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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 25: 03-01-2026



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week, we return to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, to see God's unconditional promise of blessing to Abram, whose name God later changed to the more familiar Abraham. Then we will study Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 17, in which we will see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

Let's step back for a moment and talk about how we study the readings each week to give you some insight into our method. When we study the readings, we use the following procedure, counting down from the letter "C" in the alphabet: Context, Big Idea, and Application. First, we examine the passage in light of the surrounding passages (the textual context) and the historical information (the historical context). Second, we determine the theological big idea that emerged from the study of the text. What was God saying to the people in the original context, and what theological principles can we extract from the text? Finally, we determine the contemporary application(s) – what does it mean to us today? As we move through the readings each week, try to see what theological big ideas you can garner from the text and how these could then be applied to your life. As you focus upon the **A**pplication, first pray that God would reveal to you what He would have you do with what you

learned. You may be amazed at how God sheds light differently on each passage as you encounter and study it again in the liturgical cycle over the years. Perhaps you will find, as my wife likes to say, that you have been ruined for the ordinary!

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Genesis Chapter 12. The context of this section was just after Abram, who later became Abraham, the Father of all believers, left with his father Terah from his birthplace in the region called "Ur of the Chaldeans" and settled in Haran (Genesis 11:31). These were the circumstances leading up to God's call of Abram. Looking at the bigger picture, Noah's Flood was in the somewhat distant history, and he had died back in Chapter 9 (v. 28). The era of the city building had begun under Nimrod (10:8), beginning with the city of Babel (10:10). Chapter 10 contained what was called the "Table of Nations" that represented the nations that developed after Noah and his sons departed from the ark. "These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood" (v. 32, emphasis added). The division (or "separated in some versions) happened at the Tower of Babel where God acted to confuse the languages of the nation states for several reasons including their idolatry and unwillingness to spread out and populate the earth (9:1, 11:4). "They said, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4, emphasis added). Many Bible commentators agree that the tower spoken of in verse 12 was a "ziggurat," which was a tall structure associated with the worship of pagan deities. Notice that the focus of the people's efforts was upon themselves (see the five bolded words in the text), rather than upon God's commandment to spread out and populate the earth. As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, they were not setting their minds on God's interests but on man's, something Jesus called Satanic (Matthew 16:23). We must remember that God cautions us against building shrines, regardless of the purity of our intentions. Otherwise, these shrines, or towers, ziggurats, may become stumbling stones in serving God.

With this context in mind, let's read the text. Note that as you read about God's promises to Abram, who was later renamed "Abraham," see if you can uncover the theological **b**ig ideas in the text.

First Reading:

1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And

> *from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 NAS95)*

This account is the first recorded encounter with God's call to Abram, a call to bless him. We don't know how the LORD communicated with Abram, but it seems very clear that Abram understood and immediately obeyed (v. 4). While this call would be one of blessing, it required some sacrifice on Abram's part. He had to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house. The progression goes from more general to very specific. God did not give him the GPS coordinates of the destination; He just told him that He would show Abram the land when he got there. How's that for literally walking by faith? That is why Abram is called the father of faith: he had the unique privilege of becoming the father of a great nation called to walk by faith in God, a unique light and blessing to the other nations on earth. God's blessing included not only making him into a great nation, but also making Abram's name great. The promise was that Abram would be a blessing to other people groups.

In verses 2-3, we see an unconditional blessing for Abraham and all the future Jews. "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Notice the warning that God gave to those who wouldn't bless the Jews. "And the one who curses you I will curse" (v. 3b). It's impossible to understand all of the implications of this timeless principle. Although we may not understand how God will deal with those who have harmed the Jews, we can rest assured that God will hold true to His unconditional promises to both bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them.

God called Abram to make a great sacrifice in leaving his country, his relatives, and his father's house. Is God calling you to leave some area of comfort to you? Is it possible that we are drawing our personal identity from our country, our relatives, or our father's house? Whatever the case may be, God calls each of us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Romans 4:3 says that Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. So, this text helps us to understand what pleases God's heart. Our belief in who He says He is and our willingness to walk by faith are what God is looking for in each of our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move into the second reading, ponder how God speaks to us today, calling us to take certain actions for Him. In the first reading, God spoke to Abram through a clear and specific call. The author of the Book of Hebrews provided some insights into how God spoke in the past and how He speaks to us today. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's final method of communication to His people is through the words and life of His Son, Jesus. As you read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, notice how throughout this letter, and in all of his letters, Paul's central focus is on the good news of Jesus – the Gospel.

Second Reading:

> *8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (2 Timothy 1:8-10)*

Paul reminded us not to be ashamed of suffering for the good news of the Gospel, Jesus' eternal ministry, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). God saved us not because of our works, said Paul, but for His divine purposes (Titus 3:5). This reminds us of Paul's teaching to the Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). We can celebrate that when we believe in God's promises through Jesus, we have obtained immortality (v. 10b). Just as Abram listened to God, we are to listen to Him through the Gospel. You can see why Paul was not ashamed of this good news! We can also learn from Paul's example. Even though the world around us wants us to feel timid about our faith, we, of all people, can be assured that the free gift of eternal life is something to be excited about. There are people in your life who need to hear this good news, not only from your words, but from your transformed life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move on to the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate action. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v. 21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v. 23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus, in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).*

The central focus of the passage was the Father's revelation of Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time he is mentioned along with a list of disciples, he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he was the one who cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John

18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence on the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, was known for his zeal and energy in his ministry to the Lord. Together with Peter, James, and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These three privileged men were chosen by God to be the first to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centers on the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

> "Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to respond in a similar way to Peter? I remember an incident between my wife and me that helps shed light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration in the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I went out for a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news from her boss. After she hung up, I sprang into action with a five-point plan to overcome this obstacle and proceed. As I moved on to the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon, the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking, and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong? I was only trying to help. What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and listen.

My story about the need to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration. God the Father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.

5c). Peter, though well-intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the Father's love for Him (which, by the way, is the same love Jesus has for us, according to John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own five-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is God calling you to walk by faith? How are the examples of Abram and Paul helpful to you?

2. Does the fact that salvation comes by grace and not by works sound like good news to you? When we accept this free gift from God, we are exercising faith. How is faith necessary for salvation to be imparted to us? How are you exercising faith in God's grace and not putting your faith in your own good works to bring you eternal life?

3. Jesus' true identity as God was revealed at the transfiguration. His face was radiant, shining like the sun. How can a vision of Jesus' true identity spur you on in your everyday life? What would need to change in your life in order to obey God's voice and "listen to Him"?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for Lectionary 27: 03-16-2025

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of Beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of the chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation" and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

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First Reading:

Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.

> *Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:*

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement.

It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, but God also gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you,*

> *and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.*

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evildoers are characterized by unwholesome appetites and unseemly pride in their wrongdoing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." His conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, whom he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

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Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, with each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.*

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lose it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a

week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they saw what must have seemed like a dream to them. They saw Jesus with different facial expressions and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live.

There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God. "*This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him*!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and the disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4:1). List at least three specific ways in which you are living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?

2. In what ways do you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-25-2024



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the first reading from Genesis in which we see Abraham's journey to sacrifice his son Isaac and discuss the typology of Isaac. Then we move to the second reading from Romans where we discover more about God's special relationship with His believers. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which we see Jesus' transfiguration in which a glimpse of his divinity is revealed to this very special subset of believers including Peter, James, and John.

Before we begin this week, I want to note something about the various formats in which we make these study notes available each week. For readers who have subscribed to the Mass Notes by email they receive the text of the study along with a link to both the PDF and the html version published on the web site. The version on the web site has the advantage of "mouse over" links for all of the verse references. This means that anytime an online reader positions their mouse over a verse reference the full text of that reference is made available to them. [In the cases where the text of the verse isn't provided this is a very handy feature.] Being able to see how Scripture interprets itself or correlates with other passages is a good skill to develop as you read and study God's Word. Please

keep this in mind as you do your own studies.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis. The context is the story of Abraham traveling to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. As you read, highlight any similarities that you find between Father Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and God the Father's giving of His Son Jesus for a sacrifice on Calvary. *Note: All of the intermediate verses between 1 and 18 were included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

> Genesis 22:1-18 NAS95 1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." 15 Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from

> heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

Abraham fulfilled God's commandment to journey to the mountain in order to sacrifice his son, the son of promise born to him and Sarah. Abraham likely believed that since God had already provided him a son through supernatural means in his old age He could provide him with another son once he sacrificed Isaac or He could raise Isaac from the dead. One thing that stands out is both Abraham and Isaac's faithfulness in obeying God. Abraham was obedient to his Father God, while Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of even carrying the wood for his own sacrifice and allowing himself to be bound. We wonder what was going through Isaac's mind during all of this. At the last possible moment, God provided a substitute sacrifice (v. 13). In the end, God complemented Abraham for his obedience (v. 18).

When I read these passages, I have always felt that somewhere during this event Abraham may have explained the situation to Isaac. Perhaps, as Abraham was preparing to lay his son on the wood he may have told him about God's commandment to sacrifice him, and perhaps even his hope that God would bring him back to life. This would have revealed Isaac's great faith in God being able to raise him from the dead, as it is hard to imagine Isaac willingly laying down upon a pile of wood while Abraham raised a knife to kill him.

There are two main applications of the reading. First, God took note of Abraham's radical faith that was manifested in his obedience and blessed him for it. In the same way, we as believers and the seed of Abraham we are blessed by God for our radical faith that is manifested in daring steps of obedience. As children of Abraham, we are called to obey God even when it means taking radical measures in what He has revealed in His word for us to do. A second application has to do with the typology of Isaac. Isaac is what is called a "type of Christ." Here are a few of the similarities between Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus for sin on the cross (1 Peter 3:18).

- Abraham journeyed and on the third day reached the mountain (v. 4). Isaac was bound, but then released on the third day because God provided a substitutionary sacrificial lamb. Jesus, God's sacrificial lamb (John 1:29), laid in the grave for three days and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:4) whose sacrifice was a substitute for our sins. Both physical

people were given back to their fathers on the third day.

- Both Isaac and Jesus were willing to offer their bodies as a sacrifice (vv. 7-8, Colossians 2:6-8).

- Father Abraham surrendered his son Isaac to God's will (v. 10). God surrendered His Son Jesus by His own will. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

- Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (v. 6), and Jesus carried his wood for His sacrifice (John 19:17)

- Ishmael was technically Abraham's first son, but he was a child of the flesh born to the slave Hagar, not the child of promise born to Sarah. Therefore, Isaac was his father's one and only son (v. 2). Jesus was God's one and only Son (John 3:16), Whom He loves (Matthew 3:17).

- Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of death. Jesus was obedient to His Father to the point of death and beyond (Philippians 2:8).

We see this story of a Father's sacrifice, echoing the ultimate story of God's sacrifice that was made through Christ's death on the cross for us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is Paul's teaching on the very special relationship that exists between God and the believer. He said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Next, he teaches on the difference between those living in the flesh and those living in the spirit. He said that those that live in the flesh cannot please God (v. 8), but as believers we are not in the flesh

but in the spirit (v. 9). Next, there is a connection to the first reading as Paul said, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (vv. 16 – 17). Like Abraham and Isaac, we are heirs with God through our faith in Christ. As you study the text of the second reading, remember the special relationship that you have with your Father God through faith in Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 8:31-34 NAS95 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

We learn a few things from this short passage. Unlike as we saw in the first reading how God let Abraham off the hook from sacrificing Isaac, He did not allow such a provision for Himself when it came to the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. His Son was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). If God was willing to go to such great lengths to save us, we can be assured that He will continue to provide all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Paul said in this reading that since God is our justifier, and this does not come through our own performance or good works, how could anyone say that we are guilty when we have already been forever forgiven (v. 33)? He noted that Jesus is the One that intercedes for us. Later, Paul said, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). We can have absolute confidence in the fact that since Jesus is our one and only intercessor with God the Father, nobody can bring a charge against us because we stand holy and blameless before Him. In the midst of our trials, we can take hope that God is still in control and that He is at work for our good. A few verses previous to this concluding though Paul says that "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes" (Romans 8:28). God is in the business of conforming us to the image of His Son, and no one can stop Him (Romans 8:29).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark and follows the miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:9) which was after Jesus had also fed the five thousand (Mark 6:44). The disciples didn't yet understand that these two events were miracles (Mark 6:52) whereas the people continued to follow Jesus because they liked the good food that He provided them (John 6:26). After Jesus fed the 4,000, He left with the disciples in the boat and they forgot to take along enough food and had only one loaf of bread (Mark 8:14) even though seven large baskets had been left over after feeding the crowds (Mark 8:8). At this point, Jesus knew about their lack of bread and told them to "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). This confused the disciples, so Jesus went on to explain to them about the two miraculous feedings. We are including this because it shows how Jesus corrected His disciples' unbelief in the events leading up to the revelation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration about which we will be studying in the Gospel reading.

> "17 And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 18 "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They *said to Him, "Twelve." 20 "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they *said to Him, "Seven." 21 And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)
> Note: The asterisks (*) denote a verb with the historical present tense, something that does not exist in the English language but does in the Greek text.

For at least this instant, the disciples were being as hard hearted as were the people who were following Jesus for no other reasons than He provided them with food and healed their sick. Jesus, because of His kindness and special relationship with the disciples, especially the unique group of three (Peter, James, and John), explained to them the meaning of what had happened during the feeding of the two large groups. At this point the Holy Spirit moved mightily in Peter's heart and he proclaimed through the power of the Spirit, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). This leads to the opening of Chapter 9 in which we as readers of God's Holy Word are honored with being able to partake in Jesus' transfiguration that included not only Peter, James, and John but also two additional biblical characters from the Old Testament living in heaven (Mark 12:26 – 27). Now let's read today's Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:1-10 NAS95 1 And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of*

> *those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." 2 Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; 3 and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4 Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. 5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. 7 Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" 8 All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. 10 They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.*

After the disciples had continually misunderstood the miraculous events surrounding the feeding of the two large groups of people, Jesus chose this special subset of His disciples to experience yet another miraculous event, His transfiguration before them. This event revealed an important aspect of Jesus. While He was fully man, He was also fully God. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him in this supernatural and surreal glimpse into Jesus' divinity (v. 4). Peter, a man who it seemed always wanted to solve problems, opened his mouth to suggest that since it was the Feast of Tabernacles that they should build three booths, one for each of the three men. He said this because he was terrified and didn't know what else to say (v. 6). At this point, God spoke to them out of the cloud and commanded them to listen to Jesus, God's beloved Son (v. 7), His "Isaac."

What can we learn from the reading about living our lives as Christians? Peter, my personal favorite among all of the disciples, sought to be the "fixer" of the problem at hand. Not knowing what to say, he just said the first thing that came into his mind. Which of us wouldn't have done the same thing? How many of us have gotten into trouble by not exercising better control of our internal filters and just saying what pops into our minds? The difference between Peter and us is that Peter had the first-hand testimony of Jesus fresh in his heart. Technically, Peter wasn't mistaken in what he said, but God corrected him and told him to simply listen to Jesus instead of rushing in to fix perceived problems. That is good advice for all of us; just listen to Jesus by reading and understanding His words given to us through the Bible and not rushing in with both of our gun barrels blazing!

I remembered one time many years ago when I was working as an engineer at Ford. I was attending a small luncheon party given in my honor as I was transitioning to a new department as a part of my rotational training program. While standing in line at the salad bar, my boss gave me a very good compliment and I immediately responded by saying the first thing that popped into my head. Instead

of just accepting the compliment, I denied it by, saying that I really hadn't done a very good job! I knew immediately that I had messed up, but this wasn't something that was easy to take back. To this day, I regret my knee jerk response. However, I can be certain that God has forgiven my momentary indiscretion, regardless of whether or not I continue to allow it to be an indictment against me in my heart.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read about Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. However, Isaac was also obedient and as we saw is a type of Christ. A second type is also evident in the reading. In what ways can you determine that Isaac a type of believer similar to you and me?

2. Pay attention to the "voices" or messages you hear coming to you on a regular basis. When you hear an accusation and condemnation, what is your natural response? Do you hide, pretend, or defend yourself? Alternatively, do you run to the Savior and remind yourself of the truth? In the second reading, Saint Paul gives us a glimpse of God's heart for those who are in Christ. What concepts resonate with you and how will you seek to live in light of these truths?

3. Have you ever gotten yourself in trouble by saying the first thing that came into your mind? What was the particular circumstance, and is there any way in which you can be redeemed in your mind through what you read about in the Gospel lesson?

Sunday Mass Study Notes for 03-13-2022

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of the chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation" and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

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First Reading:

Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.

Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement. It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his

faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, but God also gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose

god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evildoers are characterized by unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrongdoing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." And his conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, whom he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lose it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not yet seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in

the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they saw what must have seemed like a dream to them. They saw Jesus with different facial expressions and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live.

There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God. "*This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him*!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4:1). List at least three specific ways in which you are you living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?

2. In what ways do you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for 02-28-2021



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the first reading from Genesis in which we see Abraham's journey to sacrifice his son Isaac and discuss the typology of Isaac. Then we move to the second reading from Romans where we discover more about God's special relationship with His believers. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which we see Jesus' transfiguration in which a glimpse of his divinity is revealed to this very special subset of believers including Peter, James, and John.

Before we begin this week, I want to note something about the various formats in which we make these study notes available each week. For readers who have subscribed to the Mass Notes by email they receive the text of the study along with a link to both the PDF and the html version published on the web site. The version on the web site has the advantage of "mouse over" links for all of the verse references. This means that anytime an online reader positions their mouse over a verse reference the full text of that reference is made available to them. [In the cases where the text of the verse isn't provided this is a very handy feature.] Being able to see how Scripture interprets itself or correlates with other passages is a good skill to develop as you read and study God's Word. Please keep this in mind as you do your own studies.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis. The context is the story of Abraham traveling to Mount

Moriah to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. As you read, highlight any similarities that you find between Father Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and God the Father's giving of His Son Jesus for a sacrifice on Calvary. *Note: All of the intermediate verses between 1 and 18 were included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

Genesis 22:1-18 NAS95 1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." 15 Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

Abraham fulfilled God's commandment to journey to the mountain in order to sacrifice his son, the son of promise born to him and Sarah. Abraham likely believed that since God had already provided him a son through supernatural means in his old age He could provide him with another son once he

sacrificed Isaac or He could raise Isaac from the dead. One thing that stands out is both Abraham and Isaac's faithfulness in obeying God. Abraham was obedient to his Father God, while Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of even carrying the wood for his own sacrifice and allowing himself to be bound. We wonder what was going through Isaac's mind during all of this. At the last possible moment, God provided a substitute sacrifice (v. 13). In the end, God complemented Abraham for his obedience (v. 18).

When I read these passages, I have always felt that somewhere during this event Abraham may have explained the situation to Isaac. Perhaps as Abraham was preparing to lay his son on the wood he may have told him about God's commandment to sacrifice him, and perhaps even his hope that God would bring him back to life. This would have revealed Isaac's great faith in God being able to raise him from the dead, as it is hard to imagine Isaac willingly laying down upon a pile of wood while Abraham raised a knife to kill him.

There are two main applications of the reading. First, God took note of Abraham's radical faith that was manifested in his obedience and blessed him for it. In the same way, we as believers and the seed of Abraham we are blessed by God for our radical faith that is manifested in daring steps of obedience. As children of Abraham, we are called to obey God even when it means taking radical measures in what He has revealed in His word for us to do. A second application has to do with the typology of Isaac. Isaac is what is called a "type of Christ." Here are a few of the similarities between Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus for sin on the cross (1 Peter 3:18).

- Abraham journeyed and on the third day reached the mountain (v. 4). Isaac was bound but then released on the third day because God provided a substitutionary sacrificial lamb. Jesus, God's sacrificial lamb (John 1:29), laid in the grave for three days and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:4) whose sacrifice was a substitute for our sins. Both physical people were given back to their fathers on the third day.
- Both Isaac and Jesus were willing to offer their bodies as a sacrifice (vv. 7-8, Colossians 2:6-8).
- Father Abraham surrendered his son Isaac to God's will (v. 10). God surrendered His Son Jesus for His own will. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (v. 6) and Jesus carried his wood for His sacrifice (John 19:17)
- Ishmael was technically Abraham's first son, but he was a child of the flesh born to the slave Hagar, not the child of promise born to Sarah. Therefore, Isaac was his father's one and only son (v. 2). Jesus was God's one and only Son (John 3:16), Whom He loves (Matthew 3:17).
- Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of death. Jesus was obedient to His Father to the

point of death and beyond (Philippians 2:8).

We see this story of a Father's sacrifice echoing the ultimate story of God's sacrifice that was made through Christ's death on the cross for us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is Paul's teaching on the very special relationship that exists between God and the believer. He said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Next, he teaches on the difference between those living in the flesh and those living in the spirit. He said that those that live in the flesh cannot please God (v. 8), but as believers we are not in the flesh but in the spirit (v. 9). Next, there is a connection to the first reading as Paul said, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him" (vv. 16 – 17). Like Abraham and Isaac, we are heirs with God through our faith in Christ. As you study the text of the second reading, remember the special relationship that you have with your Father God through faith in Jesus.

Second Reading:

Romans 8:31-34 NAS95 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

We learn a few things from this short passage. Unlike as we saw in the first reading how God let Abraham off the hook in sacrificing Isaac, He did not allow such a provision for Himself when it came to the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. His Son was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). If God was willing to go to such great lengths to save us, we can be assured that He will continue to provide all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Paul said in this reading that since God is our justifier, and this does not come through our own performance or good works, how could anyone say that we are guilty when we have already been forever forgiven (v. 33)? He noted that Jesus is the One that intercedes for us. Later Paul said, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). We can have absolute confidence in the fact that since Jesus is our one and only intercessor with God the Father, nobody can bring a charge against us because we stand holy and blameless before Him. In the midst of our trials we can take hope that God is still in control and that He is at work for our good. A few verses previous to this concluding though Paul says that "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes" (Romans 8:28). God is in the business of conforming us to the image of His Son and no one can stop Him (Romans 8:29).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark and follows the miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:9) which was after Jesus had also fed the five thousand (Mark 6:44). The disciples didn't yet understand that these two events were miracles (Mark 6:52) whereas the people continued to follow Jesus because they liked the good food that He provided them (John 6:26). After Jesus fed the 4,000, He left with the disciples in the boat and they forgot to take along enough food and had only one loaf of bread (Mark 8:14) even though seven large baskets had been left over after feeding the crowds (Mark 8:8). At this point Jesus knew about their lack of bread and told them to "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). This confused the disciples so Jesus went on to explain to them about the two miraculous feedings. We are including this because it shows how Jesus corrected His disciples' unbelief in the events leading up to the revelation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration about which we will be studying in the Gospel reading.

"17 And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 18 "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They *said to Him, "Twelve." 20 "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they *said to Him, "Seven." 21 And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)
Note: The asterisks (*) denote a verb with the historical present tense, something that does not exist in the English language but does in the Greek text.

For at least this instant, the disciples were being as hard hearted as were the people who were following Jesus for no other reasons than He provided them with food and healed their sick. Jesus, because of His kindness and special relationship with the disciples, especially the unique group of three (Peter, James, and John), explained to them the meaning of what had happened during the feeding of the two large groups. At this point the Holy Spirit moved mightily in Peter's heart and he proclaimed through the power of the Spirit, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). This leads to the opening of Chapter 9 in which we as readers of God's Holy Word are honored with being able to partake in Jesus' transfiguration that included not only Peter, James, and John but also two additional biblical characters from the Old Testament living in heaven (Mark 12:26 – 27). Now let's read today's Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading:

Mark 9:1-10 NAS95 1 And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." 2 Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; 3 and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4 Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. 5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. 7 Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" 8 All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. 10 They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.

After the disciples had continually misunderstood the miraculous events surrounding the feeding of the two large groups of people, Jesus chose this special subset of His disciples to experience yet another miraculous event, His transfiguration before them. This event revealed an important aspect of Jesus. While He was fully man, He was also fully God. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him in this supernatural and surreal glimpse into Jesus' divinity (v. 4). Peter, a man who it seemed always wanted to solve problems, opened his mouth to suggest that since it was the Feast of Tabernacles that they should build three booths, one for each of the three men. He said this because he was terrified and didn't know what else to say (v. 6). At this point God spoke to them out of the cloud and commanded them to listen to Jesus, God's beloved Son (v. 7), His "Isaac."

What can we learn from the reading about living our lives as Christians? Peter, my personal favorite among all of the disciples, sought to be the "fixer" of the problem at hand. Not knowing what to say he just said the first thing that came into his mind. Which of us wouldn't have done the same thing? How many of us have gotten into trouble by not exercising good control of our internal filters and just saying what pops into our minds? The difference between Peter and us is that Peter had the first-hand testimony of Jesus fresh in his heart. Technically, Peter wasn't mistaken in what he said, but God corrected him and told him to simply listen to Jesus instead of rushing in to fix perceived problems. That is good advice for all of us; just listen to Jesus by reading and understanding His words given to us through the Bible and not rushing in with both of our gun barrels blazing!

I remember one time many years ago when I was working as an engineer at Ford. I was attending a small luncheon party given in my honor as I was transitioning to a new department as a part of my rotational training program. While standing in line at the salad bar my boss gave me a very good complement and I immediately responded by saying the first thing that popped into my head. Instead of just accepting the complement, I denied it by, saying that I really hadn't done a very good job! I knew immediately that I had messed up, but this wasn't something that was easy to take back. To this day, I regret my knee jerk response. However, I can be certain that God has forgiven my momentary indiscretion, regardless of whether or not I continue to allow it to be an indictment against me in my heart.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read about Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. However, Isaac was also obedient and as we saw is a type of Christ. A second type is also evident in the reading. In what ways can you determine that Isaac a type of believer similar to you and me?

2. Pay attention to the "voices" or messages you hear coming to you on a regular basis. When you hear accusation and condemnation what is your natural response? Do you hide, pretend, or defend yourself? Alternatively, do you run to the Savior and remind yourself of truth? In the second reading, Saint Paul gives us a glimpse of God's heart for those who are in Christ. What concepts resonate with you and how will you seek to live in light of these truths?

3. Have you ever gotten yourself in trouble by saying the first thing that came into your mind? What

was the particular circumstance, and is there any way in which you can be redeemed in your mind through what you read about in the Gospel lesson?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday 03-08-2020



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we return to Genesis, the first Book in the Bible to see God's unconditional promise of blessing on Abram, whose name God later changed to the more familiar Abraham. Then we will study Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 17 in which we will see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

Let's step back for a moment and talk about how we go about studying the readings each week in order to give you some insights into our method. When we study the readings, we use the following procedure counting down from the letter "C" in the alphabet: **C**ontext, **B**ig Idea, and **A**pplication. First, we examine the **context** of the passage in light of the surrounding passages (the textual context) along with the historical information (the historical context). Second, we determine the

theological **big idea** that emerged from the study of the text. What was God saying to the people in the original context, and what theological principles can we extract from the text? Finally, we determine the contemporary **application(s)** – what does it mean to us today? As we move through the readings each week try and see what theological big ideas you can garner from the text and how these could then be applied to your life. As you focus upon the **A**pplication, first pray that God would reveal to you what He would have you do with what you learned. You may be amazed at how God sheds light differently on each passage as you encounter and study it again in the liturgical cycle over the years. Perhaps you will find, as my wife likes to say, that you have been ruined for the ordinary!

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Genesis Chapter 12. The context of this section was just after Abram, who later became Abraham the Father of all believers, left with his father Terah from his birthplace in the region called "Ur of the Chaldeans" and settled in Haran (Genesis 11:31). These were the circumstances leading up to God's call of Abram. Looking at the bigger picture, Noah's Flood was in the somewhat distant history, and he had died back in Chapter 9 (v. 28). The era of the city building had begun under Nimrod (10:8), beginning with the city of Babel (10:10). Chapter 10 contained what was called the "Table of Nations" that represented the nations that developed after Noah and his sons departed from the ark. "These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood" (v. 32, emphasis added). The division (or "separated in some versions) happened at the Tower of Babel where God acted to confuse the languages of the nation states for several reasons including their idolatry and unwillingness to spread out and populate the earth (9:1, 11:4). "They said, 'Come, let **us** build for **ourselves** a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let **us** make for **ourselves** a name, otherwise **we** will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4, emphasis added). Many Bible commentators agree that the tower spoken of in verse 12 was a "ziggurat," which was a tall structure associated with the worship of pagan deities. Notice that the focus of the people's efforts was upon themselves (see the five bolded words in the text), rather than upon God's commandment to spread out and populate the earth. As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, they were not setting their mind on God's interests, but on man's, something which Jesus called Satanic (Matthew 16:23). We must remember that God cautions us against building shrines, regardless of the purity of our intentions. Otherwise these shrines, or towers, ziggurats, may become stumbling stones in serving God.

With this context in mind let's read the text. Note that as you read about God's promises to Abram, who was later renamed "Abraham," see if you can uncover the theological **b**ig ideas in the text.

First Reading:

> *1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless*

> *those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 NAS95)*

This account is the first recorded encounter of God's call to Abram, which was a call to bless him. We don't know how the LORD communicated with Abram, but it seems very clear that Abram understood and immediately obeyed (v. 4). While this call would be one of blessing, it required some sacrifice on Abram's part. He had to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house. The progression goes from more general to very specific. God did not give him the GPS coordinates of the destination; He just told him that He would show Abram the land when he got there. How's that for literally walking by faith? That is why Abram is called the father of faith, since he had the unique privilege of becoming the father of a great nation that was called to walk by faith in God, as a unique light and blessing to the other nations on earth. God's blessing included not only making him into a great nation, but also making Abram's name great. The promise was that Abram would be a blessing to other people groups.

In verses 2 – 3 we see an unconditional blessing of Abraham and all of the future Jews as well. "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Notice the warning that God gave to those who won't bless the Jews. "And the one who curses you I will curse" (v.3b). It's impossible to understand all of the implications of this timeless principle. Although we may not understand how God will deal with those who have harmed the Jews, we can rest assured that God will hold true to His unconditional promises to both bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them.

God called Abram to make a great sacrifice in leaving his country, his relatives and his father's house. Is God calling you to leave some area of comfort to you? Is it possible that we are drawing our personal identity from our country, our relatives or our father's house? Whatever the case may be, God calls each of us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Romans 4:3 says that Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So this text helps us to understand what pleases God's heart. Our belief in who He says He is and our willingness to walk by faith is what God is looking for in each of our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move into the second reading, ponder for a moment how God speaks to us in the present day in order to call us to take certain actions for Him. In the first reading God spoke to Abram through a clear and specific call. The author of the Book of Hebrews provided some insights into how God

spoke in the past and how He speaks to us today. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's final method of communication to His people is through the words and life of His Son Jesus. As you read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy notice how throughout this letter, and in all of his letters, Paul's central focus in on the good news of Jesus – the Gospel.

Second Reading:

> *8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (2 Timothy 1:8-10)*

Paul reminded us not be ashamed of suffering for the good news of the Gospel, Jesus' eternal ministry, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). God saved us not because of our works, said Paul, but for His divine purposes (Titus 3:5). This reminds us of Paul's teaching to the Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). We can celebrate that when we believe in God's promises through Jesus, we have obtained immortality (v. 10b). In the same way that Abram listened to God, we are to listen to Him through the Gospel. You can see why Paul was not ashamed of this good news! We, as well, can learn from Paul's example. Even though the world around us wants us to feel timid about our faith, we of all people can be assured that the free gift of eternal life is something to be excited about. There are people in your life who need to hear this good news, not only from your words, but from your transformed life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v.21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v.

222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

> *1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).*

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence in the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry with the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the

Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to have responded in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved onto the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong; I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is God calling you to walk by faith? How are the examples of Abram and Paul helpful to you?
2. Does the fact that salvation comes by grace and not by works sound like good news to you? When we accept this free gift from God, we are exercising faith. How is faith necessary for salvation to be imparted to us? How are you exercising faith in God's grace and not putting your faith in your own good works to bring you eternal life?
3. Jesus' true identity as God was revealed at the transfiguration. His face was radiant, shining

like the sun. How can a vision of Jesus' true identity spur you on in your everyday life? What would need to change in your life in order to obey God's voice and "listen to Him"?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 03-17-2019



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we open with a reading from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, the book of beginnings. Today's study reveals God's gracious plan to make Abraham the progenitor of a physical line of chosen people and the spiritual line of God-followers. The second reading is from one of the Apostle Paul's favored letters—that is, it's favored by many Bible readers because of the promise of joy and confidence to those who trust God wholeheartedly. The Gospel reading from Luke takes us into a very intimate occasion in the life of Jesus that demonstrated visually and orally His unique character as the very Son of God.

Introduction to the First Reading:

So much is packed into this passage of Scripture that it could take several pages of commentary to

explain it all clearly. Note that this choice servant of God is known first as Abram ("exalted father"). His name is later changed to Abraham ("father of many nations"; Gen. 17:5). It begins with the reassuring promise of God that He will protect Abram; He will be "a shield" to him. And he promises him a great reward. In what we refer to as the Abrahamic Covenant, introduced in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed in chapters 13, 15, and 17. God had promised Abram that he would be "a great nation" and his "offspring" would be blessed. And that raises a great question in Abram's mind. This passage answers the question and gives us a preview of the history of the nation to be born of Abram.

First Reading:

> Note: The reading omitted verses 1-4 and 16 that are included below.
>
> *Genesis 15:1-18 NAS95 1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." 2 Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." 4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." 5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And He said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." 8 He said, "O Lord GOD, how may I know that I will possess it?" 9 So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. 11 The birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away. 12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. 14 "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. 15 "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age. 16 "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." 17 It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates:*

Abram is perplexed. How could he have offspring, he asks, "since I am childless"? Not knowing the

miraculous plan that God had in mind, Abram proposes that God use Abram's servant Eliezer as his heir. But God responds that his heir "will come forth from your own body." Then God gives this faithful follower an object lesson. He instructs him to look at the stars and count them. That's impossible, of course; the stars are innumerable. "So shall your descendants be," God tells him. In response, Abram offers a statement that reveals the depth of his trust in God. It is a statement that is referred to elsewhere in Scripture (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23): "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." This is a critical faith statement. It is not on the basis of any action of Abram that he is declared righteous, but it is on the basis of his faith, his trust in God. That same principle of faith remains true today. It is not by our holy deeds that we are considered righteous before God but because of our faith in the saving work of Jesus who paid the sacrifice for our sin.

In confirmation of God's promises to Abram, there follows a demonstration of God's commitment to fulfill His promises to Abram. The ceremony of sacrifice that is pictured is the affirmation of God that He alone will fulfill the covenant He is making with His servant. Not only that, God gives Abram a preview of what is to happen to his progeny, events that we will read about in the later chapters of Genesis and the early portion of Exodus. The 400-year captivity of Israel (the descendant nation from Abram) in Egypt is clearly foretold. And the promise of their ultimate release is predicted, as well.

The ceremony pictured in these verses included symbols of God's presence (a smoking oven and a flaming torch) which were to give Abram assurance that God Himself is making this covenant with him, and it is certain of fulfillment. It concludes in this passage with the promise that the land from the River of Egypt (the Nile?) to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia will be the homeland of God's chosen people.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

In the first two chapters of Philippians, Paul rehearses some of the factors of his relationship with the people of the church at Philippi and what he hoped and prayed for them in terms of their spiritual growth and steadfastness. He wanted them to live in a manner "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (2:27). He also taught some very important spiritual truths that should have encouraged his readers to work together for unity among themselves and to recognize the great personal sacrifice of Jesus for them. They should understand, also, the exalted place that Jesus has been given as a result of His obedience to the Father, even to the point of death.

Second Reading:

> *Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 NAS95 17 Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. 18 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. 20 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into*

> *conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself. 1 Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved.*

In today's reading, the writer offers a significant contrast. He wants his readers to follow his example and that of others who "walk according" to the pattern of his life. And he warns them of the many who walk as "the enemies of the cross of Christ." He is distressed by such conduct; it brings him great sorrow. But the followers of Christ must be warned. These evil-doers are characterized by unwholesome appetites, an unseemly pride in their wrong-doing. Perhaps the danger of their behavior is suggested in the last characteristic, "who set their minds on earthly things." What God has created and given us here on this earth is not inherently bad, but an unhealthy attachment to earthly things is fatal. As John wrote in 1 John 2:16, "For everything in the world—the carvings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." And his conclusion is the key: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." Paul makes it clear that the "end" of them "is destruction." Believers must concentrate on the eternal, not the temporal that distracts us from God and will not last. Rather, the Christian has much more to look for.

Paul goes on to note the contrast between the "enemies" of Christ and the true believers. The Christian's citizenship is not in this temporary, passing world. It is in heaven, and it's not just something we hope to enter someday; it is the place where we should continually and eagerly be looking "for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ," who will descend from our spiritual homeland to come for us. And then the changes that Paul promised in 1 Corinthians 15 will occur. He says our current "humble state" will be transformed "into conformity with the body of His glory." We surely don't fully understand all that that means, but it will occur, not by anything we can do but by His power. After all, He has the power to subject everything to Himself, and He eventually will do so.

Once again, Paul reveals his deep passion for the Philippian believers. He calls them "beloved brethren," and he again speaks of his longing to see them, who he considers "my joy and crown." In light of the glorious promise for the alien Christians whose citizenship is in heaven, their future and eternal abiding place, Paul gives a final challenge to those he loves so dearly, "Stand firm in the Lord."

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The four Gospels present Jesus in a variety of settings, each writer including those events and sayings that fit best into his argument. The four together give us a complete picture of what God wants us to know about Jesus' life and ministry. After all, according to the writer of Hebrews, God "in these last days has spoken to us by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus provides the very best picture

of who God is because He who was and is God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). In today's passage, Luke gives us a unique picture of Jesus, different from every other representation of Him in the Bible.

Gospel Reading:

> *Luke 9:28-36 NAS95 28 Some eight days after these sayings, He took along Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while He was praying, the appearance of His face became different, and His clothing became white and gleaming. 30 And behold, two men were talking with Him; and they were Moses and Elijah, 31 who, appearing in glory, were speaking of His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions had been overcome with sleep; but when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men standing with Him. 33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah" –not realizing what he was saying. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. 35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" 36 And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent, and reported to no one in those days any of the things which they had seen.*

In the paragraph just preceding these verses, Jesus had spoken of the cost of being His disciple. The disciple "must deny himself and take up his cross daily"; "whoever wants to save his life will lost it." To follow Jesus is to be willing to serve Him unashamedly and faithfully. Knowing that there will be some who will faithfully follow, He concludes this teaching by promising that some of His hearers "will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God." That was said many years ago, and yet we still have not yet seen God's kingdom established on earth in the fullest sense that He has promised it. So, what could He have meant?

Today's passage may well be the fulfillment of that promise, as we shall see. A little more than a week after that pronouncement Jesus took three of his most intimate disciples—Peter, James, and John—with Him to a mountain to pray, which was a common practice for Him. Apparently, the disciples fell asleep while Jesus prayed. (Interestingly, the same thing occurs on a later occasion in the Garden of Gethsemane on Jesus' last night before His crucifixion, Luke 22:45.) When they awoke, they saw what must have seemed like a dream to them. They saw Jesus with a different facial expression and clothes that were dazzling white and gleaming. Two men were talking with Him, and somehow the disciples recognized the two as Moses and Elijah, long dead and revered Old Testament prophets. They were "appearing in glory," and the three disciples "saw His glory." It was Moses in Exodus 33 who asked to see God's glory, but God indicated that no one could see His glory and live.

There must have been something about the appearance of these three that was supra-natural. It was an appearance beyond anything earthly normal. It's also interesting to note the topic of discussion between Jesus and the two prophets; they "were speaking of His departure." Jesus had told His disciples on more than one occasion that he would be leaving them, and He had indicated the method (His death, burial, resurrection, and return to heaven). Peter, in his usual impetuous way, was eager to keep them from leaving, so he suggested building "tabernacles," probably the kind of booths that were associated with the Jewish festival. He was interrupted by a cloud that came upon them, frightening them. Then they heard a voice, the very voice of God. "*This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him*!" As God had spoken at Jesus' baptism, so He speaks once again, confirming that Jesus is the Holy One, the anointed one of God, the one above all others who should be heard and obeyed. It seems abundantly clear that these three close disciples of Jesus had the unique privilege of having just a glimpse, a peek of what the Kingdom of God is like. The qualified king, the representatives of the old covenant, and disciples of the new, all are represented. Glory shone around as it will in that glorious future kingdom. Watch for it! Be prepared!

Reflection Questions

1. In the second reading, Saint Paul talked about "stand[ing] firm in the faith" (Philippians 4;1). List at least three specific ways in which you are you living as a citizen of heaven, for eternal values rather than worldly pleasure and standing firm in your faith?
2. In what ways to you recognize Jesus as God Himself as seen by Peter, James, and John, in the great transfiguration scene? God said to listen to Him. In what ways are you doing this in your life? In what ways are you acting upon the information you are receiving from God?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 02-25-2018

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Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we begin with the first reading from Genesis in which we see Abraham's journey to sacrifice his son Isaac and discuss the typology of Isaac. Then we move to the second reading from Romans where we discover more about God's special relationship with His believers. We conclude with the Gospel lesson from Mark in which we see Jesus' transfiguration in which a glimpse of his divinity is revealed to this very special subset of believers including Peter, James, and John.

Before we begin this week, I want to note something about the various formats in which we make these study notes available each week. For readers who have subscribed to the Mass Notes by email they receive the text of the study along with a link to both the PDF and the html version published on the web site. The version on the web site has the advantage of "mouse over" links for all of the verse references. This means that anytime an online reader positions their mouse over a verse reference the full text of that reference is made available to them. [In the cases where the text of the verse isn't provided this is a very handy feature.] Being able to see how Scripture interprets itself or correlates with other passages is a good skill to develop as you read and study God's Word. Please keep this in mind as you do your own studies.

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from the Book of Genesis. The context is the story of Abraham traveling to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. As you read, highlight any similarities that you find between Father Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and God the Father's giving of His Son Jesus for a sacrifice on Calvary. *Note: All of the intermediate verses between 1 and 18 were included in order to provide the full context and meaning.*

First Reading:

> *Genesis 22:1-18 NAS95 1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. 5 Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 9 Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." 13 Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. 14 Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." 15 Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. 18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."*

Abraham fulfilled God's commandment to journey to the mountain in order to sacrifice his son, the son of promise born to him and Sarah. Abraham likely believed that since God had already provided him a son through supernatural means in his old age He could provide him with another son once he sacrificed Isaac or He could raise Isaac from the dead. One thing that stands out is both Abraham and Isaac's faithfulness in obeying God. Abraham was obedient to his Father God, while Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of even carrying the wood for his own sacrifice and allowing himself to be bound. We wonder what was going through Isaac's mind during all of this. At the last possible moment, God provided a substitute sacrifice (v. 13). In the end, God complemented Abraham for his obedience (v. 18).

When I read these passages, I have always felt that somewhere during this event Abraham may have explained the situation to Isaac. Perhaps as Abraham was preparing to lay his son on the wood he may have told him about God's commandment to sacrifice him, and perhaps even his hope that God

would bring him back to life. This would have revealed Isaac's great faith in God being able to raise him from the dead, as it is hard to imagine Isaac willingly laying down upon a pile of wood while Abraham raised a knife to kill him.

There are two main applications of the reading. First, God took note of Abraham's radical faith that was manifested in his obedience and blessed him for it. In the same way, we as believers and the seed of Abraham we are blessed by God for our radical faith that is manifested in daring steps of obedience. As children of Abraham, we are called to obey God even when it means taking radical measures in what He has revealed in His word for us to do. A second application has to do with the typology of Isaac. Isaac is what is called a "type of Christ." Here are a few of the similarities between Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac and the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus for sin on the cross (1 Peter 3:18).

- Abraham journeyed and on the third day reached the mountain (v. 4). Isaac was bound but then released on the third day because God provided a substitutionary sacrificial lamb. Jesus, God's sacrificial lamb (John 1:29), laid in the grave for three days and rose from the dead on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:4) whose sacrifice was a substitute for our sins. Both physical people were given back to their fathers on the third day.
- Both Isaac and Jesus were willing to offer their bodies as a sacrifice (vv. 7-8, Colossians 2:6-8).
- Father Abraham surrendered his son Isaac to God's will (v. 10). God surrendered His Son Jesus for His own will. The Scripture says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).
- Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (v. 6) and Jesus carried his wood for His sacrifice (John 19:17)
- Ishmael was technically Abraham's first son, but he was a child of the flesh born to the slave Hagar, not the child of promise born to Sarah. Therefore, Isaac was his father's one and only son (v. 2). Jesus was God's one and only Son (John 3:16), Whom He loves (Matthew 3:17).
- Isaac was obedient to his father to the point of death. Jesus was obedient to His Father to the point of death and beyond (Philippians 2:8).

We see this story of a Father's sacrifice echoing the ultimate story of God's sacrifice that was made through Christ's death on the cross for us.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

The second reading is from Saint Paul's Letter to the Romans. The context is Paul's teaching on the very special relationship that exists between God and the believer. He said in the opening of this chapter, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Next, he teaches on the difference between those living in the flesh and those living in the spirit. He said that those that live in the flesh cannot please God (v. 8), but as believers we are not in the flesh but in the spirit (v. 9). Next, there is a connection to the first reading as Paul said, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him"

(vv. 16 – 17). Like Abraham and Isaac, we are heirs with God through our faith in Christ. As you study the text of the second reading, remember the special relationship that you have with your Father God through faith in Jesus.

Second Reading:

> *Romans 8:31-34 NAS95 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? 33 Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; 34 who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

We learn a few things from this short passage. Unlike as we saw in the first reading how God let Abraham off the hook in sacrificing Isaac, He did not allow such a provision for Himself when it came to the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. His Son was the "Lamb slain since before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). If God was willing to go to such great lengths to save us, we can be assured that He will continue to provide all we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3).

Paul said in this reading that since God is our justifier, and this does not come through our own performance or good works, how could anyone say that we are guilty when we have already been forever forgiven (v. 33)? He noted that Jesus is the One that intercedes for us. Later Paul said, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). We can have absolute confidence in the fact that since Jesus is our one and only intercessor with God the Father, nobody can bring a charge against us because we stand holy and blameless before Him. In the midst of our trials we can take hope that God is still in control and that He is at work for our good. A few verses previous to this concluding though Paul says that "God works all things together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purposes" (Romans 8:28). God is in the business of conforming us to the image of His Son and no one can stop Him (Romans 8:29).

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

The Gospel reading is from Saint Mark and follows the miraculous feeding of the four thousand (Mark 8:9) which was after Jesus had also fed the five thousand (Mark 6:44). The disciples didn't yet understand that these two events were miracles (Mark 6:52) whereas the people continued to follow Jesus because they liked the good food that He provided them (John 6:26). After Jesus fed the 4,000, He left with the disciples in the boat and they forgot to take along enough food and had only one loaf of bread (Mark 8:14) even though seven large baskets had been left over after feeding the crowds (Mark 8:8). At this point Jesus knew about their lack of bread and told them to "Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod" (Mark 8:15). This confused the disciples so Jesus went on to explain to them about the two miraculous feedings. We are including this because it shows how Jesus corrected His disciples' unbelief in the events leading up to the revelation of His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration about which we will be studying in the Gospel reading.

> *"17 And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? 18 "HAVING EYES, DO YOU NOT SEE? AND HAVING EARS, DO YOU NOT HEAR? And do you not remember, 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?" They *said to Him, "Twelve." 20 "When I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?" And they *said to Him, "Seven." 21 And He was saying to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)*
> Note: The asterisks (*) denote a verb with the historical present tense, something that does not exist in the English language but does in the Greek text.

For at least this instant, the disciples were being as hard hearted as were the people who were following Jesus for no other reasons than He provided them with food and healed their sick. Jesus, because of His kindness and special relationship with the disciples, especially the unique group of three (Peter, James, and John), explained to them the meaning of what had happened during the feeding of the two large groups. At this point the Holy Spirit moved mightily in Peter's heart and he proclaimed through the power of the Spirit, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). This leads to the opening of Chapter 9 in which we as readers of God's Holy Word are honored with being able to partake in Jesus' transfiguration that included not only Peter, James, and John but also two additional biblical characters from the Old Testament living in heaven (Mark 12:26 – 27). Now let's read today's Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading:

> *Mark 9:1-10 NAS95 1 And Jesus was saying to them, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." 2 Six days later, Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and brought them up on a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; 3 and His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them. 4 Elijah appeared to them along with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus. 5 Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 6 For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified. 7 Then a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" 8 All at once they looked around and saw no one with them anymore, except Jesus alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man rose from the dead. 10 They seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead meant.*

After the disciples had continually misunderstood the miraculous events surrounding the feeding of the two large groups of people, Jesus chose this special subset of His disciples to experience yet another miraculous event, His transfiguration before them. This event revealed an important aspect of Jesus. While He was fully man, He was also fully God. Moses and Elijah appeared with Him in this supernatural and surreal glimpse into Jesus' divinity (v. 4). Peter, a man who it seemed always wanted to solve problems, opened his mouth to suggest that since it was the Feast of Tabernacles

that they should build three booths, one for each of the three men. He said this because he was terrified and didn't know what else to say (v. 6). At this point God spoke to them out of the cloud and commanded them to listen to Jesus, God's beloved Son (v. 7), His "Isaac."

What can we learn from the reading about living our lives as Christians? Peter, my personal favorite among all of the disciples, sought to be the "fixer" of the problem at hand. Not knowing what to say he just said the first thing that came into his mind. Which of us wouldn't have done the same thing? How many of us have gotten into trouble by not exercising good control of our internal filters and just saying what pops into our minds? The difference between Peter and us is that Peter had the first-hand testimony of Jesus fresh in his heart. Technically, Peter wasn't mistaken in what he said, but God corrected him and told him to simply listen to Jesus instead of rushing in to fix perceived problems. That is good advice for all of us; just listen to Jesus by reading and understanding His words given to us through the Bible and not rushing in with both of our gun barrels blazing!

I remember one time many years ago when I was working as an engineer at Ford. I was attending a small luncheon party given in my honor as I was transitioning to a new department as a part of my rotational training program. While standing in line at the salad bar my boss gave me a very good complement and I immediately responded by saying the first thing that popped into my head. Instead of just accepting the complement, I denied it by, saying that I really hadn't done a very good job! I knew immediately that I had messed up, but this wasn't something that was easy to take back. To this day, I regret my knee jerk response. However, I can be certain that God has forgiven my momentary indiscretion, regardless of whether or not I continue to allow it to be an indictment against me in my heart.

Reflection Questions

1. In the first reading, we read about Abraham's willingness to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. However, Isaac was also obedient and as we saw is a type of Christ. A second type is also evident in the reading. In what ways can you determine that Isaac a type of believer similar to you and me?

2. Pay attention to the "voices" or messages you hear coming to you on a regular basis. When you hear accusation and condemnation what is your natural response? Do you hide, pretend, or defend yourself? Alternatively, do you run to the Savior and remind yourself of truth? In the second reading, Saint Paul gives us a glimpse of God's heart for those who are in Christ. What concepts resonate with you and how will you seek to live in light of these truths?

3. Have you ever gotten yourself in trouble by saying the first thing that came into your mind? What was the particular circumstance, and is there any way in which you can be redeemed in your mind through what you read about in the Gospel lesson?

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Sunday Mass Study Notes for Sunday, 3-12-2017



Welcome back to the Sunday Mass notes. This week we return to Genesis, the first Book in the Bible to see God's unconditional promise of blessing on Abram, whose name God later changed to the more familiar Abraham. Then we will study Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy and conclude with the Gospel lesson from Matthew 17 in which we will see Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

Let's step back for a moment and talk about how we go about studying the readings each week in order to give you some insights into our method. When we study the readings we use the following procedure counting down from the letter "C" in the alphabet: **C**ontext, **B**ig Idea, and **A**pplication. First, we examine the context of the passage in light of the surrounding passages (the textual context) along with the historical information (the historical context). Second, we determine the theological big idea that emerged from the study of the text. What was God saying to the people in the original context, and what theological principles can we extract from the text? Finally, we determine the contemporary application(s) – what does it mean to us today? As we move through the readings each week try and see what theological big ideas you can garner from the text and how

these could then be applied to your life. As you focus upon the **A**pplication, first pray that God would reveal to you what He would have you do with what you learned. You may be amazed at how God sheds light differently on each passage as you encounter and study it again in the liturgical cycle over the years. Perhaps you will find, as my wife likes to say, that you have been ruined for the ordinary!

Introduction to the First Reading:

The first reading is from Genesis Chapter 12. The context of this section was just after Abram, who later became Abraham the Father of all believers, left with his father Terah from his birthplace in the region called "Ur of the Chaldeans" and settled in Haran (Genesis 11:31). These were the circumstances leading up to God's call of Abram. Looking at the bigger picture, Noah's Flood was in the somewhat distant history, and he had died back in Chapter 9 (v. 28). The era of the city building had begun under Nimrod (10:8), beginning with the city of Babel (10:10). Chapter 10 contained what was called the "Table of Nations" that represented the nations that developed after Noah and his sons departed from the ark. "These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood" (v. 32, emphasis added). The division (or "separated in some versions) happened at the Tower of Babel where God acted to confuse the languages of the nation states for several reasons including their idolatry and unwillingness to spread out and populate the earth (9:1, 11:4). "They said, 'Come, let **us** build for **ourselves** a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let **us** make for **ourselves** a name, otherwise **we** will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth'" (Genesis 11:4, emphasis added). Many Bible commentators agree that the tower spoken of in verse 12 was a "ziggurat," which was a tall structure associated with the worship of pagan deities. Notice that the focus of the people's efforts was upon themselves (see the five bolded words in the text), rather than upon God's commandment to spread out and populate the earth. As we will see later in the Gospel lesson, they were not setting their mind on God's interests, but on man's, something which Jesus called Satanic (Matthew 16:23). We must remember that God cautions us against building shrines, regardless of the purity of our intentions. Otherwise these shrines, or towers, ziggurats, may become stumbling stones in serving God.

With this context in mind let's read the text. Note that as you read about God's promises to Abram, who was later renamed "Abraham," see if you can uncover the theological **b**ig ideas in the text.

First Reading:

1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; 2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." 4 So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (Genesis 12:1-4 NAS95)

This account is the first recorded encounter of God's call to Abram, which was a call to bless him. We don't know how the LORD communicated with Abram, but it seems very clear that Abram understood and immediately obeyed (v. 4). While this call would be one of blessing, it required some sacrifice on Abram's part. He had to leave his country, his relatives and his father's house. The progression goes from more general to very specific. God did not give him the GPS coordinates of the destination; He just told him that He would show Abram the land when he got there. How's that for literally walking by faith? That is why Abram is called the father of faith, since he had the unique privilege of becoming the father of a great nation that was called to walk by faith in God, as a unique light and blessing to the other nations on earth. God's blessing included not only making him into a great nation, but also making Abram's name great. The promise was that Abram would be a blessing to other people groups.

In verses 2 – 3 we see an unconditional blessing of Abraham and all of the future Jews as well. "And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; 3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." Notice the warning that God gave to those who won't bless the Jews. "And the one who curses you I will curse" (v.3b). It's impossible to understand all of the implications of this timeless principle. Although we may not understand how God will deal with those who have harmed the Jews, we can rest assured that God will hold true to His unconditional promises to both bless those who bless the Jews and curse those who curse them.

God called Abram to make a great sacrifice in leaving his country, his relatives and his father's house. Is God calling you to leave some area of comfort to you? Is it possible that we are drawing our personal identity from our country, our relatives or our father's house? Whatever the case may be, God calls each of us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Romans 4:3 says that Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. So this text helps us to understand what pleases God's heart. Our belief in who He says He is and our willingness to walk by faith is what God is looking for in each of our lives.

Introduction to the Second Reading:

As we move into the second reading, ponder for a moment how God speaks to us in the present day in order to call us to take certain actions for Him. In the first reading God spoke to Abram through a clear and specific call. The author of the Book of Hebrews provided some insights into how God spoke in the past and how He speaks to us today. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God's final method of communication to His people is through the words and life of His Son Jesus. As you read from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Timothy notice how throughout this letter, and in all of his letters, Paul's central focus in on the good news of Jesus – the Gospel.

Second Reading:

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, 10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (2 Timothy 1:8-10)

Paul reminded us not be ashamed of suffering for the good news of the Gospel, Jesus' eternal ministry, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). God saved us not because of our works, said Paul, but for His divine purposes (Titus 3:5). This reminds us of Paul's teaching to the Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10). We can celebrate that when we believe in God's promises through Jesus we have obtained immortality (v. 10b). In the same way that Abram listened to God, we are to listen to Him through the Gospel. You can see why Paul was not ashamed of this good news! We, as well, can learn from Paul's example. Even though the world around us wants us to feel timid about our faith, we of all people can be assured that the free gift of eternal life is something to be excited about. There are people in your life who need to hear this good news, not only from your words, but from your transformed life.

Introduction to the Gospel Reading:

As we move onto the Gospel lesson, we will see the importance of first listening to God, even when we feel that we need to take immediate actions. The Gospel lesson today is from Matthew Chapter 17. The context was just after Peter proclaimed to Jesus under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah of God (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then revealed to His disciples that He would be handed over to the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed then raised up on the third day (v.21). Peter responded to this information by immediately and impulsively responding to Jesus by saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (v. 222b) to which Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (v.23). Peter was a man of action, and Jesus reprimanded him for attempting to take matters into his hands rather than allowing God to accomplish His divine plan through Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

Read the Gospel account of what is known as the "transfiguration" of Jesus in which we see a glimpse of God's glory revealed through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Gospel Reading:

1 Six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up on a high mountain by themselves. 2 And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them,

talking with Him. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to the ground and were terrified. 7 And Jesus came to them and touched them and said, "Get up, and do not be afraid." 8 And lifting up their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus Himself alone. 9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:1-9).

The central focus of the passage was the Father revealing Jesus' glory as God in the flesh. He chose to reveal Jesus' true identity to a subset of Jesus' disciples. It's significant that Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him to the mountain. Peter, formerly a fisherman named Simon, was the foremost of the disciples, since every time that he is mentioned along with a list of disciples he is always listed first. Simon Peter was a man of action, as he is the one that cut off the ear of the high priest's servant when the mob came to arrest Jesus on the evening before His crucifixion (John 18:10). Peter became a leader of the church among the Jews, as Paul became a leader of the church to the Gentiles. James and John, known as the Sons of Thunder (Mark 3:17), were also significant in their influence in the early church. James (known as James the Greater) was the first martyr among the disciples. James, along with his brother John, were known for their zeal and energy for their ministry with the Lord. Together with Peter, James and John formed the triad of disciples who shared special privileges with the Lord Jesus. These privileged three men were chosen by God to be the first ones to experience the glory of Jesus.

As we move deeper into the text, notice that the passage centered around the Father's message to Jesus' disciples. This contains an important hint as to the theological big idea of the text. God the Father said, "**This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!** (v. 5d). Throughout Matthew's Gospel Jesus had explained to His disciples the nature of the coming kingdom. He said in the previous chapter that His kingdom would not come until after the Jewish religious authorities had Him killed and He was raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21). What God the Father was saying boiled down to something like this:

"Jesus is telling you about His Kingdom. You have different ideas, like setting up your own shrines and bringing in the kingdom through your own efforts, but you need to listen to Him for the truth about how it must play out according to the plan foreordained from before the beginning of time."

Which of us would not have wanted to have responded in a similar way as Peter? I remember an incident that happened between me and my wife that helps to shed some light on how Peter acted impulsively during the transfiguration incident from the Gospel lesson. Just after we got married, my wife and I had gone out to a quiet dinner at a local restaurant in a lakeshore community in a nearby town. As we settled down to eat, my wife's cell phone rang. It was bad news. After she hung up the call, I sprang into action with a five-point plan on how we would overcome this obstacle and how we should proceed. As I moved onto the next four points, the first hint that I had that she wasn't receiving my plan very well was a slight tremor that began in her upper lip. "That's strange," I

thought, "was she feeling ill, was it something in the soup that was causing this shake?" Soon the small tremor advanced until her whole body began shaking and then an all-out cry began! What had I done wrong, I was only trying to help? What my wife needed at that moment was just for me to be with her, hold her, and to listen.

My story about the need for me to just shut up and listen is similar to what happened to Peter when he responded impulsively to Jesus during the transfiguration experience. God the father responded to Peter's three-point plan by saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (v.5c). Peter, though well intentioned, simply needed to listen to God. When we are confronted with the glory of our Lord Jesus and the love of the Father for Him (which by the way is the same love Jesus has for us based on John 15:9), the appropriate response is to surrender our whole lives to God. Sometimes we just need to listen to God and not feel the need to respond with our own three-point plan.

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways is God calling you to walk by faith? How are the examples of Abram and Paul helpful to you?

2. Does the fact that salvation comes by grace and not by works sound like good news to you? When we accept this free gift from God, we are exercising faith. How is faith necessary for salvation to be imparted to us? How are you exercising faith in God's grace and not putting your faith in your own good works to bring you eternal life?

3. Jesus' true identity as God was revealed at the transfiguration. His face was radiant, shining like the sun. How can a vision of Jesus' true identity spur you on in your everyday life? What would need to change in your life in order to obey God's voice and "listen to Him"?

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