

Unveiling God's Glory
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March 3, 2019 - Transfiguration Sunday

For the past 8 Sundays we have lived in the season of Epiphany; the season where we focus on and consider the ways that Jesus is revealed or shown to be God's divine and human son—both Son of God and Son of Man. We have looked at the way that Jesus reveals to us the character of God through teaching, healing, and prophesying. We have focused on stories that, through Jesus, capture and unveil God's ultimately forgiving and loving nature, God's desire to bless above all else.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is the Sunday that marks the transition from Epiphany to Lent. Our focus goes from the revelation that Jesus is God's own son to the revelation that Jesus is the One who the Jewish people have been waiting for—the Messiah. Jesus is the One who will fulfil what the scriptures say: that he, the Messiah, will experience suffering and death in order to save all nations, all people. Now, this revelation is a big deal for a few reasons. For us today, it is important because it is part of the path that has, ultimately, led us here to this very moment in time—our faith is built on this. But it is also important in the context of those long-ago believers. The Jewish people had been waiting for a Messiah to arrive. Waiting for years. All their scriptures pointed to it. The scriptures said that Abraham's blessed descendants are God's people. And those descendants, with all their goodness and messiness and sinfulness follow the law that Moses presents to them from God—most notably, the Ten Commandments—to help distinguish themselves as the people of God. And for years they both struggle and thrive depending on how much trust they place in God over themselves. Then prophets in scripture speak out to the Israelite people and remind them of their covenant with God; they declare that the people must turn around and repent when they stray from God. The prophets speak of the Messianic king who is to come and will renew God's kingdom. Both the law and the prophets speak of a future time where God's covenant people will be saved.

And now here is this Jesus. This man who Wisemen bow down to. Who performs miracles and claims that his healing hand is of God, not man. Who proclaims freedom for the trapped and hurting. Who encourages forgiveness over revenge. Who states that God is making a new thing and says we can all be a part of it.

In our Old Testament reading we heard about Moses. Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with a new set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments—a new set because he broke the first set in anger upon discovering that the Israelite people had built their own idol, a golden calf, to worship instead of worshipping God. And so, after forty days and forty nights Moses comes back down the mountain with a new set of tablets for the Israelites. But what stands out most in this story is not the Ten Commandments on those tablets, it is that Moses' face is radiant—it is glowing with God's glory. Moses is the mediator between the Israelites and God and this is made even more clear after forty days of standing in God's presence: God's presence becomes a part of who Moses is. He becomes molded by God's presence, transformed—he is radiant. And this frightens the Israelites. This isn't something that a golden calf can cause. This is the work of a close relationship with God, with Yahweh. And so, after Moses calls the Israelites to him and tells them God's message, he veils

his face as to not overwhelm them. It is an interesting choice for Moses to hide God's radiance from the others and only unveil himself when he enters the Lord's presence.

For those of us who know this story and are attuned to the fact that the Israelites are going to keep sinning, to keep turning away from God time and time again, part of us wants to say to Moses, "don't hide God's glory—let the people be overwhelmed!" At least they'll be continually reminded that God is present with them. And maybe they'll even begin to want to spend more time in God's presence. Imagine what it would be like if everyone had glowing faces because they were entering God's presence so often?

But then, even when we know the story, perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to judge. How many of us can say we've veiled ourselves from others after being in God's presence? How many of us have stayed silent about God's goodness in our lives? Moses put on the veil to protect the Israelites from his radiance, but perhaps it was just as much about protecting himself, about preserving a feeling and an understanding that those around him couldn't seem to grasp onto in the same way. Perhaps we, too, put on the veil to protect ourselves from the judgement of others, to protect ourselves from being lumped in with other Christians who we don't want to be associated with due to their fundamental or extreme beliefs. Perhaps we put on the veil as a form of self-preservation rather than letting God's radiance shine. In her book *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To*, which is also the book being discussed at our Book Club after church today, the author, Lillian Daniel, addresses the fact that there are Christians who, for one reason or another, "have decided that the best policy for open-minded Christians is 'Don't ask, don't tell.' Stay in the closet. Don't share your faith." But, she goes on to say, "open-minded Christians have faith journeys that are reasonable, rigorous and real. That's worth sharing."¹

I think Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, would agree with that sentiment. In his letter he refers back to this moment with Moses and the veil that he wears. Paul claims that the radiance on Moses' face is not only due to closeness with God, but also with Christ—Christ is a part of that glory and, while Moses was an integral part of the relationship between God and God's people, Paul points to Jesus as the one who overtakes this role; Paul proclaims Jesus' superiority over Moses and interprets the veil over Moses' face as one that blinds the people from the brilliance of Jesus' divine glory, rather than protecting them from it. He claims that Jesus is the one who removes this veil. And when we see God's glory for what it truly is, we are set free by the Spirit. When we remove the veil and come into God's presence, into Christ's glory, we reflect that glory and it is transformational.

This brings us to Luke where the story of Moses is reflected in Jesus' transfiguration. Transfiguration: a moment of divine radiance. And this is what Peter, John and James become witness to while atop a mountain with Jesus. Jesus asks these three disciples to accompany him to the top of the mountain to pray. And while up there, Jesus is transformed, becomes "dazzling white." This alone would be enough to impress any witness, but then Jesus is joined by both Moses and Elijah. Why these two figures? Well, Moses and Elijah represent the two principal components of the Old Testament: the Law and the Prophets. Moses was the giver of the Law, and Elijah was

¹ Lillian Daniel, *Tired of Apologizing for a Church I Don't Belong To*, 25.

considered the greatest of the prophets. So, the fact that these two figures "spoke of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem" illustrates that the Law and the Prophets point forward to the Messiah and his sufferings. God's promises with God's people from back in the days of Abraham, and Noah, with Moses and the Israelites, spoken through prophets, *that* covenant is going to be upheld. God keeps God's promises.

Well, this is all just too much for Peter—too much in a good way. Despite feeling the weight of sleep pressing upon him, Peter is suddenly awakened to God's glory and that dazzling light, and as Moses and Elijah are about to leave he asks Jesus if they can all stay, and he offers to build accommodations for them all. He wants to hang out, to talk theology, or world issues, or whatever Moses and Elijah may want to discuss because WOW. Here we are on a mountaintop, with this dazzling light of glory and transformation, and Moses is here—MOSES. And Elijah is here. ELIJAH. And how truly awesome is this heavenly vision?! Peter doesn't want it to end. In short, however, Peter misses the point.

To help Peter understand the Transfiguration, a cloud overshadows him and the other disciples and a voice proclaims "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" God doesn't tell Peter to contain Jesus, or possess him, or use him to sustain his happiness, but to *listen* to him. And listen particularly when he says that glory only comes through suffering. The experience of the Transfiguration is meant to point forward to the sufferings Jesus is about to experience. It is meant to strengthen the disciples' faith, revealing to them in a powerful way the divine hand that is at work in the events Jesus will undergo, the fulfilment of the law and the prophesies. This is why Moses and Elijah have been speaking "about his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem."

I know what that mountaintop, transfiguration moment feels like. Many of us have experienced them, even if we haven't thought of them as such. They are those moments when God comes bursting into our ordinary lives, if only fleetingly. Maybe you've felt it at the birth of a child. Or at the deathbed of a loved one. Maybe you've felt it while gazing at a vast expanse of stars on a quiet night. Or when a community has come together at the exact right time and place to make what can only be explained as a miracle occur. At times like these we are stirred inside, for we are aware that we are in the presence of God.

For me, it was a day when I sat with my summer camp staff after dinner. We all sat in a circle and we sang together with many harmonies. And we laughed and chatted with our neighbours. And I just had this overwhelming wave of warmth and peace wash over me and I knew in that moment that I had to always work in Christian communities. I didn't want the feeling to end. In fact, I think I even put off leading Bible Study that night just by a little bit so that we could sing just a few more songs than usual. God's glory was unveiled to me, and I wanted to sit in it for as long as I possibly could. To watch it transform those around me. To see the glow radiating off the faces of those around me.

But, like Peter, I couldn't stay in that moment forever. Otherwise, like Peter, I'd have missed the point. We cannot live our lives in the mountaintop. We have to come down at some point. If we continually try to recreate those glory-filled moments so that we can sit and bask in them for just a little longer, we're missing the point. Our faith is

strengthened by those genuine moments of glory, not defined by them. We have to learn to enjoy these special moments where we are aware of God's presence among us for what they are, and then try to learn from them. Where we may try to hold on to them tightly at first, over time, the grip loosens and we begin to forget. Nevertheless, they are reminders of a loving, magnificent God who is always present—whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

In other words, Jesus was as much the Son of God filled with the radiant life of the Spirit when he was in a valley, or in someone's home, or by a fig tree, or in the temple, or on a road as he was on the mountain. Peter and the others really saw Jesus for who he was while on that mountain, but he was just as much that divine person all the other times they saw and interacted with him. So too our occasional glimpses of divine reality don't stop being valid when their memory fades away. We must listen to our transfiguration experiences because they point us to the ever-present power of God. As the author John H. Westerhoff states, "Our ordinary perception limits us to the surface of life, leads us to the illusion that there is nothing beyond it, and keeps us bogged down in our disappointments and confusion. Our extraordinary glimpses of the divine reveal to us the length and breadth and depth of the God who loves us and is with us always."

Moses entered God's presence and his closeness with God reflected off him and made others aware of God's presence, and the way God molds us to be more like God through that presence. Paul said to remove the veil that keeps us from Christ's glory—the glory of the One who is chosen by God and whose glory, through the Spirit, sets us free. Peter reminds us to wonder in awe at those moments when God breaks through our ordinary lives and shows us God's glory, but also not to possess or later dismiss those moments; let them be what they are: times of deepening and strengthening.

May we live lives unveiled, ready to reflect glory, whether or not we are on that mountaintop. Amen.