

Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C
Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
II Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

“To veil or not to veil?” that is the question. What a strange image that runs through our scriptures this morning.

It starts in our story from **Exodus**. **When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, he didn’t know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and the Israelites knew; they could see that he was *different*; it showed all over his face; his skin, it was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.**

Have you ever had that experience? Where someone you know has clearly had some sort of *transformative experience*—we might even call it a *spiritual experience*—and *they’re just different*, they’ve *changed*, and it’s a little *unsettling*, even a little *scary*. What does this change mean? What will it mean for the other person, and what will it mean for me? What will it mean for my relationship *with* this person who is changed? **Radiance** and **glory** in another person—these are most *unsettling*.

But Moses called to Aaron and the leaders of the congregation, and they returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. The *transformed* person understands that this *change* is *disturbing*, so *he’s got to reach out toward* them and let them know that there is *something in him* that they can *still recognize*—**his voice**—just enough *connection* and *comfort* that **they are willing to return to him.**

And **Moses** is *strategic*, he doesn’t start *big*, he starts with a *small group*—just **Aaron and the leaders of the congregation**. He knows that *building some trust there* is *essential* to *building trust across the whole community*. When we’re *unsettled*, it often takes someone we *trust* to say, “*It’s okay to come closer.*” **Moses** got this important step, and having tended to this task of *building trust* well—which is really about *meeting people where they are and walking the relationship forward slowly*—having *built some trust that could ripple out*, **all the Israelites came near, and Moses gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.**

But it’s hard to be face-to-face with **glory** all the time—it’s just a lot of *energy* to navigate—so **when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but 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, the 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.**

Moses knew **when to veil and when not to veil**. He understood that when it was **just he and the Lord**, it’s *full-on glory time*—*receiving all that glory, drinking in all that glory, letting God transfigure you through and through*. **Moses** knew that, though *unnerving*, the **Israelites needed to see that kind of glory, needed to know that God can change us that profoundly; Moses** knew that **the people needed to hear all that God longed to say to them**. And **Moses** understood the **dance of putting the veil back on to give the people of God a chance to integrate that glory into themselves before going deeper into this process of transformation.**

This **veiling-and-unveiling dance** is *good* and *necessary* because **full-on glory shatters us**, and **you've got to have some space to put the pieces back together into a new pattern**. *For Moses, for us, having experienced glory, there is no going back to as it was before.*

This is what **Paul misses**. He sees the *veiling* as a **problem indicative of the Israelites unwillingness to hear and their hardness of heart**. I think **Paul misreads** the Exodus story. I get that. Prior to reading this story this week, I had always *misread* it, too; I had always thought that **Moses took off the veil when he went in to talk with the Lord, and THEN, put it on when he came out to tell the Israelites what God said because they couldn't handle hearing what God had to say, BUT THAT'S NOT HOW THE STORY GOES**. Moses comes out and talks to them face-unveiled. They *can* hear what God has to say; they just *need a little breather* from all that glory to *integrate* what God has said before hearing the next piece. That's *very different* from **hardness of heart**; *that's* working with our very real human limitations when it comes to how fast we can move along the process of transformation.

And truth be told, **Paul understands** that *transformation is a process*, too. Hear again what he says to the Corinthians, **“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 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.”**

“All of us are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” We are continually being transformed moving deeper into glory, all of the time.

And this is the piece that **Peter** has such a hard time with. He *sees the glory*. He *sees Jesus' appearance change, just like the Israelites saw with Moses*, and he *sees* how **the veil between the realms lifts** and how **Moses and Elijah are right there with Jesus**. *Peter is riveted by the glory*, and he *wants to capture it, like lightning in a bottle, and keep it right there. But glory isn't to be contained in some location or dwelling place or experience—glory is the energy that radiates out when transformation is underway*. Peter sees it, but he's *not* letting it change him, and we know this because, while **Peter was blown away by seeing Moses and Elijah and Jesus talking with one another, he didn't tune into what they were saying**.

They were talking about **Jesus' departure that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem**. They were talking about the crucifixion to come. *Transformation always involves letting something go, letting something die, shedding something*. Peter wants to **nail that glory down, right there without letting the process keep moving toward the dying that will lead to resurrection**. Peter is settling for **vicarious glory, instead of the glory that comes when we die and rise with Jesus**.

God sees that **Peter is too mesmerized by the experience**; Peter is *seeing part of it, but not the fullness of it*; it's just *a little too much* for Peter to take in the full implications of what is happening and what is being said. So, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, **“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”**

God veils Peter with that cloud to reorient him to the bigger picture—“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him! Peter, you've got to understand that gaining your life is going to involve losing it; you've got to understand that rising is going to involve dying; you've got to understand that glory will change you through and through, and that is not an easy process. Peter, you're new life is going to

mess with your old one—in time, you will understand just how costly, and glorious, all this will be.” Peter needed some veiling to take in the fullness of all that was happening around him *and* to him; Peter needed some veiling to hear and integrate *all* that Jesus and Moses and Elijah and God were trying to tell him. God gets the dance that has to be done with us; so does Jesus—*veiling and unveiling*—it’s just *the dance we have to do to be changed from one degree of glory to another.*

Too much glory can cloud our capacity to see, and *paradoxically*, entering the cloud can clear our sight, reorient us, help us to see things in a fuller way, help us to understand the whole *and not just* the part.

You know, *the story of the transfiguration goes on.* The next day Jesus and Peter and his companions come down off the mountain, and they are met with a crowd. A man calls out to Jesus about his son, his only child, who is seized by a spirit that just won’t let his boy go. The man had begged Jesus’ disciples to cast it out, but they couldn’t do it. Oh, Jesus is frustrated. “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon dashed the boy to the ground. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The disciples could only see *a part* of the picture. They *knew* the power and glory of casting out demons—they had seen Jesus do it so many times—but *they missed the whole.* They focused on casting out the spirit, *not engaging it.* They *only* saw the spirit; they *didn’t see a father*, and they *didn’t see his precious son.* They *only* got the glory part *without the deeper transformation that was needed to make the whole WHOLE.* Jesus didn’t simply try to cast out the unclean spirit and send it to the outer darkness; *Jesus engaged it head-on; Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit.* And, *he healed the boy*, and he *gave the boy back to his father.* Jesus *healed and restored the relationship.* When we only focus on *the part*; we can’t heal *the whole.* *Jesus got that; his disciples didn’t.*

The deeper our transformation goes, the more we see *the whole*, and *not just the parts*; the more we understand and embrace *paradox*; the more we live in the *tensions* and see them as *necessary pressures* to pull us along the path of transformation. The deeper our transformation goes, the more we can move in the rhythm of veiling *and* unveiling, full-on mind-blowing glory *and* disorienting clouds that reorient our sight.

“*To veil or not to veil?*” that may have been our *original question*, but the answer lies in knowing the importance and place of *both.* Transformation, transfiguration, *will always involve both.* Amen.

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