

Sunday March 3rd, 2019  
Transfiguration Sunday

**PRAYER:** O God, you reveal yourself and declare your will to people in every age. We come unto you as have our forebears, seeking the gift of your countenance and the guidance of your spirit. But we do not come along. We bring with us the likenesses of all the false gods to whom we have bowed our knee, and all the false prophets to whom we have inclined our ear.

O Lord, break down the temples of all these false gods, and deliver us from their agents. And let us hear again the voice that said of Jesus, "This is my chosen; to this one you shall listen!"

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** "The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:8, 10-12 RSV)

**OFFERTORY SENTENCE:** Jesus said, "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Luke 16:13)

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious and Loving God, it is you who knows our every weakness even before we indulge them and it is you who meets our needs long before we are even aware of them. You are truly mighty, marvelous, the Ruler of rulers and Lord of lords. It is a very humbling thing, and rightly so, to consider the distance between us-between your holiness and our fallenness. It is a reality that can reduce us to terrifying fear that causes us to withdraw from you and even from your people. However, having encountered your redeeming grace, we dare to approach you with boldness and confidence. We come before you not because of who we are but because of who you are; not because of what we do for you, but because of what you do for us; not because of the obedience with which we serve you, but because of the love with which you seek us.

So we come before you, O Lord, secure in the faith that, even though we deserve abandonment, you will never abandon us; that even though we can never earn your love, you love us anyway. We thank you that you continually and constantly are seeking to mold us into the people you created us to be. How you turn our feet to the paths of justice and compassion and generosity, truly overwhelms our souls.

Indeed, when we consider the cost to draw us to yourself, we are broken by humility. We see your love walking on the shores of Galilee, speaking comforting words to the lowly of heart, only to be met by the indignant cries of the powerful and the elite. We see your love moving to a ditch on the road to Jericho, rescuing the victim of highway robbery, only to be criticized for traveling a dangerous and risky path. We see your love chatting with a Samaritan woman, aware of her transgressions yet not condemning her, only to be condemned by the pious and self-righteous for being seen to indulge sinful behaviour.

Yes, Lord, we are humbled by your love, for we have helped drive us its cost. When the lowly are comforted, we are apt to speak condemnation rather than approval; when the victims of crime are aided, we are apt to blame the victim rather than aid the compassion; and when sinners are transformed by the love of their neighbours, we are apt

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to condemn the neighbours for the company they kept rather than commend the sinners for the change they have met. Forgive us, O God, for claiming for ourselves a grace that we deny others. Deliver us from the hypocrisy of our ways that they who look to us for compassion shall no longer turn from us in frustration.

Gracious God, who in Jesus Christ has endeared yourself to us, enable us so to walk among our neighbours that we shall endear Jesus to them. Help us to always remember, when they turn to us, to direct them to the Chosen Lamb of God, the one of whom you say, "This is my Son, listen to him!"

**BENEDICTION:** O Lord, whose passion for justice is offended by injustice, whose love for right is offended by wrong, and whose concern for equity is offended by inequity, send us forth so committed to you that your will and our will shall become one. Help us so to live that we no longer offend your concern for equity, your love for right, or your passion for justice. Amen.

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Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-43a  
“Should Have Stayed on the Mountain”

How proficient are you at reading signs and then following the instructions on those signs? Well I researched for some actual signs posted in public places that if I read them carefully, make me scratch my head. The first one appeared in a Laundromat, and it read: “Automatic Washing Machines: Please remove all your clothes when the light goes out.” Now if I did what the sign said, I would probably get arrested.

How about a sign in a SoHo office: “Would the person who removed the stepladder yesterday kindly bring it back-or further steps will be taken?” There was a sign in an office kitchen that I would struggle to obey, it read: “After the tea break, staff should empty the teapot and stand upside down on the drain-board.” Then there was the notice in a health food shop window: “Closed Due to Illness.”

In a London department store this sign appeared: “Bargain Basement Upstairs.” A notice was sent to the residents of the Wiltshire Parish in England: “Due to increasing problems with litter, louts, and vandals, we must ask anyone with relatives buried in the graveyard to do their best to keep them in order.” On a farm gate there appeared: “The farmer allows walkers to cross the field, but the bull charges.”

At a gas station this sign popped up: “Please do not smoke near the fuel pumps. Your life may not be worth much, but our fuel is.” Outside a secondhand shop: “We exchange anything: bicycles, washing machine, etc. Bring your wife along and get a wonderful bargain.” On a repair shop door: “We can fix anything. (Please knock hard on the door-The bell doesn’t work.)

It is one thing to see a sign, but something altogether different to try and understand the real intent of the sign. In our Old Testament lesson, we are told that Moses went up on the mountain and spent some time with God. In that time on the mountain he was given the Ten Commandments as the beginning of the law that would guide God’s people. But something else happened to Moses besides receiving tablets.

In spending time with God, Moses’ face had begun to shine or glow. In the Old Testament, God’s presence was often represented by the “shekinah” or the shining of God. Whenever God was represented, there was a glow; like when his angels visited humans. That same glow was present on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus stood and talked with Moses and Elijah that we read about in our Gospel lesson.

This glow that emanated from Moses was a sign; a sign that Moses had met God, and was profoundly affected by the encounter. The glow lent credibility to Moses leadership of the Hebrew people, because after all, God had spoken to him. If there was any doubt about whether Moses should lead Israel or not, people could just think, “Well no one else is glowing with the Shekinah.”

Now, there is a problem with religious signs; can anyone tell me what it is?

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Usually, signs like Moses' face glowing, cause fear in those who see such things. When people see what appears to be evidence of God's visitation to mankind, there is excitement, but also a lot of fear. There can also be a bit of hysteria as well, as we see when water stains, or other things, appear suddenly in what we might think are representations of Jesus' or Mary's face.

Signs though, from God, mostly cause the feeling of fear. So, we can understand how when every time Moses came to speak to the people, and his glowing face appeared, the people were so afraid that they failed to hear what he had to say. The same thing happened with the disciples in our Gospel lesson. Overcome by what they saw on the Mount of Transfiguration they had to be told by God himself to listen to Jesus.

The shining face of Moses was a real problem. How can you keep everyone's attention to listen to the law of God being read, when they are staring at your face, or afraid to look at you for fear they may get struck down?

So, there was an idea hatched by someone, maybe even Moses himself. Whenever Moses came out to publicly speak to the people, he wore a veil over his face, and when he was alone in his tent, or in worship with God, he removed the veil. Everyone seemed satisfied with the plan, and life went on. In fact, this situation went on for years, with Moses hiding his face behind a veil.

What the people of Israel didn't know was that, over the years of Moses hiding his face behind the veil, the glowing had faded. Over the years, Moses' bitterness and disappointment over Israel's disobedience, and God's refusal to let Moses into the chosen land, led to removal of the "She Kina", the shining presence of God. So, the veil remained, not to hide the glowing, but to hide the fact there was no glowing.

Thus, to preserve Moses' leadership, a ruse was perpetuated. The Apostle Paul picks up this thread in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 and makes the point that the true veil in that story wasn't the one over Moses' face, and whether to hide the glowing or to hide there was no glowing, but rather the veil that was a problem, was the one over the people's minds, so they could not see the truth.

Paul writes that their hearts were hardened; an expression that denotes impregnability. That is to say, nothing could penetrate their hearts. We are not talking literally about something physically piercing our hearts like a spear, but rather metaphorically that truth cannot pierce a person's mind or spirit. The people in Moses' day were so closed to the truth about everything, that they lived in a veiled world.

They failed to see the truth about the fading glory in Moses. They failed to see the truth about how they continually failed to live up to their obligations under the Old Covenant. They failed to see that even though they were heading to the Promised Land, they were still far away from God. They failed to see the truth that no matter how hard they tried to live up to every part of the law, they always fell short.

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However, the myth still persisted into Paul's day, and let us be honest, persists even today. The myth being, that if I try hard enough, follow every piece of God's law, I will succeed in pleasing God, and thereby receive my reward. But that is not the truth. If we believe this line of thinking, we are living with a veil over our minds and hearts.

In 2 Corinthians 3:7 are these words, "The old system of law etched in stone led to death, yet it began with such glory that the people of Israel could not bear to look at Moses' face. For his face shone with the glory of God, even though the brightness was already fading." Already, from the moment he came down the mountain, the glory had already begun to fade.

The futility of human effort, to fulfill the law, was already proving impossible, even as Moses came down the mountain with the tablets. The sins began to pile up, and soon the people of Israel had a real mess on their hands that no amount of sacrifice or prophetic words seemed to be able to address. The bad stuff just kept on accumulating. It is almost like the story of brothers Geno and Russell Capozziello.

Geno and Russell were owners of a Bridgeport, Connecticut wrecking company, who were fined \$900,000 for operating an illegal dump. The locals began to call the illegal dump site "Mount Trashmore". In 1986, on empty lots surrounding their facility, the brothers began dumping debris from buildings they had demolished. Eventually the mound of rubble and muck, covered two acres, and reached a height of thirty-five feet, the equivalent of a three-story building. (AP Press, Nov. 20, 1991)

The state ordered them to clean it up, but the brothers claimed there was no place to dump it legally in Bridgeport, and they could not afford to haul it away. While spending more than \$330,000 the previous year to have debris hauled away, they barely dented the pile. According to Geno, "It was never supposed to get this high." That's the way sin works. The effects of sin just keep piling up, accumulating beyond our control.

We become blind, shall we say veiled, to the truth, and when we are challenged or confronted about the accumulating effects of our sin, we are hard hearted. We don't want to talk about it, let alone see the truth. That isn't to say the problem has gone away; it rather means we are intentionally blinding ourselves to the crisis before us. I wish we had time to go over the book of Romans today, where Paul is very blunt about our state before God.

Here is a taste of what he writes as he quotes from the Psalms in Romans 3:10-18.  
*No one is good-not even one. No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one. Their talk is foul, like the stench of an open grave. Their speech is filled with lies. The poison of a deadly snake drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They are quick to commit murder. Wherever they go, destruction and misery follow them. They do not know what true peace is. They have no fear of God to restrain them.*"

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Then in verse 20 Paul says “*For no one can ever be made right in God’s sight by doing what his law commands. For the more we know God’s law, the clearer it becomes that we aren’t obeying it.*” With such harsh words about our spiritual condition, it is easy to feel crushed, and to lose all confidence in our futures, both in this world and in the next. Paul is right that the law simply shows my utter failure to live a moral life. Where shall we find hope if the old ways that Moses represented, have failed to give us any?

Maybe you are not quite convinced that this bleak assessment applies to you personally. Again, we go back to Paul’s letter to the Romans where he writes, “For all (not some or a few but all) have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” (Rom. 3:23) So I am sorry to inform us all that the net has been cast and we are in it. Now hold on, there is this other verse in Romans chapter 3 that I find hopeful.

In verse 24 Paul writes, “Yet, now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty.” Okay, God’s got our attention, because we certainly don’t want to be guilty, but how is this possible, since the law can’t save us? Verse 24 continues, “He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sin. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment of our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us.”

Paul is saying that Jesus saw the state we were in, with the consequences of sin and guilt piling up around us, and he willingly offered to haul it all away, at no cost to us, but at the cost of everything to Jesus. That’s the truth that needs to penetrate our hard hearts. The veil of self-righteousness can only be removed when we put our full faith in Christ Jesus. It is the truth behind every letter Paul writes. It is the truth behind every hymn, every sermon, every book ever produced in Christian history.

There was a young man who was working his way among the people in the gate area of an airport. At first his purpose was unclear but soon it was very apparent that he had an agenda. As the people waited for the boarding announcement to be made, he made his way around the departure lounge handing out copies of the little booklet *The Four Spiritual Laws*, doing the faithful work of evangelism.

In the gate area that day, there was an elderly man who was fast asleep in one of the chairs. The man was as deep in a sleep as anyone could be, but the young evangelist was undeterred in approaching him.

Sliding up to the slumbering man, the young evangelist tapped the man on the knee. When the old man woke, he was extremely startled. He blurted out, “Where am I? What’s going on? What’s happening?” The persistent young man simply and sternly said, “Sir! Are you saved?” “Yeah,” said the old man. “I guess I’m saved! I suppose I’m saved! Yes! I’m probably saved!” “That’s not good enough!” replied the young man.

“Can you tell me exactly when you were saved?” “Not exactly,” the old man answered. “It was almost two thousand years ago!” The slumbering man’s answer is good theology. Our salvation is dependent on what Jesus did two thousand years ago. That is when our salvation was purchased and we were delivered from the consequences of our sins.

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We may have just found out about it recently, but Jesus did what needed to be done long ago, and far away, on an old rugged cross. The Shekinah that emanates from him will never fade.

Are you tired of feeling like you are living in the dark, that the truth of your existence is somehow veiled from your eyes? Then it is time to trust Christ Jesus, with your faith, hope, and life: because the scriptures promise that if we turn to Jesus, the veil will be removed, and we will begin to reflect the glory of God just as Moses did so long ago. Only this time, like Jesus, it will not fade with the passing of time.