The people of Abram’s era didn’t believe in an afterlife. The only way to “live” after death was to have children who would remember and honor their ancestors. When God promises to make Abram a great nation, God means that Abram will have thousands of descendants who will remember him. For Abram there was no greater sign of divine favor. Thus, verse 3b can mean “May you be as blessed as Abram.”

God’s blessing of Abram also indicates that through him every person will eventually find — or lose — salvation (v.3a). Those who accept God who first revealed through Abram, then through the story of his descendants, and finally in Jesus will themselves be blessed by God. Those who reject this God will be excluded from divine favor.

“All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you.”
Up the mountain

Jesus didn’t fit people’s expectations of the messiah. He broke Jewish laws, befriended sinners, and instead of visibly defeating his enemies, his enemies seemed to defeat him.

Knowing that it will be difficult for his followers to keep believing, Jesus takes his closest disciples aside so God can help them understand who he is.

Narrative clues

Elements of this story underscore the profound significance of what is happening.

- Mountains were traditional places of revelation because they were close to the heavens
- Dazzling whiteness was a sign of glory and divinity
- Clouds often represented God’s presence because they carried life-giving water

Three tents

Moses and Elijah represent God’s law and the prophets. By the time of Jesus, Jews had come to believe that both men had been taken up into heaven. People expected Elijah, and possibly also Moses, to return at the end of the age (Mal 3:23).

Given these expectations and the extraordinary events that are unfolding before their eyes, Peter believes the final age has come. He offers to make permanent shelters for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Not only does Peter misinterpret what’s happening, he speaks as if Jesus were on equal footing with Moses and Elijah. God clarifies the superior status of Jesus.

Listen to him

The voice from the cloud repeats what it said after Jesus was baptized (Mt 3:17). This time, however, it adds, “Listen to him.” Moses promised that God would send his people another prophet to teach and guide them: “to him shall you listen” (Dt 18:15). Jesus fulfills this promise, but he also exceeds it, for he is greater than even the greatest figures in his people’s history.

Do not be afraid

It was typical of people having a vision of heavenly or divine figures to bow down in fear (Dan 10:8f and Rev 1:17). The holy figure then raises the frightened person up. Jesus’ touch and reassuring words also echo his healing actions in other parts of the Gospel.

THE GOSPEL READING

MATTHEW 17:1-9

I. Imagine that you’re Peter, James, or John.
   a. What is it like on the mountain?
   b. Why do you think Jesus takes you with him?
   c. What are you and the other two disciples saying and/or doing?
   d. How do you recognize Moses and Elijah?
   e. How do you react when the two men appear?
   f. Do you hear what Jesus talks about with Moses and Elijah?
   g. Do you want Moses and Elijah to stay? Why/why not?
   h. How would you describe the cloud?
   i. What does the voice from the cloud sound like?
   j. How well have you been listening to Jesus?
   k. Why are you afraid?
   l. How do you feel after Jesus helps you up?
   m. Do you ever talk about what happened?

Living the word

2. How well are you listening to God’s Son?
3. How do you find strength to persevere in your Lenten practices?

THE GOAL OF SCRIPTURE IS IGNORANCE OF CHRIST—ST. JEROME

PRAYER

adapted from the Prayer over the People for the Second Sunday of Lent

O Lord, bless your people with a blessing that endures forever. Keep us faithful to your beloved Son. May we always desire and at last attain that glory whose beauty he revealed in his own body to the amazement of his apostles. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.