

Face it; Connection with God Changes Us and then the World

7 Transfiguration Sunday C

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First Reading: Exodus 34:29-35

Moses' face shone with the reflected glory of God after he received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The sight caused the Israelites to be afraid, so Moses wore a veil to mask the radiance of God's glory, taking it off when he spoke directly with God.

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 & all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, & they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; & Aaron & all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, & Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, & 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 the Lord, he would take the veil off, until he came out; & when he came out, & told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; & Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with the Lord.

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

The conversation about Jesus' suffering & death is enclosed in a dazzling foreshadowing of the resurrection. God affirms Jesus' identity, the disciples are stunned speechless, & Jesus resumes his mission with a demonstration of his power over evil.

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter & John & James, & went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹& while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, & his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses & Elijah, talking to Jesus. ³¹They appeared in glory & were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter & his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw the glory of Jesus & the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as the men 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, & one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came & overshadowed them; & 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. & they kept silent & 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 Jesus. 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, & all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him & will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” ⁴¹Jesus answered, “You faithless & perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you & 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, & gave him back to his father. ^{43a}& all were astounded at the greatness of God.]

Introduction

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, & John. We pray that it will be true of all of us who see God’s glory in the word & in the supper & who are being “transformed into the same image” by God’s Spirit.

Overview - Lifting the Veil

The transfiguration is frustrating for disciples—past & present—who long for an unmediated experience of God. Jesus’ glory is revealed, & then, just as suddenly, a cloud descends & the vision fades. Even when God is revealed in shining glory, much remains veiled & hidden. As he witnesses Jesus’ transfiguration, Peter’s understanding remains veiled; ours does too. The glimpses we get of God’s glory—through the veil or reflected in the mirror—are expectation-shattering, alarming, overwhelming, & awesome. The love of God shines too brightly to view directly, & yet we do have the privilege of directly experiencing that love in baptism, in communion, in service to God, & in relationship with God’s creation & our neighbors in need. The veils we contend with daily are the barriers that prevent us from truly loving those neighbors, caring for creation, & seeing the shining face of Jesus in the faces of people who are different, hungry, difficult, enemy, invisible, or poor. God is always revealed in ways that surprise & confuse us, whether shining on the mountaintop or dying on the cross.

Real-life Story

The first episode of the Netflix series *Queer Eye*’s fifth season features ELCA pastor Noah Hepler. With the help of the Fab Five, Noah & his church are transformed.

Beyond the makeover, Noah also experiences an internal transformation as he grapples with his imposter syndrome & comes to embrace who he is & to learn that's enough. The transformation he experiences isn't meant to keep him on the mountaintop but is to be shared. Not only is Noah changed but, as Fab Five member Antoni remarks, Noah "gets to be that change" in the world as he shares his story & breaks bread with others. Watch the episode, then discuss it using a [guide](#) created by Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries.

Theological Reflection & Quote

In today's gospel reading, Jesus embodies the "now & not yet" of our faith. He is both transformed, & completely Jesus. He is bridging the gap between law (Moses) & the prophets (Elijah), but he is also standing on a mountain in his own time. Jesus gives us a glimpse of the glory yet to be, when the law & the prophets are fulfilled, & at the same time stands on two feet in real time. It's reminiscent of Martin Luther's famous quote, "This life therefore is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness, not health, but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road. All does not gleam in glory, but all is being purified."

Theological Reflection

The Masked Singer (Fox, MBC Entertainment Films) is a show that tries to stump the judges by having the singers perform wearing head-to-toe costumes & masks that hide their faces. The judges attempt to guess the identity of the performer by voice alone. In today's first reading, from Exodus, Moses wears a veil, indicating sacredness, to hide his face from the Israelites. In what ways do we veil or mask ourselves before God? How does this masking make it difficult to truly know ourselves, & even be known by others? In what ways is Lent, the season we are poised to enter, an unveiling time for Christians? How can we be our true singing selves, with masks off?

The Transfiguration of Our Lord—the Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Over the past Sundays, we have seen Jesus show himself to be Christ, the one anointed by God to be our Savior. This Sunday, the Transfiguration, when Jesus appears on a mountain in divine glory, concludes the time after Epiphany. In 3 days, on Ash Wednesday, we begin the climb to the mountain of Jesus' crucifixion. The church holds side-by-side the brilliance of God & the cross of Jesus. On the Lutheran calendar, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday is a celebration of the mystery of Christ, as Jesus' divinity is shown forth on the Mount of Transfiguration. Martin Luther had first proposed this calendar change.

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

Written in the late 80s, Luke's account of the transfiguration summarizes motifs found in both the beginning & the conclusion of his gospel. The mountain, the light, the cloud, & the voice denote God's presence, as on Sinai. God's naming Jesus as the Son of God was spoken first in Luke 1:35 by the angel to Mary. Luke has added to the Mark & Matthew accounts, not only that the disciples were not asleep during the vision, but that Jesus is discussing his departure, his "exodus"—that is, his death. "Two men" appear also at the resurrection (Luke 24:4) & the ascension (Acts 1:10). Just as Moses, who represents the law, & Elijah, who represents the prophets, ascended to God at their death, so will Jesus. The dazzling white clothing is a frequent apocalyptic motif. The dwellings may refer to the Feast of Tabernacles & to the promise that the people will again live in tents (Hos. 12:9). The subsequent miracle of the healing of the epileptic boy returns Jesus to his earthly use of divine power to conquer the demons of evil. We too have encountered the presence of God, not on a Palestinian mountain, but in Jesus Christ. We too are called children of God, thanks to our baptism into Christ. Here we listen to him, & for us now & at the end of time Jesus is the transforming manifestation of God. The optional verses are the one place in the three-year lectionary with the story of the healing of the epileptic boy. To proclaim both stories is to tie the inexpressible glory of God with the power of Jesus to exorcize evil. Jesus has predicted his suffering, death & resurrection to his disciples; he has called on them to "take up their cross" (v. [23](#)), has warned that those who hear the gospel but fail to trust in it will be condemned, & has promised that some present will see the kingdom of God. Now he & the inner circle of disciples ascend "the mountain" (v. [28](#)). In Luke, Jesus always prays before an important event. An aura of unnatural brightness is linked with mystical appearances in Exodus & Acts; "dazzling white" (v. [29](#)) is a symbol of transcendence. In Jewish tradition, both "Moses & Elijah" (v. [30](#)) were taken into heaven without dying. Jesus' agenda is in accord with the Law & the prophets; he is doing God's will. "Two men" also appear at the resurrection and at the ascension. Jesus' "departure" (v. [31](#), *exodos* in Greek) is his journey to Jerusalem & his passage from this world. Peter clearly doesn't understand; perhaps he thinks he is witnessing a super Feast of Tabernacles ("dwellings", v. [33](#)) – a time when the whole city was brightly illuminated. The "cloud" (v. [34](#)) is a symbol of God's presence; the words from it recall Jesus' baptism, and add "listen to him!" (v. [35](#)). Vv. [37-43a](#), the healing of an epileptic child, present three contrasts: 1) from the mountain to the needy world; 2) Jesus' great power over evil (vs. the disciples'); and 3) Jesus' fidelity to God vs. general human infidelity. The child is in miserable condition. In healing him, Jesus shows God's "greatness" to "all" (v. [43](#)).

Exodus 34:29-35

From the 7th century BCE Priestly tradition comes this curious detail about Moses' veil, a narrative that conveys the utter brilliance of the presence of God. The people need intermediaries, Moses & later priests, because they themselves cannot bear to look at God. Sinai (Horeb) is the mountain on which God appeared to deliver the covenant. The tablets of stone were for a time kept in the ark of the covenant but later in history are lost from the record. Moses can see directly at Jesus; the disciples see the shining divinity of Christ; & in the resurrection by faith, so can we all.

Images in the Readings

The readings include the central biblical images of light & **mountain**. In the Bible, significant religious events occur on a mountain, because according to the ancient cosmology, God was described as dwelling above the earth &, when appearing on earth, coming as far down as the top of the mountain. Still today people speak of "mountain-top experiences." Even nonreligious hikers describe sensations of transcendence, partly as a result of oxygen deprivation. Yet God is not only brilliant light, but also **cloud**. Although contemporary people tend to think of clouds as relating to weather conditions, in the Bible the cloud is a mysterious sign of the presence of God. It is as if God covers the earth & brings life, yet suddenly vanishes. The 1st & 2nd readings refer to a face **veil** that humans need to don were they to be in God's presence. A recurring claim in biblical Judaism is that one cannot look at God & live—although in one story (Exod. 24:11) the elders not only survive their experience of seeing God, but also eat with God. Religion itself can be thought about as the veil that people don so that with safety they can approach the utter inexplicable presence of spiritual reality. For Luther, convinced of the absolute distance between God & humanity, a veil was indeed necessary, & that veil is Christ. As the Confession & Forgiveness says it, as if we have turned ourselves away from God's view, we need to be turned again through Christ toward God (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* p. 95). Many contemporary people who view God as a benign uncle see no need for any veil of any kind.

Life on the Earth

One conclusion that Christians can draw from the story of the Transfiguration is that the radiance of God can indeed be seen on earth when by faith we gather to hear the word. The disciples do not have to die & join Moses & Elijah in some spiritual realm before they can witness the glory of God. Christians can assist one another in seeing God's glory in many places on earth.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

There are many people today who are seeking God, a lot of them in bizarre ways. Your local “spiritual supply store” offers crystals, cards, boards, powders & various other gadgets for the expressed purpose of cosmic convergence of your coming in contact with God. The greatest search in our time & for all time is the search for God. However, Christian people proclaim that God cannot be found, but rather has found us in Jesus the Christ. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. All of heaven breaks loose for us in the weekly assembly, but we miss it if we are sleeping. As we awake to God’s presence, let us not lock it away in booths of our own security & salvation. Instead of snoozing, let us be dazzled, opening our hearts to God’s presence, a source of courage, power & might that will motivate us to go out into the world & point others to God’s most brilliant light.

—Karen M. Ward [Karen M. Ward, in *Homilies for the Christian People*, pp. 407-08.]
(Thanks to Sundays&Seasons.com; WorkingPreacher.org; montreal.anglican.org)

Question

In the faces of babies we see hope; in models we see beauty and physical perfection; in seniors we can see the meaning of their years. What does the face of a life connected with God look like? Do we see the wisdom gained from experience, the compassion radiated from survived pain, the love that echoes a commitment of choice and bears the circumstances of time, the hope that has persisted through endless nights, the quiet dynamic joy that knows the appreciation of a profound moment in life or the appreciation of one for another.