

2nd Sunday of Lent

In my childhood, I once asked my parents, “Why doesn’t God just appear to us to remove any doubts people may have?” They patiently explained God did appear to people in the past, such as my own patron, St. Paul, on the road to Damascus. They could also have cited the appearance of God to Abram in today’s first reading, which shares some themes with the conversion of Paul: questions, doubt, darkness and light.

The Lord had already asked Abram to leave his home in Ur and travel thousands of miles to Canaan, where the Lord again appeared to him for the conversation we heard today. God asked Abram to be faithful to the covenant, and God promised him land and many descendants. Abram was 75 years old; his wife Sarah was 65. As yet they had no children, so the prospects for a large family looked dim. However, the stars shone brightly above in great numbers, and God promised that Abram would generate that many descendants.

These few verses beautifully depict human faith in God. Genesis says, Abram “put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him.” But then, right when the Lord renews his promise that Abram will possess this land, Abram asks, “O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” Our great ancestor had great faith, but he also had great questions. He wanted to move from faith that something would happen into knowledge that it would happen.

We sometimes overlook this distinction. When our faith is strongest, we may speak of it as knowledge—“I know God will help me”—, but the nature of faith is to intervene where knowledge is not sure and to put trust there.

God recognizes Abram’s need and helps him out. At the Lord’s request, Abram hunts down several animals, splits them in two, and arranges the carcass halves facing each other in a ghoulish row. While Abram waits, birds of prey swoop down for a free feed. Abram falls into a trance and, according to Genesis, “a terrifying darkness enveloped him.” This is the same guy who a few verses earlier just “put his faith in the Lord.” In the darkness a mysterious smoking fire pot and flaming torch appear and pass through the bloodied pieces of severed animals. This got Abram’s attention, and the Lord repeated his promise. Sarah gave birth to her first child 25 years later. As one of our volunteers likes to say, “God is good, but God is slow.”

One feature of Lent is to accompany those who have not yet been baptized on their journey toward the sacraments of initiation. At the cathedral this year we have six adults in that category, over whom we will pray the scrutinies the next three weeks at the 11 o’clock Mass. These catechumens, now numbered among the elect, are coming to faith, just as Abram did, and just as we have done.

In my adulthood, when I look back at my childhood question, “Why doesn’t God just appear to us to remove any doubts people may have?” I think about Abram. God did appear to him. That still did not remove Abram’s doubts. He still asked how the promise would be fulfilled. He still spent time in terrifying darkness. As stars abide in the sky, so Christians abide in faith; it is the air we breathe. Faith is the greatest mark of the eternal covenant God made with humanity, a covenant comfortable with questions, doubt, darkness and light.