

In God's Presence

Last Sunday After the Epiphany (Transfiguration Sunday)

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ 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, ³⁵ 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.

Our scripture invites us to think about what it means to be in the presence of God.

The context of this scripture is important; the incident was immediately after the golden calf idolatry and subsequent divine punishment (32:135); Moses' intercession and divine reconciliation (33:1-34:9); and the renewal of the covenant (34:10-28). In today's short passage, Moses is portrayed as the one through whom God's presence would be most regularly and fully communicated. Moses had just spent "forty days and forty nights" fasting in God's presence as "he" wrote again "on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments" (34:28; see 24:15-18).

Our text has to do with having been in God's presence and with glory, subjects to discomfit the self-consciously humble. Were it simply about Moses's bringing the law down from the mountain, we could understand the ethical significance with little effort. Were it simply about Moses's special stature before God, we could easily assimilate that to our notions of effective religious leadership. But this talk of God's presence and glory are strange. For one thing, Moses did not even perceive it. For another, the veil he chose to put on was not for himself, but to protect the people from being overwhelmed. Finally, the glory that shone from being in God's presence was, apparently, a splendor that was

thrust on Moses in his role as the bearer of God's word, commissioned to deliver to God's people the Ten Commandments.

Those of us who have been nurtured on the "teaching of the cross" find ourselves feeling a bit ambivalent about the language of glory. To be sure, our creeds and confessions speak of "the glory of God" and of our duty to "glorify and enjoy God," but in truth glory has become something of an abstraction to us, who have left its definition largely to the Pentecostals and the lyrics of older hymns. Luther and Calvin taught us to be suspicious of glory, comparing the teaching of glory unfavorably to the teaching of the cross, and emphasizing the virtues of self-denial and humility.

But does God shine and do God's servants shine after being in God's presence? What are we to make of the brightness of which this text speaks? This light, reflected in Moses' face and veiled to protect the people, seems to have something in common with that glory of the Lord that shone around those Bethlehem shepherds, leaving them "terrified" ([Luke 2:9](#)). Or perhaps we think of that transfiguring brightness that surrounded Jesus on another mountaintop ([Luke 9:28-36](#)). This story of Moses suggests that God's glory does shine and that its beauty disconcerts. This glory silences our religious chatter and renders us blinking and confused in its light. Perhaps that is what holy ground feels like. In any case, that is how Peter and the disciples felt, at least as recorded in Mark's Gospel, for in speaking to Jesus, Peter, we are told, "did not know what to say, for they were terrified" ([Mark 9:6](#)). Far from being an abstraction this glory appears in Scripture to be something of a threat. What are we to make of it?

Perhaps its reflected nature is a clue. Moses did not shine as a result of his own charisma. In his role as bearer of the divine word to Israel, Moses was invited into conversation with God and given words to say and stamped with the glory those words evoked. In recent years we have been taught to think of God as vulnerable, so it comes as something of a surprise to hear that God is glorious and that spending time in God's presence and proclaiming God's word brings with it a certain splendor. This scripture will

not allow such splendor to be hidden under the bushel basket of some well-contrived modesty. These "ten words" (v. 28) are glorious precisely as they bear witness to the One whom heaven and earth cannot contain, and yet whose glory it is to be Israel's God. Aaron and the others were right to be afraid to come too near Moses or to look at his face. This splendor shone with the terrible light of God's reflected presence, a light that illumines God's word and renders God's people conspicuous, marking them as witnesses to the Lord of life.

Often we do not think of God's word as all that glorious or God's people as shining all that conspicuously from being in God's presence. Scripture is a text to be studied, a word to be proclaimed to a gathering of not even very ambitious sinners. There is nothing self-evidently glorious about our congregation. Yet Moses' face shone. Jesus' figure became dazzling bright. This glory, Basil the Great observed, far from being an abstraction, brings us near to the disturbing events of Easter morning, where the disciples' bafflement and joy and even terror came face to face with the risen Lord, whose splendor dispelled and continues to dispel the gloom of death itself. 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).

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**

I know what you must be thinking: "I'm not a leader like Moses – this scripture was only about him. But as Christians we are all bearers of the Word of God. What we learn from this scripture: First, preparing to be a faithful bearer of God's word involves time alone with God. God spoke to Moses "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exod. 33:11). Moses received instructions and prepared himself to bring God's word to the people at Mount Sinai. Maybe your way of spending time with God is reading through the Bible, reading the Daily Bread, praying, journaling or listening to praise or Taize' music.

Second, *The Glow Comes from Time Alone with God*. The aura on Moses' face came from standing in the presence of the Divine. Others may notice the glow before it is seen by you, the one who bears it. This can happen when your life is informed by life in the community and tradition and grounded in prayer and hope.

An Illustration of God's presence and glory. When we gather to worship God's presence may be felt in terms of shared smiles and warm greetings, fervent prayer, and soul-stirring music! 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 once again conveyed a sense of the presence of God in their midst with an emotional response, this time 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-Horeb, and the child encountered the presence/spirit of God through the community that surrounded him.

Together, Moses and the people were able to change from fear and misunderstanding to acceptance and cooperation. Such communication and willingness to change informs and reforms the spiritual life of the congregation. It encourages trust and enables ways of being accountable to the Holy One and to one another. **Archie Smith Jr.**

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