

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent – Cycle C – March 17, 2019

Fear has an interesting role in the Scriptures....

In both the first reading and the Gospel today, there are images of fear and unknowing...

In the first reading, in the midst of Abraham deciding if he can trust God, the scriptures say that “a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him.”

In the Gospel, while Peter, James and John were with Jesus on Mount Tabor, the scriptures report that “a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened.”

Have you ever felt a cloud of darkness surround you while you were trying to figure out what was going on in your own life? I would suggest that most of us have or are currently struggling with a dark cloud...struggling with an aspect of life that is mental, spiritual and/or physical.

A. For some folks, this cloud of darkness is, indeed, mental. We all know friends and family members who have suffered mentally...We hear that the stigma of talking about mental illness is slowly being lifted, and yet we know many who continue to suffer in silence.

B. For other folks, their cloud of darkness is spiritual. In the midst of life's uncertainty, it is so normal to ask questions like: Is God real? Have I been abandoned? Can I really count on God?

Heaped on our individual spiritual challenges...we cannot overlook that our Catholic tradition is in the middle of a crisis of leadership as we watch the sexual abuse crisis continue to unfold. Of course, we all want to know what concrete steps will be taken. And yet, many are asking deeper questions, like “Is the institution willing to look at and uncover the layers of deep dysfunction and destruction that have been allowed to permeate below and over the surface of our faith tradition?” A cloud of darkness, to be sure.

C. So yes, mental and spiritual clouds...and yet for some, their own fears and clouds of darkness are rooted in the physical...their own health, or the health of a loved one.

Our search for meaning in life can often encompass one, two or all three of these realities...the mental, the spiritual and the physical. Which one of these areas do you experience a cloud of darkness or unknowing most these days?

In the first reading and in the Gospel, these clouds of darkness or unknowing come about before a turning point, before a relationship deepens, or a path or direction becomes clearer.

Abram, or Abraham as he will be later known, is not sure he can trust God. "How do I know that you will keep your word?" he asks. For some of us, this may seem like a pretty bold question to ask God. You may have been taught that you just don't question God. But Abraham dares to do just that. And while he waits for an answer, this is when the darkness envelops him. It is in the waiting.

Haven't we all been there? Waiting? Wondering about the meaning of a cloud of darkness or unknowing. They call that liminal space...liminal, from the Latin word for "threshold." The space between "what was" and "what's next". Most of us are pretty uncomfortable in liminal space. It can be very disorienting. And yet, liminal space is where all transformation takes place.

For the disciples, their liminal space had already begun as they climbed the mountain with Jesus to Mount Tabor. Jesus had started his ministry proclaiming liberty to captives. Sounds great! The Gospels report lots of healings! Fantastic! All seems to be going well, thank you very much. And then, right before they head up to Mount Tabor, Jesus has started to tell them what is coming ahead. Wait, what? What's wrong with things as they are? This does not even make sense. Hey, we have an idea, let's just stay here on this mountain!

But Jesus reminds them that they must return to their mission...to continue to proclaim the Kingdom of God and be of service to those on the margins. On the Mountain, fear overtakes them...a fear of unknowing. After the mountain-top experience, the disciples know something is now different. They know things will not be like they were. When they come down from the mountain, Jesus again tries to prepare them for what is to come. Again, they are too afraid to ask him what he means. Their liminal space continues. They are at the threshold.

Liminal space is not easy. Let's not sugar-coat the idea. It can include true fear, if not panic. And aren't these natural and rational responses to darkness and unknowing?

And how many of us are waiting right now? Waiting for understanding, waiting for direction, waiting for transformation. Waiting in our clouds of unknowing of mind, body or spirit. Maybe even panicking.

But it's OK.

But in the midst of our disintegration, we **MUST** remember that liminal space **IS** sacred. The presence of God is not only in the resurrections in our lives. God lives in the liminal spaces too.

On Ash Wednesday I helped distribute ashes to patients who wanted them at St. Vincent Complex Care Hospital here in the city. To put ashes on the foreheads of individuals who knew they were in the final stretch of their physical lives was profound. They did not need to be reminded that they were going to turn to dust. They knew it. They were living it. But in that moment, they were my teachers. They are our teachers. Liminal space has a way of teaching us in deep and profound ways.

We often hear that Lent is a time of repentance. But what if Lent were also a time of just sitting in the unknowing in our own lives and experiencing the sacredness of that time? In the liturgical year, we are in between what the Church calls Ordinary time and the season of Easter. But Easter does not make any sense at all without liminal space. It is always darkest before the light. Resurrection does not come without death; the Spirit does not come without the leaving of another.

There is plenty of Lent left, my friends.

Can we sit with one another in our clouds of unknowing? Not fixing, not rationalizing, not closing our eyes to this sacred time. But merely **BE-ING** with ourselves and with one another, and with our God who lives, too, in the liminal spaces.

Blessed are the poor in spirit...they will inherit the kingdom of God.

Liminal space won't feel like the kingdom.

But that doesn't mean that God is not closer than ever.