A great desire of many devout people is to have an experience of God. They are not necessarily hoping for a vision or a voice from heaven. Just the realization of divine presence; a momentary certainty that prayers have been heard; a sense of peace and comfort. Two of today’s readings recount such experiences.

In the first reading Abram is called by God, not as a reward for fidelity, but simply out of divine graciousness. The primary focus of his account is God’s promise: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you.” Abram and his people will be great, will be blessed, will have a great name, and will enjoy the esteem of others. In fact, the fate of other people will be determined by the way those people interact with Abram. The last aspect of this promise is no less significant than the earlier ones: “All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.” In other words, the blessings contained in this promise are not meant solely for the family of Abram; some are meant for all people. The promise includes a challenge: Abram and his family are to be a source of blessing for others. How is this to unfold?

The gospel passage from Matthew recounts another divine experience, the transfiguration of Jesus. Various details indicate that this is a divine self-revelation. It occurs on a mountain, the place where theophanies (manifestations of God) often occur. Jesus’ outer appearance is transfigured and, like Moses before him, Jesus’ face shines brightly (see Exod 34:35). Conversing with Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the Law and the Prophets respectively, intimately links Jesus’ authority with theirs. Finally, the voice from heaven reveals Jesus’ true identity and confirms the legitimacy of his teaching. While the transformative experience happens to Jesus, Peter, James, and John witness this marvel and are overwhelmed by its splendor. They offer to build tents for the three wondrous beings. They want this extraordinary event to last. And who wouldn’t?

Two divine revelations; two very different outcomes. The transfiguration of Jesus seems to have been meant for the benefit of the three disciples. The identity of Jesus is revealed to them and their faith in his teaching is confirmed. There appears to be no benefit for others, at least not “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” We are not sure why this was the case. Perhaps it was because it is so easy for people to cling to what gives comfort and reassurance. Later, the agony and death of Jesus will cause untested faith to crumble, and the resurrection will ground new faith in the power of God and not merely in divine consolation.

Abram’s experience certainly contains promises of success and prosperity for him and his descendants, but it also includes responsibility for others. Abram is to be the agent of divine
graciousness throughout the world. Most of us are not accustomed to think of Israel as a source of blessings for others. That is a feature that we associate with the mission of Christianity. However, Paul credits the Jewish people with major spiritual blessings: “[T]heirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. (Rom 9:4-5). Further in that same letter, Paul insists that the Jewish people did not cease being God’s chosen people: “For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). The Jewish faith should be respected and revered, not disdained and maligned. It has been a source of blessing for Christians. Has the faith of Christians been a source of blessing for the Jews?

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