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**Transfiguration- Pull Up the Veil**

by Pastor Clarissa Martinelli

Indelibly etched in the memory of all who lived through the middle period of the 20th century is the image of a mourning Jackie Kennedy, draped in a waist-length black veil, as she watched the funeral procession for her husband, President John Kennedy. Five years later first Coretta Scott King and then Ethel Kennedy would wear black veils in mourning for their assassinated husbands Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy. By the time of former President Lyndon Johnson's state funeral in 1973, the long-standing custom of the funeral veil seems to have vanished.

The veil is prominent in our three biblical stories today. In our first lesson, Moses, fresh from a direct encounter with God, puts on a veil after revealing his glowing countenance to the people. In Luke's Gospel, at the Transfiguration, three disciples of Jesus are veiled in a cloud and they are terrified. This veil is lifted for them when they hear a voice saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to Him." St. Paul uses 'veil' as a metaphor for whatever prevents us from seeing the full truth about God. Removing the veil is not something we mortals can do at our own initiative. Rather, Paul credits the Holy Spirit for lifting the veils that blind us and for effecting in us a transformation 'from one degree of glory to another.'

A theologian writes:

*Paul had enough experience in ministry . . .to know  
that no one falls head first into the pool of God's transforming love.  
(No one) emerges fully formed as a perfect reflection of Christ.  
The work of God's justifying and redemptive Spirit  
moves in human lives from one degree of glory to another.*

On the church calendar, today is Transfiguration Sunday. It marks a unique happening in Jesus' public ministry, and it is observed on the Sunday just prior to the beginning of Lent as a way of setting the tone or creating a context for our Lenten journey. So there is a particular story to be told today, the story of that transfiguration event. However, from my perspective, there is an earlier story that can be helpful in linking the transfiguration narrative. So we begin this morning with two stories: the first an episode in Jesus' life that is told in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke and the second, a much earlier account from the time of Moses as read in our Old Testament Scripture.

The Gospel writers tell us that as the scene around Jesus was intensifying, as the number of his followers was increasing and the challenges from the religious establishment were becoming more regular and more pointed, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him and went up on a mountain to get away, to claim some quiet time. While they were there, a most extraordinary thing happened. The disciples were startled out of their sleepy state by a sudden awareness that Jesus' appearance had changed—changed dramatically. He had been transfigured. He was literally glowing. The light was so bright that it hurt their eyes. A combination of fear and awe overwhelmed them, and they wondered what to do. And then they saw in the light Moses and Elijah standing with Jesus. Peter, always the outspoken one, made an attempt to respond to all of this by suggesting that they could build three booths there on the mountain as symbolic dwelling places. But instead of getting a response to this impromptu idea, they heard a loud voice saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." And when the three disciples looked up, the light was gone and only Jesus was standing there.

These three startled and bewildered disciples didn't know what to make of what they had witnessed. They had seen Moses and Elijah, symbols of the law and the prophets, the shapers of the Hebrew faith. And they had seen Jesus as never before—seen him transfigured, seen him "in all his glory." As they rubbed their eyes wondering if they really had seen this phenomenon, Jesus tells them to keep what they had witnessed to themselves—and that confirms it for them. They had seen and experienced the glory of God reflected in Jesus and now that image, that light, was part of them.

The second story occurred during a much earlier time. It comes out of the book of Exodus, from the wilderness period when the Israelites were wandering between Egypt and the Promised Land. Moses had returned from an encounter with God carrying the two stone tablets containing God's commandments for the people. But seeing the people in the midst of enthusiastic worship of the golden calf, Moses dropped the tablets and they broke into pieces. (Some of you can picture Charlton Heston with a long white beard and a flowing colorful robe standing in the midst of a mass of surprised sinful people.)

Well, following that dramatic scene, Moses goes back to the mountain, spends forty days interacting with God and then returns with new tablets. This time when he returns, he has a glow about him. The text says, "The skin of his face was shining and they were afraid to come near him." But they do gather and Moses shares with them the message from God, including the commandments inscribed

on the stone tablets. When he finishes speaking, Moses puts a veil over his face so the people will not have to continue to deal with the glow. And apparently that became his pattern from then on. When he was communicating with God or sharing God's word with the people, the veil would be lifted, but at all other times, it would be down.

What was that all about you might wonder? Some among us might conclude that Moses just got a good sunburn being up in the thin mountain air for 40 days without his SPF30 sunblock. But the ancient Hebrews saw light as the expression of God's glory. They were so convinced of the power of that brightness that a well-known saying of that time claimed, "you could not look upon the face of God and live."

No human being could stand up to the overwhelming glory of God. That belief put Moses into a special category. Whether he had looked God in the face or not, he had obviously spent enough time in the presence of God that he had picked up some of the glow of God's glory, and while it hadn't killed Moses, the people didn't want to take any chances—thus the veil.

So we have two stories. Each of these stories is trying to communicate to us something about the nature of God, trying to help us imagine the unimaginable, to have some way to represent the awesome glory of God. When I find these accounts to be a little difficult to work with, when I try to think of other ways to present the idea of a God who is truly beyond our ability to conceive or describe, I realize that symbols, representations, analogies, images are all we have to work with. And somehow the image of overwhelming light—high intensity brightness—becomes a reasonable way to communicate the idea. As the writer of First John says, "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

So these two mountaintop stories—Jesus' transfiguration in the presence of Peter, James, and John, and Moses with his shining face transmitting God's commandments to the Hebrew people—both become encounters with an overpowering light that represents the glory of God. In these accounts, we have a validation of both Moses and Jesus—a way for their contemporaries to understand the legitimacy of their message, indeed of their whole life and ministry.

But since none of us are about to be face-to-face with either Moses or Jesus, what does all of this light and glory business have to do with you and me? Here we turn to our scripture lesson for the morning from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, where we are confronted by his call for boldness—boldness that Paul saw as

particularly lacking when he looked back at the encounters between the Hebrew people and the shiny-faced Moses. Paul is anxious to set aside the superstitions or mythologies of earlier generations that caused them to live in fear of God's presence—that caused Moses to cover himself with a veil. We have, Paul says, spent too much time pulling down—hiding behind—veils in our lives. We have not allowed ourselves to be touched or to be transformed by the light of Christ.

So Paul encourages the church community—you and me—with these words: “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.” That's the invitation, to be bold. Yet we like to keep that veil handy.

When a coworker asks us, “How was your weekend?” we are quick to reply with comments about our travels or about the movies or sporting events we watched, where we ate and what we read in the newspaper, but we make no reference to our time of worship. We pull down the veil.

When a new neighbor moves into our building, we are quick to offer helpful hints about our favorite restaurants and dry cleaners, about specialty stores and commuting times, but we don't bother to talk about the congregation of faithful Christians that is our spiritual home. We pull down the veil.

When our children are working to sort out right from wrong, we offer our sage counsel and try to help them think through their dilemma without any mention of the underlying Christian beliefs that help us steer our course through difficult waters. We pull down the veil.

When we write a note of sympathy to a friend who has lost a loved one, we manage to fill the page with kind and gentle words that make no reference to the faith that offers us hope in the face of tragedy and life in the face of death. We pull down the veil.

When we reach out to help the needy in our community with basics like food, clothing and shelter, we describe it as “charitable giving” rather than tying our response to Christ's call to love our neighbors. We pull down the veil.

Paul invites us to be “the light in the city” but in a new and more personal way. He points us beyond programs, important as they are for extending the love of Christ into the heart of our community. Paul puts the primary emphasis on each of us as individuals—on our being the light in our city or wherever we are called. Rather

than being afraid of the glory of God, rather than pulling down a veil to spare ourselves and others that brightness, you and I need to be mirroring that light—that glory of God—into the workplaces, homes, and neighborhoods where we spend our time.

Bold and unashamed, we need to do more than “hold” our beliefs; we need to embody them, to let them shine. Commentator Terence Fretheim says that the brightness of Moses’ skin suggests “intensity, zeal, vigor, and vitality, warmth and passion.”

The stories on this Transfiguration Sunday invite us into our own encounters with God; invite us to open our eyes and become aware of God’s presence and reflect God’s glory; invite us to live lives of intensity, zeal, vigor and vitality, warmth and passion; invite each of us to lift the veil and to live with boldness, shining as a light in all the places we will go and collectively, all of us together, shining as a light in the community, to the glory of God.

On this Transfiguration Sunday and throughout the year—may it always be so.

Amen. Amen. Amen.