

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

March 13, 2022

Reflection by Sister Pat Coughlin, OSB, D.Min.

Gn 15:5-12, 17-18; Phil 3:17—4:1; Lk 9:28b-36

I did the March homily helps for the Catholic Climate Covenant and I found the scripture readings difficult. It was hard to dig down enough to see common themes in the Lenten Sunday readings-except the ones for this Sunday. The first and third scripture passages describe theophanies, defined as “A manifestation of God that is tangible to the human senses.” Theophanies are usually spectacular, dramatic, awesome, a word that is way overused nowadays.

This morning we have two accounts of awesome manifestations of God. What should we make of them? I got some help from a Brazilian theologian named Claudio Carvalhaes. He sees these stories as Magical Realism, a literary device that several South American novelists use to explore, in imaginal language, the different levels of a reality working at the same time. “The real happens in the fictional, but the fictional is real.” These stories express tremendous theological realities and social consequences.

The first one tells of Abram, who had previously been promised an heir, but the heir was not forthcoming, and he and Sarai were very old. He complains to God and then shows skepticism when God also promises him land. The story tells us that Abram had faith in God, but at first glance, it doesn't seem that way. But Abram's complaints and question show that he did have faith in his relationship with God. When we have a solid connection with someone, we have faith that we can complain and question because we have a deep level of faith in that person. There is famous story about Teresa of Avila traveling to one of the Carmelite convents she was reforming, being thrown out of her carriage into the mud. She hears the voice of God saying, “Teresa, this is how I treat my friends. She replies, “no wonder you have so few.”

And God acknowledges this. He doesn't strike Abram dead for impertinence; he puts on a sort of spectacle to acknowledge the bond. The ritual is an ancient covenant ceremony in which the parties making the agreement. Animals are sacrificed and split; the two parties walk between from opposite directions to the other side. This symbolizes the parties' willingness to suffer the fate of the animals if they break the covenant.

Except this not a covenant. God, symbolized by fire, is the only party making a promise. God is binding Godself to fulfill that promise, a gesture of love. God demands nothing more of Abram.

The second theophany is a story of awakening. In Luke's account Peter, James and John were awakened to a vision of the light that Jesus brings into the world. They had to wake up to realize who Jesus truly is. The doors of their perception were cleansed and they experienced who Jesus was beyond a preacher and miracle worker. Moses and Elijah are there to witness that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

It was one of those thin places where divinity and humanity permeate each other. But then the cloud descends. Jesus is preparing the disciples for the cross that Paul tells us about, and they are afraid. There is no lingering on the mountain. Their awakened perception of who Jesus is leads them back into the world and their responsibility to witness that vision of light to a suffering world.

These big theophanies can remind us that we all experience smaller ones in our daily lives when we are reminded that God is right here and that divine love is everywhere. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in the beautiful mountains of North Wales, writes. "The

world is charged with the grandeur of God; it will flame out, like shining with shook foil.” But so many on our planet are prevented from seeing that shining by war, violence, and systemic injustice and we are called to do whatever we can to share the light with them. Lenten discipline reminds us that, if we have seen the light through the grace of others we need to shine the light it on others.