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Weekend of Sunday, February 27, 2022
Transfiguration of Our Lord/Year C
First Reading: Exodus 34:29-35
Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Gospel Reading: Luke 9:28-36
Sermon Title: “Transform Us, We Pray”

Theme

Witnesses to the glory of God in the face of Jesus reflect that glory in the world. It was true for Moses. It was doubtless true for Peter, James, and John. We pray that it will be true of all of us who see God’s glory in the word and in the supper and who are being “transformed into the same image” by God’s Spirit.

Texts

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

¹²Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. ¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses

is read, a veil lies over their minds; ¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

^{4:1}Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Luke 9:28-36 [37-43a]

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. [

³⁷On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴²While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ^{43a}And all were astounded at the greatness of God.]

Sermon

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration. It is a rough transition from the weekends in Epiphany where we find Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry slowly emerging, revealing his ministry, being an epiphany himself – and then boom! We are in Luke 9, where according to Luke's Gospel, Jesus has already predicted his Passion once (9:22) and made his decision to go to Jerusalem (9:51) where he will meet his destiny. Jesus is perhaps within six months of his death. This rough transition is necessary because, according to the liturgical calendar, next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent.

The Readings for this Weekend, the Transfiguration of Our Lord, are not only historical, meaning they provide a narrative of events, but they are also instructional, telling us exactly what we are to do as Jesus' disciples. Let's take a look.

I love the stories of the Old Testament. I find them fascinating. At the point in history where the First Reading took place, Exodus 34, the Israelites were far from being a homogenous people, united by their worship of the God of Israel. They were a motley collection of people made up of anyone who was not Egyptian. They have long since lost their unique identity as God's "Chosen People." And slowly, like Putin eating up Ukraine one bite at a time, over perhaps 600 years since Joseph, whom we heard about last weekend, brought his father, Jacob's whole family to Egypt, the Israelites slowly became enslaved.

God saw and heard the cries of their burden and sent them a redeemer in the person of Moses. Moses, the Israelite baby in the basket found floating in the Niles by one of Pharaoh's daughters, who became an Egyptian prince, was the one God chose to work through, to set God's people, the Israelites, free from their bondage of slavery to the Egyptians.

After the dramatic dual between Pharaoh and Moses, including the ten plagues, Pharaoh set Moses' Israelites free, sort of. There was the first Passover, the Israelite plundering of Egypt, the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea, and finally, they found themselves at the bottom of Mount Sinai when Moses decided he needed to commune with God for further instructions. That, of course, yielded the Ten Commandments, the Law, and several other very specific instructions.

While Moses was up on the mountain top communing with God amid fire, smoke, and lightning, the Israelites presumed Moses was vaporized, so they abandoned God and made for themselves a Golden Calf to worship. Moses came down from the mountain and saw them, and in a rage destroyed the stone tablets upon which were carved the Ten Commandments.

After giving them a stern talking to, he went back up the mountain and got another set of the Commandments, and that is where the First Reading fits into the narrative. Moses came down from the mountain top, and though he didn't know it, his face "shone" because he had been in the presence of God; his countenance was transformed.

The story indicates that that got the attention of the Israelites. They were frightened of Moses, and that worked to his advantage. Now they had something extraordinary that they could see that convinced them that Moses' God, their God, was real and they had better listen to him.

I rarely think about what it would be like to be in the presence of God, because well, in scripture it usually ends in death. However, in my times of meditation, I often focus on the face of Jesus, because scripture tells us that "he is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and Jesus himself said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b).

The Disciples had been with Jesus for about three years. They had heard his preaching and teaching, and had witnessed his signs and miracles, and yet, there were many times they seemed not to grasp who he was. Maybe that was the purpose of the Transfiguration.

You heard the story, Jesus and his inner circle of Peter, James, and John went up a mountain to pray,

²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory

Of course, Peter, impetuous Peter, had to say something, so he blurted out something about building booths. Just my opinion, others have their opinions, but I

think Peter wanted to accommodate these three important guests and building dwellings for them might help convince them to stay! But just as quickly as that scenario unfolded, a cloud overshadowed them, there was the disembodied voice of God who cleared up who Jesus was, ^{35b}“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And then it was gone, all of it, Moses and Elijah, the cloud, and the voice, all gone.

Now we don't know how that experience affected Peter, James, and John. I suspect profoundly, but not necessarily appropriately. I say that because, in the next passage, they and the rest of the Disciples seemed to not understand it and earned for themselves a rebuke from Jesus. ⁴¹“You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

The apostle Paul wrote that another phenomenon can happen. Once exposed to the Holy, we can get lost in the Law like the ancient Israelites. Like the veil on Moses' face that prevents us from seeing God and dying, we don't want to see God either because we misunderstand God, and only see the Law that convicts, and that leads to recognizing our sinfulness, we try to achieve righteousness ourselves but we can't, and so we put on veils, metaphorically speaking, to hide our faces from God.

In the Second Reading, the apostle Paul used Moses' veil as a metaphor for what the Jews have always gotten wrong. Moses did indeed shine because he was in the presence of the Holy. And that phenomenon compelled the Israelites to adopt the Commandments, Laws, and Statues of the LORD. But then rather than fall down and worship the LORD, they made the LORD's Commandments, Laws, and Statues the focus of their lives. Paul wrote that that veil still exists among the Jews.

But it shouldn't because Jesus Christ, God's own Son, has come. And scripture tells us that "he is the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and Jesus himself said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9b). He was transfigured for the benefit of Peter, James, and John, and all the others who would eventually hear the story including us today. Yes, we can look into the face of Jesus. And if we would just do that, all we would see is his love, grace, and mercy.

God gave the ancient Israelites, his Chosen People, his Commandments, Laws, and Statues to help them live godly lives. When they got confused about that, Jesus came and attempted to straighten them out, but most of them wouldn't have it, so they killed him.

"So Pastor, we've heard all this before. What does it have to do with us?" I am so glad you asked.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Some of us, like the ancient Israelites and Jesus' own Disciples, want to do it, work out our righteousness too. But we can't because we are addicted to sin. We are so burdened by all the terrible things we do and have done that we can't imagine anyone forgiving us, let alone loving us, so we put on veils, metaphorically speaking, to prevent God from seeing us, at least the real us, the entire us, and all our sin and failures. But that doesn't eliminate them, and it doesn't buy us any time to free ourselves from them, and so it seems we are stuck and without hope.

Now I realize that for most of us, I am preaching to folks who are already believers. You have heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ who came to save sinners by giving his own life as the ransom for our own; a payment we could never make ourselves.

But there may be some here, and I know there are many outside these walls, who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ *effectively* – they've never been reached by it, never had their weary hearts broken by it. That's probably because of that veil you've put on yourselves. So if I am describing you, know that God revealed in Jesus Christ has indeed done all that that I have spoken of - *for you*. **PIC** To you, I encourage you, tear away the veil and look into the loving face of Jesus and feel his eyes penetrate that crust you've built up around your heart and soul, and allow yourself to be transformed by his love, grace, and mercy.

For the rest of us who pretty much come every week and *have* effectively heard the Gospel and who cherish it in our hearts and souls, the apostle Paul has something for us too. He wrote:

¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

^{4:1}Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

We are all unfinished and half-baked this side of eternity, and we always will be.

But by the grace of God, the Spirit will transform us, if we let it. Let our transformed faces and lives shine in the darkness of an increasingly scared and hurting world. Let that be our prayer.

Prayer

Holy God, transform us we pray.

Present in our midst yet beyond all comprehension,

by your light we see light;

by your healing, we are made whole;

by your mercy, we know your greatness.

Turn your gaze upon our weakness

and show us the way of your love

that we may live with unveiled faces,

through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen