



BEYOND THE VEIL

Exodus 34:29-35, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2



FEBRUARY 7, 2016 – TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

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In our church and in many churches across the United States and Canada we use a three-year cycle of weekly scripture readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary is built around the seasons of the Church Year, and includes four readings for each Sunday. During most of the year, the lections are: a reading from the Hebrew Bible, a Psalm, a reading from one of the four Gospels, and a reading from the Epistles.

Most Sundays I choose the Hebrew Bible reading, the Gospel reading and a Psalm. Today is the final Sunday of Epiphany, which means that it's Transfiguration Sunday. This is the day we get to contemplate the strange passage where Jesus and a couple of disciples climb a mountain and Jesus transforms in front of them, shining with a divine light, and chatting with Elijah and Moses. Then they hear God's voice from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Chosen, Listen to him, for God's sake!" That's a paraphrase...

I didn't choose that passage today because this year, this week, I found myself drawn to the other readings – the reading from Exodus 34 and the one from 2 Corinthians.

We'll get back to the transfiguration of Jesus a little bit later...

What strikes me about these passages is that they all have something to do with veils. You know, that piece of material worn over the face. It blocks vision, not only from within but from the outside as well. When a bride wears a veil, not only does it keep the groom from seeing the glory of her beautiful countenance, it also prevents the bride from seeing the groom all that clearly. Maybe that's a good thing!

The typical transfiguration scene from the Gospels could be based on the scene toward the end of Exodus that we just heard.

Moses comes down from his return trip up Sinai, after the golden calf incident, with the second version of the Ten Commandments (The 10 Commandments 2.0). Oddly, they're referred to here as the two tablets of the treaty, or the covenant. They're not called 'commandments' here.

But the scene doesn't focus on the commandments anyway. The eyes of the reader are immediately drawn to Moses' face. There's something about Moses' face that is unusual when he descends from the mountain after conversing with God. There's a weird glow that radiates from the prophet's face. He's shiny.

Funny thing -- the verb that's translated 'glow' is the verb, *qaran*, which means to push with a horn, to gore, to be horned, to shoot out horns, or figuratively, rays – to shine. The Latin translation of Jerome's, called the Vulgate, was used by the church for over a thousand years, and translated the word directly as horned. So earlier readers read the

verse, “The skin of Moses’ face was horned when he talked with them.” That’s why Michelangelo’s famous sculpture of Moses in St Peter’s in Rome literally has horns. Fortunately, we know now that the word is a glow or ray.

It makes sense when you think about it – when Aaron and all the Israelites saw his face they were terrified to come near him. Naturally they would be afraid to come near him if he had horns, so horned kind of works there.

“But Moses called to them, and Aaron and the leaders of the congregation returned to him” – but not everyone. Imagine, the frightened leaders creeping back toward Moses, scared but drawn to him. When the people see that their heads haven’t exploded and they haven’t been struck by lightning or smited or anything, the rest of the community comes closer and “he gave them in commandment, all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.”

When he finished speaking with the people he put a veil over his face.

Now I’ve been trying to figure this out. AFTER he finished speaking with them he covered his face. We can’t be too certain what the word used here for ‘veil’ - *macveh* -- means, because out of the entire bible it’s only used in this passage. We have no other context with which to compare it. This covering could have been some sort of ceremonial mask for all we know.

But if he used it to protect the people from his divinely glowing face you would think he’d put it on before talking to them. Except he doesn’t. He puts it on after he talks to them. But it is a little confusing:

When 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.

If they were anything like us, I think that the people didn’t really want to be reminded of God, anytime other than when Moses was teaching or preaching. Moses would go into the tabernacle without the veil, then he would come out and give the word of God, the people would see his glowing face and then he would put the veil back on. Then they would go back to their lives.

It’s like sometimes people get uncomfortable when they find out there’s pastor in the room – Uh-oh! I have to behave! I can’t swear or tell dirty jokes. People feel like they can’t be themselves. So many pastors won’t admit to being pastors right away. Pastors veil their faith when they go out.

People veil their faith, too, when they go out into the real world. We come to church on Sunday morning and we serve at Extended table once a month but for many of us, that's all we do. The rest of the time we hide our faith from our unchurched friends and the people we meet during the day.

There are times when we just don't want people to know we're Christians. I get that. I think the fundamentalists have given us all a bad name and sometimes, personally, it's embarrassing to admit I'm a Christian. I stayed away from the church for 20 years because I didn't want to be seen as one of "those" people.

But how can we get our good name back? We know that being a Christian means we love our neighbors – yes, all of them. We know that all are welcome in our church! We feed the hungry and visit the sick and we try really hard not to judge others. So how can we take back our faith?

Remember the veil works both ways. You can't see in, but at the same time, it's hard to see out. I imagine Moses may have missed an awful lot of what was going on in his congregation – in his community -- when he separated himself from his people with the veil.

In our other reading from 2 Corinthians, we hear about Moses again. Paul uses the veil as a metaphor for incomplete knowledge. But remember, when you read Paul's letters, you're reading someone else's mail. Paul wasn't writing to us. Paul's letters were occasional – they had a specific reason. They aren't theological tracts or sermons; they're actual letters, written to address specific issues, in a specific time and place. When Paul says "even to this day," he doesn't mean to this day. We believe they are the inspired word of God, and we've found them useful enough, and true enough that we keep them around as sacred texts.

We aren't Paul's audience, and we can't just upload Paul's words in to the present without considering the context and the reasons Paul may have had for writing them.

Paul talks about the people of Moses' time having hardened minds. He writes, "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."

Huh! Maybe Paul is talking about this very day! There are people out there with a different kind of veil over their minds. We have our veil, which keeps the light in. They have theirs to keep the light out.

But when we really turn to Jesus, the veil is lifted. Paul goes on, "And 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."

Can you imagine looking in the mirror and seeing – like a special effect – seeing the face of God, the face of Jesus, with your face superimposed on it, changing into the face of Christ right before your eyes!

Paul goes on: “Changing from one degree of glory” – that’s this face, the one we live in – to another degree of glory, which is the face of Jesus. That can’t happen until we allow our veil to drop from our faces more and more. It’s a process. It’s something we strive toward

Jesus went up on the mountaintop and started chatting with the old guard of the prophets, Elijah and Moses – both light bearers and sharers. When he dropped his veil – when he lowered his guard – he began to shine and the disciples saw Jesus for what he really was, and they were astounded.

Moses encountered God and his face shined. It was too much for the people to bear so he hid his face. Maybe Jesus hid his shine too. He was always saying don’t tell anybody. Moses hid his light under a bushel, if you will. Some scholars think this is one of the reasons God wouldn’t let Moses enter the Promised Land.

Do we focus on making people comfortable so our neighbors won’t notice or criticize us?

We have to drop our veil, too. We need to lower our guard so that the world around us can see the light of Christ within us. Remember, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. That’s you!

And like the disciples, the world will be astounded too! And we can take back the name of Christ. As I’m fond saying around Christmas time – instead of worrying about putting Christ back in Christmas, how about we concentrate on putting Christ back in Christian!

People like me, and others -- won’t stay away from the church for 20 years if we drop our veil and focus on the teachings and example of Jesus. If we love our neighbors and turn the other cheek...

Like the 12-step program, Christianity won’t appeal to followers through clever advertising, or with cool bands and contemporary music. We attract followers by our actions in the community.

On this last Sunday of Epiphany, before we hit the long season of Lent, we celebrate the eternal light of God that comes in the face of Christ – and in our own faces when we welcome the stranger, when we love the unlovable, and lift up the hopeless.

This is something we all could stand to think about this week. Where are our veils and when do we wear them?