

## Does Your Face Shine?

### Exodus 34:29-35

Typically, a church worship service is a place where God's presence - in community is experienced. It evokes an emotional response. A sense of God's presence may be reflected in the radiance or glow on people's faces. God's presence may be felt in terms of shared smiles and warm greetings, fervent prayer, soul-stirring music, maybe even hand clapping, shouts of praise, and amens! At a relatively quiet point in a particular worship service, a young lad, perhaps six or seven years old and a child of the congregation, was sitting with his parents. He appeared to be restless. He turned around and saw all of the faces looking forward. His face was expressionless at first; then suddenly a big and broad glowing smile appeared. His smile called out smiles on the faces of others. Nothing was said, no words spoken, just a big broad grin spread across his face.

The child could not see his own face, but members of the congregation could. It was as if the entire congregation conveyed a sense of the presence of God in their midst with an emotional response to the child, and the child was smiling back with a big glow on his face. The smile and glow were part of the meaning of God's felt presence in the worshiping community. The glow on the child's face was in response to a congregation expressing their experience of God's presence.

Moses encountered the presence of God at Sinai, and the child encountered the presence and spirit of God through the community that surrounds him. **Archie Smith Jr.**

Our scripture stands as the conclusion of the significant events of the golden calf idolatry and subsequent divine punishment (32:1-35); Moses' intercession and divine reconciliation (33:1-34:9); the renewal of the covenant (34:10-28). Israel's apostasy confronted Moses on the return from Sinai and provoked him to destroy the stone tablets. God's anger over the sins of the people brought into question whether God was still with them. This set up the unusual dialogue, where Moses attempted to intercede with God, essentially saying, *"If we have this special relationship, Lord, and you won't go with us, how will anyone know we are special?"* Moses wanted to be reassured. The interaction seemed to reach its peak when God agreed and said his countenance would indeed lead Israel—but Moses was not finished. With amazing brashness he went on to ask one of the most remarkable questions in the Bible: he wanted to see God's glory as proof! This was a daring request because the Scriptures say that those who look at God will die. The majesty of an omnipotent sovereign is so great that a direct human encounter will be lethal. Yet this was exactly what Moses was asking: he wanted to be "up close and personal"! There were many stories of contact with God through dreams, messengers, and angels. There were countless prayers and conversations with God, but a direct encounter with God was and is rare indeed.

In our scripture Moses was spending his second "forty days and forty nights" fasting in God's presence as the Ten Commandments were written again "on the tablets" (34:28; see 24:15-18). Moses was confirmed as the one through whom God's presence would be most regularly and fully communicated. Moses was to function officially as the mediator between God and the people. He was to "speak and talk" with God, and then speak and talk with the people as his ongoing work for God and the people. Moses'

main function was to convey to the people the "words" (commandments) that God had spoken to him (34:32, 34; see 34:27-28), in order that the people might acknowledge obediently the "covenant" (34:28). With this new responsibility came an unusual aura; "the skin of his face shone," 34:29, 30, 35). Moses entered the cloud of smoke and fire on Mount Sinai (19:18-20); that cloud was connected with the presence of God's "glory" (*kabod*); and as a results Moses' skin "glowed" and "radiated" with the divine *kabod*, since Moses had been in God's presence for so long. This radiance became a visible sign to the people that Moses was still the peoples' direct source of communication with God. Thus they were allowed to see the radiance of Moses' face each time Moses returned from being in the presence of the divine *kabod*. **Wallace Eugene March**

This light, reflected in Moses' face appears to be similar to that glory of the Lord that shone around those Bethlehem shepherds, leaving them "terrified" (Luke 2:9). This reflection also reminds us of that transfiguring brightness that surrounded Jesus on another mountaintop (Luke 9:28-36). Perhaps that is what holy ground feels like.

This splendor shines with the light of God's reflected presence, a light that illumines God's word and renders God's people conspicuous, marking us as witnesses to the Lord of life. The unbearable brightness of Moses' face was the residue of God's steadfast love for Israel, his faithfulness to them in the face of betrayal and even death, and his gift to them of a dignity and honor they did not choose and would never have chosen for themselves. They were meant for shining, and they shone, unaware of the weight of glory that was theirs in the God who made his face to shine upon them (Num. 6:25).

The concept of the glory of God is an abstraction that tries to encompass the power and majesty of God. In Hebrew the word is *kabod*, literally, "to be loaded down with riches." It refers to God's awesome power and a bright—even blinding—clouded aura. This aura dramatically indicates God's nearness, while still concealing God's awesomeness. While the glory of God may be an elusive concept, a blessing of riches is something most of us can understand. We recognized it in some of the people we most admire. Every now and then we encounter people who have a depth, or joy, or even a kind of charisma that, as we get to know them, we discover grows from a deep personal relationship to God. These folks commonly talk about their relationship to God as one filled with great abundance. And how often have we heard the phrase "Her face just glows," as others try to describe the aura they see in these people?

As Moses returned from Sinai, we would expect the focus of the text to be on the tablets, but it is not. Moses' face stole the show. Our scripture says that Moses' face "shone" because he had been talking with God. He had been visually transformed by his divine encounter. What had begun with a discussion of God's face turned to a discussion of Moses' face.

Two things we learn as people of faith from Moses' experience. The first is "*Our closeness to God molds who we are.*" The second is that while one of the most defining obligations of all people of faith is to do justice, the enduring message of Moses' encounter is that we are also called to be in the presence of God. The two are inextricably connected.

There is a popular trend in our contemporary culture to focus on "doing the right thing" and to be known for acts of compassion. Much is admirable about politicians, movie stars, and rock stars speaking out and offering great acts of charity, but the risk is that this leads us to figure backward: it reasons

that if one does good things, one must therefore be good and close to God. The fundamental point is that proximity to God is the necessary and defining first step. It is the proximity that enables us to embody and radiate God's love in the world. It is the closeness that calls us and sustains us.

Meister Eckhart, the fourteenth-century German theologian, once said, "We should not think that holiness is based on what we do but rather on what we are, for it is not our works that sanctify us, but who sanctifies our works." **Nick Carter**

Vincent van Gogh painted a number of ordinary objects: a yellow chair, a vase of sunflowers, a collection of small sailboats beached by the sea. Among his compositions is a painting of a pair of old work boots, almost worn out, each boot leaning against the other. At first glance, nothing could appear more ordinary or unglorious. But as one looks at the painting, one notices that the boots are illumined from beyond the painting and that they describe a life not just of labor and toil, but of vast human dignity, even beauty. The boots are glorious, not because their style is chic, but because it is their peculiar splendor to reflect the humanity that has labored so long and so hard in their use. These boots cry out that their owner was made for the glory of God, that to be a human being is to be a glory-bearing, glory-reflecting, glory-bound creature. That is surely the meaning of such transfiguring glory: to see in its brightness an anticipation of the glory of the risen Lord and to find in him the destiny of every "ordinary" life. For he is, as Karl Barth reminds us, "the one who makes us radiant. We ourselves cannot put on bright faces. But neither can we prevent them from shining. Looking up to him, our faces shine." **Thomas W. Currie**

So the question is: Does your face shine?

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