

“Mystery and Glory – Living Unveiled”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

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The season of Epiphany concludes with a light display rivaling a Super Bowl halftime show. I often quip that people don't normally put Transfiguration Sunday on their calendars, nor do I suspect you spent this past week humming transfiguration hymns, if you even have any favorite transfiguration hymns. Still, the last Sunday before the Lenten season is about light and radiance. From Moses with a face so bright he placed a veil over it when away from God's presence, we now turn to what we call Jesus' transfiguration, during which his face also radiated, and his clothes became so dazzling white you'd think it was a commercial for laundry detergent.

As we hear our lesson, I invite you to try to see past the dazzle of the light spectacle, and hear God's presentation of Jesus to the world. At his baptism, [in Luke's Gospel], God announced, “You are my son, my beloved.” At that time, it is not clear if others heard the words or if it was a private exchange between parent and child. But when God speaks these words again at the transfiguration, they are meant for the three disciples who ascend the mountain with Jesus.

Let us hear Luke's account of Jesus' transfiguration, in Luke 9:28-36:

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly the disciples saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus. ³¹Moses and Elijah appeared in glory and were speaking of Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw Jesus' glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they 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, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and 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. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Many of us have had eye-opening experiences, where we have seen people we thought we knew well doing things we would not expect. It might be the friend, so serious, diligent and precise, who then appears onstage in a comedy, or sings at a karaoke night, with a free spirit that surprises. Perhaps it is a co-worker who never seems serious, jokes about everything, who you unexpectedly discover works as a Hospice volunteer. Sometimes we see people we thought we knew in a new way. One way to approach Jesus' transfiguration is with a focus on how the three disciples closest to Jesus will see him in a new way after their time with him on the mountain.

Peter, James and John witness Jesus' face change, and his clothes become dazzling white. Then the two patriarchs of the faith appear; Moses and Elijah, each of whom have had their own mountaintop experiences with God. The three were chatting about Jesus' departure to be accomplished in Jerusalem. We naturally link the word departure to Jesus' death, but the word translated "departure" is *exodos*. This is important, because *exodus* means not only departing from one place, but going to a new place, a better place, a promised land.

The transfiguration is a witness to God's glory, a God who can assemble Moses, Elijah and Jesus in one place. Yet, underlying the spectacle and the cameo appearances of past leaders, is God's intent to announce who Jesus is.

This announcement has been anticipated in Luke, as just previously, Jesus asked his disciples who the crowds were saying he was. The answer came back, "John the Baptist, or Elijah." Jesus then asked, "Who do you say I am?" We recall Peter affirmed Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ of God.

This sets up God's declaration on the mountaintop to the three, tired disciples, "This is my son, my Chosen." Yet, then came three more words – three words of instruction – "Listen to him." God sets apart Jesus from Moses and Elijah, making it clear Jesus is the one who will lead them in the new *exodos* to Jerusalem. "Listen to him." Listen to my Son as you journey.

The people of Israel had seen God's holiness in the shining face of Moses. Now, the three disciples have seen God's glory in the face of Jesus. Unlike the Greco-Roman gods who kept their distance and ruled from above, God's holiness can be witnessed face to face. In Jesus, God's presence would walk with them on the roads and in the villages of everyday life.

Sometimes we have mountaintop experiences, and then we talk about coming down to reality. At the end of our lesson, Jesus and the disciples are alone. In the very next verse, they come off the mountain and are immediately met by a large crowd. Of course the challenge for disciples, then and now, is not to just listen to Jesus, but to live his teachings when we meet the crowd, and face the reality of life and need. In a very real way, we can imagine Jesus asking his disciples, "Whose face will the crowd see in your words and actions?"

Let's take this idea of reflecting God's holiness and Jesus' teaching in our lives, and try to link it with the image of the shining face – not Moses' face, nor even Jesus' – but how our faces, meaning our lives, reflect or fail to reflect God's love, God's holiness, God's righteousness in our words and actions. The image of shining faces brought to mind a morning song.

*Good morning to you, Good morning to you,
We're all in our places, with [pause] bright shining faces,
Oh, this is the way to start a new day.*

Of course, perhaps as some youth awoke this morning at their winter retreat, and groggily came to breakfast, the altered version we used to sing at camp might be heard:

*Good morning to you, Good morning to you,
You look rather drowsy, In fact you look lousy,
Now is that the way to start a new day?*

The message is simple: start each day with a bright, shining face. Not bad advice. Another song came to mind from the musical "Bye, Bye Birdie." It also began with the idea of someone not having a good day. You probably know the opening lines:

*Gray skies are gonna clear up, put on a [pause] happy face;
Brush off the clouds and cheer up, put on a happy face.
[then] Take off the gloomy mask of tragedy, it's not your style;
You'll look so good that you'll be glad ya' decided to smile!
Pick out a pleasant outlook, stick out that noble chin;
Wipe off that "full of doubt" look, slap on a happy grin!
And spread sunshine all over the place, just put on a happy face!*

We may have been taught to project only bright shining faces, or even to "put on a happy face" faith. Go into a job interview with a dour face and you better have credentials that far outweigh anyone else. I like the idea of, "Smile, so the whole world smiles with you."

Our popular culture is full of formulas for how to be popular, successful, or rich. Even in Christian bookstores, you will find a number of their best sellers in the self-help section. Yet, it seems to me each formula for success or popularity comes with a mask, or perhaps a set of masks, and we learn which to wear when. Like theater masks, sometimes we put on smiling or laughing faces, and other times we portray a serious visage. I suspect many of us were brought up to know how to act, what face to wear, in various life situations.

Yet, living life wearing masks can lead to losing ourselves. We fail to know who we are, or to whom we belong. The danger of a mask-wearing culture – and friends, I'm going to say we all do it – the danger is we are not fully radiating the image of who God created us to be. Put on a happy face if it is your face, but not if it is a cultural mask.

Our God is not a masked God. Our God can be seen face to face, and welcomes us to enter with Moses into a safe place of knowing and being known. In that safe place, in the presence of God, we can reveal our true selves – the hurts, the jealousies, the hatreds, the fears we may hesitate to share openly with others. That is the life of prayer, times when we return to the mountain.

I also think God envisioned for us more than being safe in our prayerful one on ones with the divine. Jesus' challenge for us as the church is to allow ourselves to be safe with each other. It is not easy. Past hurts may continue to fester. I am very wary of being completely honest with someone who has broken a confidence. Yet, still, the church is called to be a safe place for unmasked people.

Moses was unveiled before God, but wore a veil to contain the brightness after such meetings. I think we are called to take off the veil, not only before God, but with each other. When the disciples came off the mountain, there was a sense in which a veil was lifted, and they knew they had seen the face of God in Jesus. What would linger for the disciples was God's instruction, "Listen to him."

This is our instruction as well. "Listen to him." Of course, Jesus has competition. In a culture where self-help books beg us to listen to them, and where Dr. Oz, or the View, or politicians, or even sports commentators vie for our loyalty by offering their own "listen to us" formulas and masks, God still tells us, "Listen to Jesus."

Our lives as disciples are all about living as if we have listened, by risking being unveiled, and trusting God can, through all our imperfections, reflect the shining, welcoming face of Jesus' love and grace through us.