

Exodus 34:29-35  
March 3, 2019

## The Light

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. The Transfiguration is a reference to the time when Jesus took Peter and James and John up on a mountain to pray and was changed before them. His appearance became very bright, and for a brief time he was accompanied by Moses and Elijah, two figures in Judaism representing the Law and the Prophets. It is seen as a revealing of Jesus' true nature as the Son of God. It is seen as a time when the presence of God rested upon Jesus in a remarkable way the witnesses couldn't miss.

The connection to Moses stands out. Moses, of course, is regarded as the founder of Judaism because he delivered to the Israelites the Law, most notably in the form of the Ten Commandments. Jesus is presented in the gospels as a "new Moses," the bringer of a new law.

### The Law

There is a corresponding event to the Transfiguration in the story of Moses. It occurred when Moses went to the mountain to receive the commandments for the second time. If you remember, the first set of tablets were destroyed when Moses came down from the mountain to find the Israelites dancing around the golden calf.

When he came with the second set of tablets he, like Jesus, was changed. The glory of God rested upon

him in a way that made him glow, so much that in order to be in the presence of the people he had to don a veil. The description is somewhat similar to that of Jesus on the mountain with Peter and James and John. Because I have focused on the Transfiguration story in the gospels each of the last few years, I have decided to focus on the incident with Moses this time.

### 10 Commandments

It is helpful to be reminded of just exactly what those commandments are. Can you name them? The first four regard one's relationship with God, the next six are about relationships with other people.

- 1 - You shall have no other gods before me.
- 2 - You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- 3 - You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- 4 - Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.
- 5 - Honor your father and your mother.
- 6 - You shall not murder.
- 7 - You shall not commit adultery.
- 8 - You shall not steal.
- 9 - You shall not give false testimony about your neighbor.
- 10 - You shall not covet (your neighbor's things).

It is, however, not the substance of the Law (or the Prophets) that snatches our attention, but the appearance of Moses after having been in God's presence. His face was radiant, so much that he covered it with a veil to shield it from the people, who

were afraid to come near him. It is this radiance that must be our central focus for the day.

## Radiance

I am not sure there is anything in our normal experience to capture the power of this radiance. Whenever people are at their dead-level best they will sometimes have a glow about them, not so much that they require a veil, but a glow nonetheless that might cause us not to look at them too long.

I thought of a memory of an experience at church about 25 years ago in South Carolina. There was a man in the church, a very sporadic attender, about whom I had been told that as a younger man he had played and sang in a rock and roll band. I went to visit him one day and as we were talking I asked if he would like to play and sing in a church service sometime. He said yes and we planned it for a particular Sunday.

He showed up with an amplifier which we sat on the platform next to the pulpit, and he played and sang a couple of hymns. I no longer remember which hymns he played. He was past the prime of his youth, a large man, a little unkempt and looking a little uncomfortable in his Sunday clothes. He played and sang as beautifully as anyone I have ever heard. He didn't seem to be performing but just lost in song singing to God in our presence.

Because I was on the platform, I could see the congregation. I was struck with the observation that no one was looking at him. Some were looking at the floor and others at the ceiling; some were looking to one side and some to the other but no one was looking at him. It was as if they were blinded by the sight of him. He was ordinary, but in that moment his playing and singing was extraordinary, and like a light that is too bright, they were compelled to look away.

Perhaps something like that is what happened to Moses. He was ordinary, but God's presence made him radiant with light. And Moses, like Jesus, like us, lived in a muddy and miserable world with all kinds of threats and much to fear. But even now, even for us, there are transfigured moments when maybe even we are better than we normally are, or we become involved in something transcendent.

At these times, people can be said to stand out. To stand out because of some extraordinary goodness is the meaning of the religious world, "holy." This kind of radiance is nothing compared to God's holiness, but since we have witnessed it, been promised it, and called to it, we are right to seek it and try to understand it.

## Holiness

To be holy means to be set apart and humanly speaking, it refers to those times when we rise up and become better than we ordinarily are. God is holy because God is higher. In a relationship with God, we

are offered God's holiness. In that sense it is a human possibility. That is what happened to Moses. We know from the story of Moses that he was not always radiant with the presence of God's glory. Just the fact that at any moment in his life he did receive such radiance is instructive for us.

I was reading devotionally this past week when I ran across a Frederick Buechner set of lines I thought might help. They are lines about sacraments and rituals, religious acts that in one form or another all believers participate in, sometimes only going through the motions, not so aware of the meanings of the rituals. He writes:

“A sacrament is the breaking through of the sacred into the profane; a ritual is the ceremonial acting out of the profane in order to show forth its holiness. A sacrament is God offering holiness to people; a ritual is people raising up the holiness of their humanity to God.”

I think of a couple of moments from more recent history when people became transcendent in their lifting up of their humanity. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. He wrote better than he himself was or believed. His words are inspiring to us not because of his character, but because of the truthfulness of the words themselves.

Or Martin Luther King when he gave the famous, “I have a dream,” speech at the March on Washington in

1963. His achievement that day was an extension of the best we have in ourselves to be. In smaller, lesser known ways the same things happen to us;

when we love the unlovable, or forgive what seems to be unforgivable, when we turn away from anger, resentment; from greed and desire; from fear, and with a strange and vibrant generosity in the face of overwhelming odds against any of our goodnesses making any kind of difference, we give them anyway in the strong faith and the firm hope that God's presence will yet shine down on each of us and make us radiant like Moses was with an extraordinary brilliance that can't be hidden, or shouldn't be hidden, and gives meaning to the instruction of Jesus that we are the light of the world, shining out in all of God's brilliance into a world that is yet rife with its own ordinary darkness.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)