

Baffled by Glory

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Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:18-45

“But they did not understand this saying. . . .” -- Luke 9:45

Last Thursday, when the Hillcrest Clergy Group met for our monthly Bible study and lunch, which I hosted here at Faith, we discovered several things about this morning’s readings that left us scratching our heads.

The first thing we realized was that Moses wasn’t keeping anything from the Israelites, including his shining face, with that veil. Verse 33 tells us that after Moses had finished conveying to the Israelites the revelation he’d received on Mt. Sinai, then he put a veil on his face, and the passage goes on to say that whenever Moses would go in to commune with the deity, he would take the veil off, and whenever he would communicate with his people, he would take the veil off. It was only in his off-hours, as it were, when he was neither communing with God nor teaching the Israelites, that Moses covered his face with a veil.

So all of us seminary-trained clergy were a little taken aback to realize that we’d been misremembering this story. We had it in our minds that Moses wore a veil to shield the Israelites from the radiance of his exposure to God. But that’s not what the text actually says. Moses wasn’t shielding the people from anything, and they apparently suffered no ill effects from God’s glory reflected in Moses’s visage.

The second thing we discovered is that Paul twists the story in Exodus 34 in some peculiar directions to make his point in 2 Corinthians – so peculiar, in fact, that I almost didn’t include 2 Corinthians in this morning’s readings. It’s a risky passage to read in church because it’s a fragment of one side of a painful conversation, the other side of which we don’t have. Paul says early in this letter, which is almost certainly a composite from several letters, that he’d made a painful visit to Corinth and that the tension between him and that congregation still lingers in his memory as he writes now. So the careful reader of 2 Corinthians should bear in mind that we have stepped into the middle of a war of words about which we know very little, and that we should exercise extreme caution in wringing doctrine out of Paul’s words.

Paul’s words about his Jewish sisters and brothers are harsh – he refers to their minds being veiled whenever the Torah is read – and it’s words like those that have encouraged Christians to think that God has abandoned those Jews in favor of us Christians – an idea that is known in theological circles as supersessionism. And there is considerable evidence to support the argument that Christian supersessionism is one of the roots of antisemitism and the persecution of Jewish people.

So you can see why I’d be reluctant to read this passage out in church. The last thing I want my ministry to support is prejudice, bigotry, or violence, but I also don’t want to be a dishonest preacher, either, by avoiding those parts of the Bible that make for difficult reading, and I think that our reading from 2 Corinthians is very difficult indeed.

Paul was a Jew who believed very strongly that another Jew, Jesus, was the Messiah

for whom Paul and many Jews had been waiting for centuries. And when other Jews didn't agree with him, Paul didn't mince words. He didn't say his fellow Jews simply had another opinion, of which there were many among Jews of Paul's time; he said they were wrong. He did not, however, say that God's covenant with the Jews had been superseded by God's relationship with the followers of Jesus or anyone else, for that matter. In Romans 11 he says, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people. . . ."

Paul was very clear that the followers of Jesus, who would eventually become known as Christians, were grafted onto the root of Judaism, and he says to the Gentiles at Rome, just a few verses after what I just quoted, "[R]emember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you."

And that's why the Christian church has always resisted every attempt – and there have been many – to remove the First Testament from its Bible. Christians believe that there is divine revelation in the Bible of the Jews that is indispensable for Christians, and for that reason alone, whatever religious differences may persist between Jews and Christians – regarding Jesus or anything else – must never lead to condescension, rejection, or persecution. And when it has, the Christian church has sinned gravely.

So I don't read Paul's words in 2 Corinthians as a rejection of Jews or Judaism. I read them as a statement of the baffling nature of God's glory, which is the same message I take from the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai and the story of Jesus's transfiguration, which is modeled on Moses's story.

Certainly the Israelites didn't grasp the opportunity for transfiguration that Moses's radiant face signified for them – at least most of them didn't. Moses's physical appearance was changed to indicate that he had been in the presence of a power capable of transforming everything, including a people who, like every other people, were intent on their own survival, security, and prosperity.

But that's not why God chose Israel. God chose Israel to be a light to the nations and a blessing to the whole world. God chose Israel not for Israel to depend upon its own resources, but to depend upon God's blessing and God's protection. Israel's life was not its own, and the Israelites were not their own masters.

And most Israelites didn't grasp that their glory was the reflection of the glory of their God. Do we grasp that fact about ourselves?

Do we Christians understand any better than Peter, James, and John that the glory of God is a transformed life, and not the slack-jawed veneration of the shrines our hands build and the images our minds project?

What a lovely and telling detail Luke preserves for us in his account of Jesus's transfiguration, when he says that Peter didn't know what he was saying when he suggested making booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. When you don't know what else to do, venerate! Worship something powerful, worship something big, worship a mystery, if you must – worship anything to keep the attention focused on the object of worship out there rather than the transformation of the worshiper in here. That seems to have been the human approach to God ever since we invented religion, and there's little evidence that most of us are going to change anytime soon. So is it any wonder that we are baffled by God's glory?

"The glory of God," the church father Irenaeus said in the second century, "is a human being fully alive." Irenaeus got it. This great defender of Christian orthodoxy, this staunch traditionalist, this dead white male bishop of the Catholic Church understood that the glory of God is not something to be gawked at or boxed in, but rather is something to be lived. And it cannot be lived if the life you choose to live is the life of business-as-

usual. The life of the world is too mired in trespasses – our own and others’ -- for transformation. Business-as-usual makes us the living dead Jesus referred to when he said “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” And there is no real following of Jesus without transformation. We who would be his followers must be and can be changed.

The bafflement of God’s glory, friends, is not its shape or color or the sound it makes from the clouds. The bafflement of God’s glory is that so many of us refuse to let it change us as it changed Moses and Jesus. Change is possible. Believe it. Live it. And let your light – and life – shine.