

[Genesis 15:5-12, 17-18; Ps. 27; Phil. 3:17-4:1; Rom. 10:8-13; Luke 9: 28b-36]

I mentioned this during the week. How many of you have seen the movie, "Bruce Almighty?" There is a scene where Jim Carrey is driving his jalopy of a car at night on a highway, and asks God to give him a sign about the future of his relationship with his girlfriend, Grace. After making the request, a run-down pick-up truck with all kinds of road signs in the back cuts in front of him. The signs say, STOP, WRONG WAY, and DO NOT ENTER. Then the truck suddenly turns off the freeway, causing Jim Carrey's car to run into a light post. He says, "Thanks for the sign!"

If you were waiting for a sign from heaven to confirm that God was on your side, what exactly would you be looking for? And where would you go to look for it? Ancient people knew, or thought they knew, what a sign from heaven looked like. Many years ago, I was looking for the Fairfield Inn on Van Dyke. I had never been there before. I looked up in my car and asked, "Lord, give me a sign." I was stopped at a red light, and looked around me. A large billboard had this message: FAIRFIELD INN, TURN LEFT NOW! I, too said, "Thanks for the sign!"

In the Scriptures, signs came from the general direction of heaven, which was up. It usually had something to do with stars or heavenly beings or uncontrollable forces like weather. A sign from heaven would be powerful, and chances are it would be terrible or at least terror inspiring.

If you wanted an advantageous position from which to receive such a sign, a mountaintop was a good place, being closer to heaven and the realm of God. In fact, one of the original names for God used in the Hebrew Scriptures is *Elohim*, the "God of the mountain." That's why the Tower of Babel experiment made sense in a sad and ill-considered sort of way. The closer to the sky you got, the closer to the seat of true power you might expect to be.

So Abram looked to the starry sky and found confirmation of the future God was promising his descendants. And in a state of trance he saw God's covenant expressed to him in the powerful symbols of fire. The scene would be utterly frightening but for the comforting words of God's promise.

An elderly childless couple will be transformed into a mighty nation. Abram understands that the power of this God can bring such a change into being.

Recall what is being said in our First Reading. To “cut a covenant” meant that you took the animals listed, cut them in half, and set the carcasses on both sides of the road. Both parties to the covenant would walk past these carcasses and say, “May this happen to me if I do not keep this covenant.” But look carefully. Who passes by on the road in our First Reading? Only God does. Abram is asleep, in a “deep trance.” God is committed to the covenant with us!

Which was harder to see: the nation hidden in the two old people Sarah and Abram, or the celestial glory concealed in Jesus of Nazareth? One might think that the continual stream of healings and miracles emanating from their Teacher would have tipped the disciples off. But apparently it took the mountaintop setting, radiant light, and the inexplicable presence of two famous and very historical holy men to cue Peter, James, and John that something glorious was hidden in the very person of Jesus Himself. Perhaps they had been hoping for a sign from Heaven to confirm that Jesus was the one Israel was waiting for. Maybe it hadn't occurred to them that Jesus might *be* the sign from heaven they sought. THE Sign was right in front of them the whole time!

A hallmark of Christian thought is the idea that what *was*, is *now*—and what *will be* is also remarkably at hand. The past and the future are simply two expressions of the “eternal now” of the realm of God. And the coming Kingdom, we might say, has already arrived. The Kingdom is “here,” and “not yet.”

Visions and trances and apparitions give certain privileged glimpses into the divine realm that garner a lot of attention for their startling supernatural qualities. But they are all ways of saying, “Wake up! See the divine presence and activity all around you!” This is the same Jesus Who walked and talked with His friends for years. This same radiant Jesus went to His Crucifixion, rose on Easter Sunday, lives in His Church, and comes to us in word, sacrament, and the least of our sisters and brothers. Can we receive the Holy Presence with understanding in all of these forms? Or are we still looking for a mountaintop view, special lighting effects, and a little fire?

In our Second Reading, St. Paul describes a transfigured view of ourselves. As citizens of Heaven, we are merely tourists in this earthly land where money, power, fame, and security are the forces in charge.

If we claim our citizenship in the Kingdom, our relationship to worldly dynamics can be a little more objective. Kingdom people are also more attuned to the idea that it is always “good for us to be here,” where the glory of God is breaking into time once more.

St. Peter wants to build tents on the mountain, which means that he wants to stay on the mountain, where it is safe, protected and comfortable. Jesus says, “You may build one big tent or three smaller tents, but not two. Because you are too tense! (Two tents – a groaner pun.)

Today’s readings take us into the realm of signs, symbols, promise, and revelation. Take a moment to think about the strongest sign of God’s presence in YOUR life and the greatest symbol of your faith. [Pause.] Now ask yourself:

What promises have you made with God that remain unfulfilled? Why? Do you have a sense that God has fallen short in some way?

What keeps you from honoring your covenant with God to remain faithful and listen to the words of Jesus?

Abram, Paul, Peter, John, and James all experienced fear and confusion at their first real encounter with Divine Truth. What are you feeling in your faith life right now? What do you know to be true above all else? Witness to those encounters with a dark and sad world which is still looking for signs. AMEN!