

The Transfiguration of Our Lord 2022 (C)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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Luke 9:28-36; Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

When I was in college, I took a year-long course on Western Civilization. And when we were studying the Renaissance, for the first time I saw a photo of a statue of Moses. The famous statue is by Michelangelo and it is in the Vatican, in Saint Peter's basilica. And Moses has two little horns coming out of his head. Maybe you've seen photos, like I have. Or maybe you've been to Rome and seen it in person. They are little horns, like a baby goat. But it's not something that you would expect.

The horns of Moses are actually found in today's first reading. More accurately, it depends on how you translate today's first reading. Exodus was written in ancient Hebrew. Gail just read these words to us: *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.* His face shone. The verb that we are translating as "shine" is *qaran* and it only occurs in the entire Old Testament in this story. And it seems that it can be translated either as growing horns or as shining. This kind of Hebrew translation is above my pay grade, but what I do understand is that it is a strange word and there is no way to corroborate its meaning by comparing it to how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. Jerome— one of the most influential Bible translators in the history of Christianity— Jerome chose to go with horns rather than with shine.

And Jerome's Bible became the Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, and was Michelangelo's Bible. And so when Michelangelo was commissioned to make a statue of Moses, he put horns on the statue. Because today's first reading from Exodus says so. At least in that particular translation. We can be absolutely certain that Jerome knew he had a choice between shining and having horns. And he chose to go with horns, even when it seems self-evident to someone like me that surely Exodus means shining.

If Jerome is right, then Michelangelo is right. But if Jerome and Michelangelo are right, then it makes no sense to read this story today. Because the word of the day is "shine." Jesus shines. Moses shines. The glory of God shines. Today is the celebration of the transfiguration of Jesus. A moment when his appearance was temporarily altered. And whatever uncertainty we may have about Moses and Exodus and Jerome and Michelangelo, we can be certain that Jesus did not grow horns! Luke writes, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."

The common theme shared by our readings is that the glory of God can be glimpsed, but we cannot experience it in its totality. We can see God's perfection only temporarily and only imperfectly. So in the first reading, Moses becomes supercharged with brightness because he talked directly to God. God is so bright and glorious that no one really can survive a face-to-face meeting. If you look directly into the sun for very long, you risk permanent blindness. According to Exodus, it's the same with God. But Moses survived it. But Moses then became a risk to his fellow human beings. The secondary brightness of Moses was too much for them. And Moses' brightness instilled fear in his fellow Israelites. Moses had to be veiled. The secondary brightness of God, the reflected brightness of God was too much.

When we turn to our second reading, the Apostle Paul has picked up our first reading and is using it to say something about the Holy Spirit. This is Second Corinthians, the second letter. But Paul returns to a metaphor he used with the Corinthians in his first letter. We see in a mirror, dimly. "Through a glass darkly." There is a veiling and an unveiling that takes place with the Holy Spirit. We see the glory, but then we can't see the glory. Paul is deploying the Exodus story in a very complex way. To be honest with you, I haven't completely unraveled his reasoning in this particular part of the New Testament. There's always more to learn. But the reading is included today because it touches on the bright glory of God, and our limitations in the presence of that bright glory.

Finally, and I daresay most importantly, our gospel today concerns an episode in which the glory of Jesus is temporarily seen by a handful of his followers. Peter— the impulsive and devoted and flawed apostle— suggests that somehow dwellings should be constructed to sort of provide an appropriate home for all of this glory. And that turns out to not be the right thing. This is a glimpse of glory. But taken with our first and second readings today, this is just a temporary unveiling of glory, and the veil quickly comes back, and once again they are with Jesus, the guy from Nazareth.

These readings, taken together, bring to mind the story of Paul on the Damascus Road. Who encountered Jesus as a bright light, and heard a voice. and Paul was temporarily blinded for several days. The powerful and confident man was reduced to being disabled and uncertain and had to rely on the assistance of those whom he once persecuted.

These stories of shining and veiling are shared in our churches right before Ash Wednesday. They tell us that the bright glory of God is something that we can glimpse, or taste, but now is not the time for us to permanently exist in the presence of that glory. When Transfiguration is placed immediately prior to Lent, in the context of the church year it is a preview of the glory that will come at Easter and Ascension. When the church year is laid next to our lives, Transfiguration signifies that our peak experiences are a glimpse, a hint of the bigger picture. But we do not get to remain on the mountain. Our lives are not one continuous mountain peak experience. God has called us to be laborers in his vineyard. As the glory of the mountaintop experience fades away, as the veil returns, and as Jesus and his disciples begin their trip to Jerusalem and to death by

crucifixion, God gives them one departing word: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” No, life is not one continuous peak experience. We cannot always see the shining glory of God’s reality. When the veil comes down, and we leave the mountaintop, we go back to our ordinary lives with that single instruction. “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Amen.