

WEEK TWO February 28 Second Sunday of Lent: Highs & Lows

Last Monday our nation marked a grim milestone:

500,000 Americans have died from the Coronavirus.

The occasion was marked at the White House with remarks by the President, followed by a moment of silence amid 500 candles - each one representing 1000 individuals who died.

It was a powerful moment.

In his remarks, the President spoke directly to those who've lost a loved one to COVID.

Here's what he said:

The day will come when the memory of the loved one you lost will bring a smile to your lips before a tear to your eye.

It will come. I promise you.

My prayer for you is that day will come sooner rather than later.

I know this is true because I've seen it happen many times in my ministry.

A person is reeling from a tragic loss, can't see any way through it, then six months, a year, a few years later there is joy and a smile.

They didn't believe it possible that the low point would end, but it did.

Time has the power to heal - to restore hope, to turn tears to smiles.

Life can be a series of highs and lows.

Here's what followers of Jesus believe:

God blesses us with highs and is with us in our lows.

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SCREEN: Grow Your Faith main screen

This is week two of our Lenten message series titled, Grow Your Faith.

And today's focus is on how God uses the highs and lows of life to grow our faith.

Let's turn to the readings we just heard.

In our first reading today, we met Abraham.

His title is 'patriarch' meaning he is considered the father of God's Chosen people.

When God and Abraham first meet, they enter a covenant - an agreement.

God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a mighty nation.

Yet for years, he and his wife Sarah had no son.

It's pretty hard to be the father of a nation without a child!

Finally they give birth to their firstborn - Isaac.

And then one day, this happened:

SCREEN: God put Abraham to the test.

**“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,
and go to the land of Moriah.**

**There you shall offer him up as a holocaust
on a height that I will point out to you.”**

I don't think I can imagine a lower moment for Abraham.

Think of the confusion, the anger, the sadness he must have experienced.

When God saw that Abraham was willing to obey and do something so difficult
he spared Isaac.

What are we to make of this story?

Is it teaching us that God be cruel?

No, it was a test of faith - a test which Abraham passed.

He went on to become the great Patriarch God said he would be.

Here is what God promised at the end of the first reading today:

**SCREEN: because you acted as you did
in not withholding from me your beloved son,
I will bless you abundantly
and make your descendants as countless
as the stars of the sky ... all this because you obeyed my command.**

Yet, God was with Abraham, God got him through.

If the story of Abraham was a low moment,

today's Gospel story of the Transfiguration represents a high.

In fact, it's hard to picture a higher moment for the apostles -

they were literally on a mountain top with Jesus.

They went there to pray and while in prayer, Jesus was transfigured.

Then Moses and Elijah appeared.

This terrified the apostles:

SCREEN: Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;
from the cloud came a voice,
“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

I’m trying to imagine what Peter, James and John felt at this moment.

They must have been ecstatic, giddy, happy beyond belief.

If they had any questions about leaving their old lives behind to follow Jesus, the Transfiguration must have erased those doubts.

So this was truly a high point in their walk with the Lord.

Jesus gave them this experience to strengthen them for the low points ahead.

Highs and lows.

Just like for Abraham and the Apostles,

God uses highs and lows to grow our faith.

If you’re wondering what these moments may be for you,

here’s how I define them:

something big happens, something you hadn’t expected or planned for and suddenly the way you see your life and God is changed forever.

God uses these moments to get your attention.

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Here’s a tricky question some people ask when they are at a low point:

“did God want me to suffer?”

And the answer is no, God is not a sadist,

he doesn’t enjoy seeing his children suffer - no loving parent does.

God wants his children to grow, to mature, to thrive.

But every parent knows that sometimes,

it is best to let a child learn something the hard way.

Mom or dad can’t always swoop in and save the day.

Pain and failure can be a great teacher.

So God will use your suffering to help you grow and learn,

to help you discover what life is all about.

And though it can be painful or confusing at the time to understand why it happened, later you look back and realize that you discovered things about yourself you otherwise would never have learned.

That you had an inner strength you didn't know you had.

That you had people in life to support you and help you get through.

Sure it was hard at the time, but it made you stronger.

The Christian writer C.S. Lewis once wrote this:

SCREEN: God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

To see God with you in the highs of life is easy.

The Apostles seeing Jesus transfigured were on top of the world.

And that high would keep them focused as they journeyed to Calvary and beyond to their own deaths.

To be like Abraham, to know God is with you at your lowest is much harder.

It requires trust and will strengthen your trust.

Just as Abraham learned you will discover that God is close by, waiting for you to cry out for help, for understanding and for the peace that only God can give.

The highs and lows of life.

Sooner or later, we all have them.

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I want to challenge you to see your highs and lows as an invitation from Christ to be transfigured.

Yes, highs and lows have the power to transfigure you, but you'll need the eyes of faith for that to happen.

Because it's easy to celebrate the highs and dismiss God as the source of blessing, to think you deserved it or that you made it happen.

And when it comes to the lows, the first reaction can be to turn away from God, to become angry, bitter, and isolated.

So I want to challenge you to see God as the source of everything that happens in your life.

This is what will transfigure you into a kinder, more generous and joyful disciple of Jesus, which is the goal of Lent. I want to mention two specific ways you can experience this in the coming week. First, I encourage you to take some time to identify the highs and lows of your life and write them down - make a timeline. The highs might include a graduation, a wedding, a birth, a promotion, a move. Lows might be a separation or divorce, illness, death of a loved one. And for each high or low that you identify, ask yourself, did I feel God was close, far away, or absent? So that's the first thing I encourage you to do this week. And for the second I want to reissue the invitation I gave last week, which is to join me in praying your way through the Gospel of Matthew this Lent.

SCREEN: spxbowie.org/lent

If you go to the Lent page of our website you will find a guide with a chapter or section of a chapter for each day along with some helpful instructions for praying with scripture.

Here's how this can help.

When we read and pray Matthew's Gospel we see how God was with his Son Jesus in his highs and lows and how also how God, through His Son Jesus was with others in their highs and lows.

This Lent, God wants to help us grow our faith so we can arrive at Easter as more fully committed disciples of Christ.

This week, take some time to reflect on your highs and lows that you may be transfigured. Amen. +