

2nd Sunday of Lent, Cycle B
Genesis 22:1-2, 9A, 10-13, 15-18
Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19
Romans 8:31B-34
Mark 9:2-10
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There are two visits to mountain-tops in our readings today. In both instances, people learn something about God that will transform their lives, and sustain them through the years to come. In our reading from Genesis, God has instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the Heights of Moriah. Though he must be heartbroken, anguished and confused, Abraham nevertheless sets out immediately to obey God's will. On the long climb up the heights, Isaac carries on his own back, the wood upon which he is to be sacrificed. (This reminds us Christians of *another* beloved Son, climbing to his death on another hill.) Isaac is no fool, so there must be fear in his heart when he points out to his father that they have brought no animal for sacrifice. Can we even imagine the emotion of Abraham, when he replies to his son: "God himself will provide a victim for the sacrifice?" When they reach the appointed place, Abraham builds an altar and arranges the wood on it. He picks up the knife. At the crucial moment, an angel stays Abraham's hand, and a voice from heaven gives him this message: "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Because you have 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...and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing -- all this because you obeyed my command." And so Abraham was confirmed as the Patriarch

of all Israel. Surely, whatever the future held, Abraham would experience it in light of what happened on that mountain.

In the Gospel, Jesus leads Peter, James and John up a high mountain. There, Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. His clothes become dazzlingly white. Moses representing the Law and Elijah the prophets appear amongst them, and begin a conversation with Jesus. Now a voice from a cloud says, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." And then Peter, James and John are once again alone with Jesus. We know the difficulties, the tragedy that loomed in their future. When Jesus was arrested, beaten and killed, they would remember what had happened on that mountain-top, and it would help keep their faith alive.

Many of us have had mountain-top experiences of our own: nothing as vivid and overpowering as Abraham or Peter experienced, but fleeting moments when we have been acutely aware of the reality, and the presence of God. It might be a moment of profound consolation in prayer, an unsettling encounter with transcendent beauty, even an intimation of grace vouchsafed in the midst of tragedy. We need to remember those moments. They can sustain us.

The seasons of the Church year can play an analogous spiritual role in our lives as the People of God. Right now we are undertaking together the long climb through Lent to Easter, not just *remembering* but living *anew* the mountain-top events that were the crucible in which the faith of the Church was forged, so that when hard times come and go, we will be able to say with the psalmist, I believed, even when I was greatly afflicted for I have walked in the presence of the Lord, in the land of the living.