

MARCH 17TH, 2019: SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18 Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 Luke 9:28b-36

How long can an insight last? All of us have a sudden flash of knowledge that we don't reason to, but is suddenly there. One I distinctly remember occurred in the middle of a sophomore study hall almost 65 years ago. I'd always studied, even did all my homework. But I did these things just to get good grades. Then out of nowhere came the conviction that there's something valuable in study itself, even if I never took another exam. That thought only lasted a split second, but it's been guiding me all my life.

I bring up insights today because most Scripture scholars believe we're dealing with an insight when we hear the gospel accounts of Jesus' transfiguration. The narrative contains the classic trademarks of a biblical myth. For instance, it's chock full of biblical symbolism: the cloud, the voice, and the unique participants. Notice also that the name of the mountain isn't mentioned; we can't track down the geographic place. These elements – and others – seem to imply that the story is rooted in an insight many of Jesus' followers experienced in their encounters with him. This particular itinerant preacher was unlike anyone they'd ever chanced upon.

In their minds Yahweh not only sent and confirmed this Galilean carpenter, but to follow his teachings and example placed one squarely in the middle of the teachings and example of the Hebrew Scriptures. The special person the Chosen People had anticipated since the days of the Exodus is in their midst right here and now. No matter how one put that insightful experience into words, their biblical attempts tell us some of Jesus' few followers at least had a hint Jesus of Nazareth was the one.

Yet it's clear from today's second reading that no matter how intense the original insight, for some Christians that "illumination" eventually faded away. Due to Paul's reference to "their stomach," scholars believe the fallen-away Philippians to whom he refers could be within the community's Christian Jews who have returned to keeping Judaism's dietary regulations. Instead of giving themselves over to the ever-changing risen Jesus, they feel more secure in giving themselves over to a set of never changing concrete laws.

Our Jewish faith ancestors no doubt had parallel insights revolving around Yahweh at work in their daily lives. The historical Jesus certainly did. Today's Genesis pericope reminds us they locked some of those insights into a covenant with Yahweh. When they'd gather to renew that agreement – as they did yearly during Passover – they'd recall those special moments. In the world before photographs and tape recorders, remembering them would be the only way to make them live again. In the case of the Passover, they would especially recall the moment when they realized for the first time that Yahweh, not a set of accidental circumstances, was freeing them from slavery.

Based on his Jewish heritage, Jesus also weaved his community's insights into a covenant, an action especially to be remembered in their celebrations of the Eucharist. But as Paul warned the Philippians, unless people imitated him, they could fall into the same trap as those whose glory became their shame. We know from his letters, imitating Paul revolves around learning how to die and rise with Jesus.

From I Corinthians 11, there's no doubt in the Apostle's mind that the best place to experience that dying for others is in the community's celebrations of the Lord's Supper. If the celebration is done correctly – and we actually give ourselves to and for one another – there's a great chance many of us will have frequent insights about the presence of the risen Jesus among us.

Afraid there just aren't any lasting insights that come from mouthing empty rituals.

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MARCH 24TH, 2019: THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15 I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12 Luke 13:1-9

Out of loyalty to Carrol Stuhlmueller, my beloved Scripture prof, I always include his unique explanation of the burning bush when I deal with Exodus 3. Unlike the vast majority of scholars, Carrol was convinced an angel wasn't positioned that day along Moses' path, waiting for him to reach a certain point, then notify another angel, "Cue the bush!" and the bush burst into flame. The late Scripture expert was convinced the bush always was on fire. The miracle in the narrative revolves around Moses seeing something everyone else overlooked. In the midst of a billion wilderness furze bushes, Moses alone notices the fire in one of them.

At some point of our lives, we stop looking. What passes before our eyes is so repetitious we no longer concentrate on it. We presume we're just seeing a constant repeat of what we've seen before.

Paul reflects on that phenomenon in today's I Corinthians passage. "Our ancestors were all under the cloud," he writes, "and all passed through the sea . . . yet God was not pleased with most of them . . ." In other words, not everyone who experiences Yahweh working in their lives notices Yahweh working in their lives.

Following an identical insight, Luke's Jesus brings up something we've all experienced: God works almost the same way in everyone's life – even in ways that are at times unjust. Rarely does there appear to be a "method to the madness." It's simply part of being alive.

Yet our sacred authors are convinced Yahweh normally communicates with the "seers," those who notice God at work in those areas and those people most of us overlook. Precisely in those unnoticed places and individuals one learns more and more about who Yahweh is and what he/she is doing in our lives. We eventually learn Yahweh's "name."

Of course, the main drawback in seeing what others ignore is that we then have responsibilities others never assume. It initially never crosses our mind that God's calling us to carry out a specific part of God's will. Moses, for instance, in seeing the fire in the bush, quickly discovers the freedom all Israelites expect Yahweh to achieve for them will only come about when he personally takes a hand in winning it. He never counted on that. Instead of being in the audience, this wilderness shepherd now finds himself on the stage. He quickly regretted he didn't lead his sheep down a different path that day.

Perhaps that's why Luke ends today's pericope with Jesus' simile of the persistent fig tree grower. "I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future." Though we insist on going through life blindly ignoring the meaning of our everyday encounters, we follow a God who frequently boasts about his/her patience with us. Faith isn't either something one has or doesn't have. It's an ongoing process.

Among others, Paul recognizes movement in faith, else he wouldn't have used Scripture the way he did. He refers to it as being an "example" in our lives; something that can be a teaching tool. The Apostle believes that unless we're conscious of the examples God provides, we could end up "falling," as some Corinthians already have.

Trained in much of my Catholic education to regard Scripture as simply a source of proof texts, I was as blind as those who never noticed fire in the Sinai bush. Certainly glad for the risen Christ's patience with me. Still have a lot to see. But I'm glad my study of Scripture at least started me down a road in which I at least began to notice some of the fire God's spirit has ignited in this book.

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