

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible; light a votive candle for each group member beside it; then take a few moments to remember God's presence with you.

**LEADER:** Creator God, like Abraham and Sarah we can count neither the stars nor your goodness to us.

**ALL:** Your promises to them draw us into the future still.

**LEADER:** Jesus, risen and with us, your presence dazzles and awakens us as it did Peter, James, and John.

**ALL:** How good it is for us to be here with one another and you in our midst.

**LEADER:** We follow you up the mountain of transfiguration to look from past to future.

**ALL:** We come to name your grace in our lives today. Amen.

Mount Tabor, the scene of Sunday's gospel, is steep. Today a harrowing taxi ride to the top snakes around twenty-three hairpin turns. The hike probably left Jesus and the three disciples who accompanied him breathless.

# SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



Shutterstock.com

Like all difficult ascents, the view from the top rewards the journey.

This part of Galilee is the Iowa of Israel, its rural breadbasket. From Mount Tabor, west of the Sea of Galilee, one sees fields of grain stretch out across the Jezreel valley. Herds of cows and sheep graze on the slopes or in fields that have been recently harvested. Villages and farm buildings dot the landscape. Everything is verdant, the result of irrigation and hard work.

Jesus' village of Nazareth lies a few miles to the northwest. To the south, some 90 miles away, is the city of Jerusalem. For Jesus, at this midpoint in his public life, the view includes his past, the present,

and the future—his childhood in Nazareth, his ministry in Galilee, and the journey he is beginning to Jerusalem and his suffering and death. On this mountaintop Jesus' disciples also catch a glimpse of what their future will be.

Most of us have moments that capture the essence of the person we are becoming. I heard in the laughter and conversation among the nuns at my college a call to be a sister. For someone else, the birth or adoption of a child is a vision of life forever revolving around this other being. Experiencing the joy of working with others to pass an important piece of legislation or build a Habitat home makes another see new possibilities for making a difference.

● When have you had a vision of your past, present, and future? How has your vision shaped your life?

Mount Tabor is the traditional site of the transfiguration.



# GOSPEL

## Jesus appears in glory with Moses, Elijah.

**NARRATOR 1:** Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up the mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed in appearance and his clothes became dazzling white.

**NARRATOR 2:** Suddenly two men were talking with him—Moses and Elijah. Appearing in glory, they spoke of his exodus which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem.

**NARRATOR 1:** Peter and those with him had fallen into a deep sleep; but awakening, they saw his glory and the two men who were standing with him.

**PETER:** Master, how good it is for us to be here. Let us set up three booths, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

**NARRATOR 2:** Peter did not really know what he was saying. While he was speaking, a cloud came and overshadowed them. The disciples grew fearful as the others entered it. Then from the cloud came a voice.

**VOICE:** This is my Son, my chosen One. Listen to him.

**NARRATOR 1:** When the voice fell silent, Jesus was there alone. The disciples kept quiet and told no one anything of what they had seen.

Luke 9.28-36

Jesus prays regularly in Luke's gospel. After he accepts John's baptism, Jesus is praying when the Spirit comes upon him and anoints him (3.21). In the midst of teaching and healing people in Galilee, Jesus withdraws to deserted places to pray (5.15). Before he chooses 12 of his disciples as apostles, he spends a night on the mountain in prayer (6.12).

Jesus teaches his disciples to address God intimately as "Father" when they pray (11.1-4). After he eats his last supper with his disciples, Jesus goes out to the Mount of Olives and prays, "Father, if you are willing, let this cup pass from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (22.42).

His prayer on the mount of transfiguration is a turning point in his ministry. A few verses later Jesus "sets his face for Jerusalem" (9.51).

This gospel calls us to set our sights toward Easter, to enter more deeply the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection, which transforms us still. Luke calls us to prayer—to take time as Jesus does in his 40 days in the wilderness to integrate the Spirit's urgings into our lives.

Jesus prays outdoors on mountains, in deserted spots, in the darkness of night. He seizes moments of reflection in the created world—where heights lay open possibilities in every direction or the night

## Jesus journeys through struggle, suffering.

Luke characterizes Jesus as a man of prayer. In his gospel Luke makes explicit why Jesus goes up the mountain. He goes to pray. It is praying that transforms Jesus' face and makes his clothes dazzle.

Peter, James, and John sleep as Jesus prays. But Luke's omniscient narrator takes us inside Jesus' mountaintop experience. As he prays, Jesus' inner life becomes transparent in his outward appearance, just as our values and commitments show through in our bodies over our lifetimes. His spirit and body are one. Two great prophets of Israel's past come alive in Jesus' consciousness to

lead him on as he prepares to go to Jerusalem where conflicts await that lead to his death and resurrection.

Awake, Peter, James, and John see what Luke wants us readers to see and what the Church wants us to reflect upon—Jesus in glory and in the company of the prophets Moses and Elijah.

- Who do you know whose spirit seems transparent in his or her face and body?
- Who like Moses and Elijah are holy people from your past who help you envision your call into the future?



God face to face but God tucks him in a crevasse to see God from the back lest he die. Moses' face reflects God's glory when he comes down, so he has to cover his face before the people (Exodus 34.20-35).

Elijah is the only prophet left in Israel when he has a showdown with the priests of Baal, the Canaanite storm god. He has to run for his

life to escape King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Angels feed Elijah food that lasts during his 40-day journey to Horeb, the mountain of God, where Moses and the people met God 500 years earlier. Elijah stands on the mountain through wind, an earthquake, and fire but hears God in the sheer silence afterwards, a voice sending him back to anoint new kings and prophets (1 Kings 19).

In the transfiguration a cloud overshadows Jesus, Peter, James, and John. A voice from the cloud identifies Jesus,

shelters his struggle. On the mount of transfiguration Jesus models the transforming power of prayer in finding one's way and facing struggles.

- **How has prayer led you into action? To insight? To try again?**
- **What conflicts seem inevitable in your life or mission?**

Only Luke tells us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah are talking about—the exodus Jesus is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Luke's choice of the word *exodus* is deliberate. The word names the event in Israel's history when God led the people out of slavery in Egypt. It means *departure or going forth*. From the mountain Jesus sees his exodus ahead, his going forth.

This iconic gospel places Jesus with the two prophets in Israel's history who have interacted most intimately with God. To evoke their communion with the Holy, the biblical storytellers favor

clouds, shadows, light, fire, mountaintops, and utter silence.

Moses first experiences God in a burning bush, takes off his shoes in this holy place, and asks God's name. To receive the commandments, God summons Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai, where he spends six days enshrouded in clouds with God and then 40 days and nights, so long that the people make a golden calf to worship.

Moses pleads with God for the people and returns to the mountaintop where God relents. Moses seeks to see



In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis encourages families and communities to work for local self-sufficiency in renewable energy and food sources and became sources of innovation. "Local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity, and a deep love for the land" (179-180). What might you or your group do to promote gardening, local markets, local farmers, reuse projects?

“My son, my chosen one.” In the exodus from Egypt God accompanies the Hebrews in the wilderness as a cloud by day and fire by night. The transfiguration shows the God of Israel claiming Jesus as Son and prophet.

Like the lawgiver Moses, who led an exodus from slavery to freedom, Jesus leads an exodus from death to new life and teaches his new law of love. Like the prophet Elijah, Jesus will confront the officials of empire and temple after his prayer in the silent stillness of a mountaintop. Peter, James, and John follow Jesus in this line of prophets.

● How are your God moments a source of hope for you?

● What spiritual experience has transformed you and stuck with you as a deep anchor in your being?



## God promises countless descendants.

Abram's covenant with God in Sunday's first reading grows out of a vision. God promises Abram descendants as countless as stars in the night. God's promise establishes a relationship with Abram and Sarai, his wife. Their faith that God can do the impossible deepens in their long wait for even one descendant.

God seals the covenant with Abram in an ancient way of

making an oath of agreement. The parties to the agreement cut animals in half and walk between the two parts, acting out the meaning—may I be cut in half if I do not keep this covenant. The ancient Genesis story envelopes Abram in deepening and terrifying darkness and places him in a trance as God's flaming torch passes between the animal halves.

### God makes a covenant.

God took Abram outside and said: “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so shall your descendants be.” Abram put his faith in the Holy One, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

God then said to Abram, “I am the Holy One who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession.” “O Holy God,” Abram asked, “how am I to know that I shall possess it?” God answered him, “Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

Abram brought all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other, but the birds he did not cut up. Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram stayed with them. As the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram, and a deep terrifying darkness enveloped him.

When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking brazier and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. Then the Holy One made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I give this land from the Wadi of

Egypt to the Great River (the Euphrates).”

Genesis 15.5-12,17-18

● How has God been faithful to you? How have you been faithful to God?

## PRAY

**LEADER:** God is our light and our salvation. Whom should we fear?

**ALL:** God is our refuge; of whom should we be afraid?

**LEADER:** Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, a prophet like Moses and Elijah.

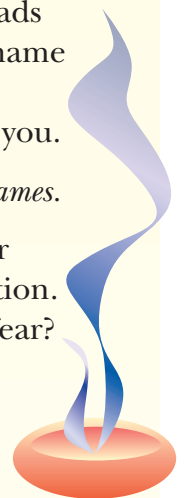
**ALL:** We listen and pray with him.

**LEADER:** Let us name others who lead us toward Jerusalem this Lent, people who call us to new life. Let us say their names, and if you wish, a way each leads you. As you say a name pick up or move a votive light toward you.

*Take time to share names.*

**LEADER:** God is our light and our salvation. Whom should we fear?

**ALL:** God is our refuge; of whom should we be afraid?



*Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.*