

Marias full of grace: Genesis 12:1-4a; Matthew 17:1-9

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

*Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. . . . So Abram went . . . [and] built there an altar [Schechem] to the Lord . . . and pitched his tent . . . and invoked the name of the Lord" (Gen. 12:1, 4, 7, 8).*

An economic migrant—a desert nomad—leads his family toward a land of promise, believing he is following the will of his Creator. And so begins the great trek for new life, survival, redemption. He will find danger, so much danger that he plans to pass his wife off as his sister. It is a trek repeated today in the heat of the Sonoran desert, in boats from Africa running ashore in southern Europe, in the hulls of boats from Fujian province to the shores of Long Island. When Abram finds hope, welcome and signs from God along the way, he builds an altar and calls on the name of God. His journey is a trail of altars leading home.

"I found us," said our daughter Rachel after a visit to Ellis Island where she read our family name on the museum's wall. "We find us" as we read of Abram's migration. This is the beginning of our family journey. The altars at which we worship on the Lord's Day are our Schechem and Bethel, places of refreshment, hope and confirmation of the journey home.

In the movie *Maria Full of Grace*, Maria swallows some pellets filled with cocaine, aiming to transport them to the U.S. If the plastic breaks, the cocaine will kill her. She is fleeing Colombia, with its dead horizons and numbing poverty, and heading out to a land of promise. She reminds us of that other Mary, her baby and their migration to Egypt.

When I visit Jackson Heights, Queens, I recognize every building, bodega and travel agency alongside the Roosevelt Avenue #7 train—this is the site of my first parish. I know all too well that this is no setting for a Hallmark card of a Mary traveling to an idyllic heavenly tableau. I remember shots in the night in this neighborhood, and three people killed across the street from the parsonage. I remember death threats when our community organization tried to take on a pusher. I remember children

from the next block who were kidnapped and killed by the cartel. I know Marias full of grace who have found a Bethel at our little church. If Mary were traveling today, she would be hounded and despised: in our time we think security means turning our backs on the stranger and blaming them.

“And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun. . . . But Jesus got up and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone (Matt. 17: 2, 7, 8).

Transfiguration. For a brief, shining moment on the migration to Jerusalem and the cross, God gave them what they needed to believe. Another Schechem in the trail of Abram’s altars. Here is what transfiguration looked like a few years ago in the streets of New York. You are driving along the FDR at night, you notice a car coming up on the right, sparks flying along the concrete. You think, “The poor guy’s losing his tire.” You slow down, drift to the left, watch the other car careen off the side of the road. Then blam! His tire tears into your car. Glass is flying, the front windshield and the roof are coming in on you . . . you smell fresh air and fresh blood.

It happens just like that. You lose a job. Your water runs out in the Sonoran desert and you lie down to die. The doctor diagnoses the lump. Your mother dies. The twin towers fall. The wave tears life from 150,000 children. You lose your way. The point of the journey is lost. There is no big picture, just helter-skelter chaos. Blam. Your best friend tells you he must go to Jerusalem where they will kill him, says it has to be that way. And they might find a cross to fit you too. Blam. In a New York minute, as they say.

You are looking through shards of glass, wind whips through the car. You keep driving. That’s all the trek is anyway. Keep driving, punch the clock, keep the appointments, drift along, put one foot in front of the other. The Galilean ministry was one appointment after another, the hungry, the sick, the cynical, the poor, they all came after him, but now he says, come away. Build an altar before the appointment with death.

Kind people in cars note the bashed-in car and form a kind of motorcade guiding you to the hospital. This is what transfiguration looks like in the streets of New York. You stagger out of the car at Metropolitan Hospital. Somebody comes out of the shadows. A street person sees your clerical collar and moves in to ask for spare change. He sees your blood-spattered face and takes your arm. “It’s all right,

brother, come with me.” He leads you into the emergency room, gets people moving to help, and stands with you as your Joseph the guardian. Transfiguration.

Later I see him in the park across the street, lighting a fire to keep warm in the chill of his trek.

Transfiguration is the appearance of God’s glory in the midst of our journeys to the cross. Out of the darkness God sends transfiguring presence. It’s OK. I’m with you. You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. All will be well. A trail of altars.

At the cross the journeys will converge, home will come into view. “And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.”