesus with light streaming forth from his garments, they also see him in conversation with the greatest figures of the Jewish religious tradition: Moses, giver of the law; and Elijah, foremost among the prophets. One wonders what they were talking about.

By the time the voice from heaven tells the disciples to “listen to him,” (Mark 9:7) however, there is no more conversation to overhear. The vision is over and Jesus alone is left with them to speak about his coming suffering and death. The dazzling images dissolve into talk of the dark and hard future that presses on Jesus – probably the last thing the disciples expected to hear. They leave the mountain puzzled, even as present-day disciples also feel consternation at the twists and turns of their calling in this world. Yet they are changed by what they have seen, even if they do not perfectly understand it. They have been called to a deeper attention to Jesus’ words, actions and presence in their midst.

At times, believers have “mountaintop experiences” of faith and catch glimpses of the glorious truth of God in Christ. An experience of this kind can cause a permanent change. The test of its effectiveness, however, is not in the powerful feelings the experience evoked, but in the capacity to listen to Jesus’ paradoxical message of self-sacrifice after the experience is over.

 *Prayer Time Cycle B*, Renew International Publications

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Pope Francis speaks about the Transfiguration. What does he say needs to happen when we climb the mountain? Or climb down from the mountain?

“We need to go to a place of retreat, to climb the mountain and go to a place of silence, to find ourselves and better perceive the voice of the Lord. We cannot stay there, however. The encounter with God in prayer again pushes us to come down from the mountain and back down into the plain, where we meet many brothers and sisters weighed down by fatigue, injustice, and both material and spiritual poverty.”

[Pope Francis Angelus Second Sunday of Lent](https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/24359)
March 16, 2014

I have always felt a bit sorry for Peter. It seems that scripture scholars are always quick to point out how often Peter didn’t “get it,” how he couldn’t understand the meaning of what Jesus was saying. More disconcerting for me has been to read the consensus among many scholars that the Gospel writers emphasize Peter’s mistakes because Peter’s example serves as a kind of “Everyman,” or every woman, in response to Jesus’ message. Put differently, it’s not just Peter, nor the other apostles, but also “we” who don’t “get it.”

It seems unfair. In this Sunday’s Gospel, seeing Moses and Elijah amidst this deserted high mountain, Peter’s Galilean mind naturally recalls God’s salvific action on behalf of Peter’s Israelite ancestors. He remembers how, when his ancestors fled Pharaoh’s Egypt and journeyed toward the Promised Land, God provided them tents, or as they were also known, “booths,” or “tabernacles,” in which to dwell. Many times, at the Jewish Festival of Booths, or Tabernacles, Peter had celebrated God’s saving of the Israelites. So, when facing Moses, the Law-giver, and Elijah, the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, what else ought Peter do?!

Peter’s example teaches us that we are called not to focus our eyes too tightly on the past, but rather look ahead, toward Jesus. Jesus’ transfiguration signals his Godship, and so, thanks to him, we are freed to look forward, not merely at our mistakes but toward our salvation. As we proceed toward Easter, let us not get stuck by our sins, but this Lent, ask God’s forgiveness, repent for our sins and pray to follow Jesus more closely.

*—Fr. William T. Sheahan, SJ, rector of the Rockhurst Jesuit Community in Kansas City, MO.*

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**Thoughts from the Early Church (excerpt from a sermon by Ephrem)**

The apostles knew that Jesus was a man; they did not know that he was God. To their knowledge he was the son of Mary, a man who shared their daily life in this world. On the mountain he revealed to them that he was the Son of God, that he was in fact God himself.

Peter, James, and John were familiar with the sight of their master eating and drinking, working and taking rest, growing tired and falling asleep, experiencing fear and breaking out in sweat. All these things were natural to his humanity, not to his divinity. He therefore took them up onto the mountain so that they could hear his Father’s voice calling him Son, and he could show them that he was truly the Son of God and was himself divine.

He took them up onto the mountain in order to show them his kingship before they witnessed his passion, to let them see his mighty power before they watched his death, to reveal his glory to them before they beheld his humiliation.

Then when the they took him captive and condemned him to the cross, the apostles would understand that it was not for any lack of power on his part that Jesus allowed himself to be crucified by his enemies, but because he had freely chosen to suffer in that way for the world’s salvation.

He took them up onto the mountain before his resurrection and showed them the glory of his divinity, so that when he rose from the dead in that same divine glory, they would realize that this was not something given him as a reward for his labor, as if he were previously without it.

That glory had been his with the Father from all eternity, as is clear from his words on approaching his freely chosen passion: “Father, glorify me now with the glory I had with you before the world was made.”

*Ephrem (c. 306-73), the only Syrian Father who is honored as a doctor of the Church.*

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At one level, the lesson [in the story of Abraham] is that God does not want human sacrifice, but there is a deeper, more intimate lesson that teaches us something about our innate need to offer sacrifice. The lesson is this: In order for something to be received as a gift it must be received twice. What is implied here?

A gift, by definition, is something that is not deserved but given freely. What is our first impulse when we are given a gift? Our instinctual response is: “I can’t take this! I don’t deserve this!” In essence, that gesture, that healthy instinctual response, is an attempt to give the gift back to its giver. But, of course, the giver refuses to take the gift back and re-gives it to us with the assurance: “but I want you to have this!” When we receive it the second time, it is now more properly ours because, by trying to give it back, we healthily recognized that it was a gift, unmerited, undeserved.

That is the exact set of dynamics within the story of Abraham offering to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac comes to him as the greatest, most-undeserved, gift of his life. His willingness to sacrifice him parallels the instinctual gesture: “I don’t deserve this! I cannot accept this!” He offers the gift back to its giver. But the giver, Love itself, stops the gesture and gives the gift the second time. Now Abraham can receive Isaac, without guilt, as gift. When they are walking back home, Isaac is now Abraham’s son in a way that he never was before. Abraham had to receive the gift twice by sacrificing it the first time.

That is the essence of sacrifice: to properly receive anything, including life itself, requires that we recognize it precisely as gift, as something undeserved. And to do that requires sacrifice, a willingness to give some or the entire gift back to its giver.

We see this as the dynamic underlying the ritual of ancient sacrifice. For example: A farmer would harvest a crop. But, before he or his family would eat even mouthful of it, he would take some of it (the “first-fruits”) and offer it back to God in the form of a sacrifice, usually by burning it so that that the smoke rising up to the heavens would take some of the crop back to God whom the farmer saw as the real giver of that crop. … Through sacrifice, they have acknowledged it as gift.

 Fr. Ronald Rolheiser – published on https://liturgy.slu.edu/

*“And at the end of woe, suddenly our eyes shall be opened, and in clearness of light our sight shall be full: which light is God, our Maker and Holy Ghost, in Christ Jesus our Saviour.*

*Thus I saw and understood that our faith is our light in our night: which light is God, our endless Day.”*

* *Julian of Norwich, writing about one of her “showings,” or visions of Christ*

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Discussion Questions

Discuss the idea of complete devotion, and trust in God, as we see with Abraham in the First Reading. What are your feelings about this reading?

How does this idea of sacrifice fit with what Ephrem (in his sermon) is telling us about Jesus’ sacrifice, and what Fr. Rolheiser says?

What might keep us from seeing God in our world? How can we lift the veil and see the true divinity and glory of God?

What gifts or insights does God give us in our everyday lives to show us the possibility of his transforming power in the world?

What happens when our eyes are opened? What are we called to do? What did the privileged disciples have to do after this glorious vision? (Note: Peter wanted to stay, but they couldn’t. Why not?)

Describe a time when you felt God’s presence very strongly. What was that like for you? Describe a time when you have been afraid of God’s presence. Why do you think you felt afraid?

**Closing Prayer:** *Prayer for Enlightenment A*ll-powerful Father,
you sent your Son Jesus Christ
to bring the new light of salvation to the world.
May he enlighten us with his radiance,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. AMEN

*“Oh Lord, I pray, fasten my soul to you.”*

Something to pray with this week

*"See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? In the wilderness I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers." (Isaiah 43:19)*

God is always surprising us, and longing to bring renewal, restoration and peace. Spend a little time with this scripture and see what it might mean for you.

Thinking again about God’s transforming power in the world, ask for the grace to be aware of the new and creative ways God is working in your life today. Also, you may want to reflect on this poem:

What is required to make a place holy? The ordinary becoming extraordinary,
The common interrupted for a moment
that we wish would last forever,
God coming into our forest, decorating our trees,
Inviting us to remove our shoes. – Rev. Robin Ringland

Where are the sacred moments in your day? Where did you get a glimpse of the divine in the ordinary?

How has God surprised you recently?