

## Sermon on the Transfiguration, Feb. 27, 2022

Each year on the Sunday before Lent starts we read the story of the Transfiguration. I wasn't sure what I would say about it this year, since I've already told you all my good mountaintop stories. But the thing that kept jumping out at me was the idea of veils. I wondered why Jesus was only seen shining on the mountaintop by these 3 disciples, and not all the time? Or if he did shine all the time why did they only notice it then?

Was Jesus especially shiny that day? Because he had gone up the mountain to pray and the bright cloud of God's presence had overshadowed them, and Moses and Elijah had appeared to strengthen him for his ordeal in Jerusalem? Was he shining more than usual? Or did he usually kind of veil the shininess, the light that was blazing from him this day. Did he turn it down a bit so as not to frighten people, like Moses putting on a veil? Is that why they didn't see it?

Or was it just that the disciples were more perceptive than usual? Could they see Jesus as he truly was because they, too, had been overshadowed by the bright cloud of God's presence and this had opened their eyes, their spiritual eyes, to see what had always been there? I don't know the answer. But it makes me wonder what we might be missing.

The other thing that stood out to me was that people respond to this with fear. When Moses' face is shining, Aaron, his own brother, and the other leaders are afraid to come near him. When Peter and John and James see the cloud of God's presence, they are terrified. And in some ways the whole experience frightens them and they tell no one for a long time. And generally, in the Bible, whenever God or God's angel appears, people are afraid. Angels' first remark is almost always, "Don't be afraid!"

Now, why is this? These days it's gone right out of fashion to tell people to fear the Lord. We are supposed to love God, not fear him. And of course, if we mean fear the way, eg, a child might fear an abusive parent, or a civilian might fear an invading army, of course there's no reason for us to fear God that way. Because God is good and God loves us. And yet, people are so often struck by fear. Now why is that?

I think this is because God is so much greater than we are. Have you ever gone down to the seashore after a storm, and watched the waves crashing in? It's something I love doing and when we lived in Lockeport, which is a small island outport, we got lots of opportunity to observe the wildness of the sea after a storm. And whenever I saw it, my heart would leap in pure gladness. But I also kept my distance. We all loved the sea. Lockeport made its living from the sea. Everyone was out on it in all seasons. But everyone had a very healthy respect and awe of it, too. We were afraid of the sea. As well as loving it.

I think it's a bit like that with God, only more so. God is so immense, so much bigger and grander than us. When we see God, we are overwhelmed by God's amazingness. And reminded of our own tinyness. And I think we tend not to like that. We like things to be on a more human scale, so we don't feel quite so teeny tiny and helpless. In fact, I think we often avoid encounters with God for that very reason.

Like Aaron wanting to keep a distance from the shiny Moses. And maybe the other disciples who maybe turned down the opportunity to climb this mountain with Jesus to pray. Like me when I spend so much time reading the newspaper or catching up on facebook in the morning that my prayers get rushed sometimes.

And I don't know about you, but when I am face to face with God in prayer (whether I see him or not, and usually it's not), if I am truly open to the experience, one thing I tend to notice is where I am falling short. I notice the good things I'm neglecting to do. And I start to see ways where I am short on patience or understanding or whatever. And this is an uncomfortable feeling. The problem with hanging out with God is that you can't conceal stuff and pretend stuff like we can with everyone else. We tend to feel naked and ashamed, like Adam and Eve hiding from God in the garden after eating the apple.

Of course, the cure for this is to bring these things to God openly and ask for help. But that's hard for us to do. And if we do manage it, then the tendency is to be like Peter and want to stay in that place and not to have to go back to the regular world where we have to put that stuff into practice with regular people, who aren't as understanding as God. Where we're afraid we'll mess up again.

St. Paul's message this morning is interesting. He is explaining the Moses passage and he uses traditional rabbinical methods. They take these stories and explore them in every way they can think of to wring all the meaning out of them that they can. Often this seems odd to us, since we're not used to that method. But after he does a bit of this, Paul says God is Spirit and wherever God's Spirit goes, there is freedom. Freedom, he says, to remove the veils that are over our faces and that prevent us from seeing God. In fact, when we turn to God in Christ, Paul says, that veil is removed and we can see God.

And then, as we gaze on God with unveiled faces, it's like looking at the reflection of God's glory in a mirror, because all of us are being transformed into that same image, being transformed into the same shiny sort of beings that Jesus showed his disciples. Gradually, Paul says, from one degree of glory to another. We are all becoming transfigured like Jesus and like Moses. We are all starting to shine out the glory of God.

How does that happen? Well, in the first place, all of us are created in the image and likeness of God. All of us have that Spirit within us, that bright Spirit. I have this image that works for me, of each of us like one of those pink rock salt lamps you see with a light inside, and the light glows through the translucent pink stone. Do you know the ones I mean? You see them in health food stores a lot. I think of us all as being lamps. Some of us are made of the finest alabaster, very thin, letting lots of light shine through. The lady whose funeral I did yesterday, Joyce Wood, was like this. She always looked pretty shiny to me, after 97 years of practicing her faith and praying and seeking to follow Jesus. Some of us are more like that pink rock salt. Not quite as bright and shiny, but letting quite a bit of light through. Some of us maybe a bit more like solid granite. But even that has sparkles in it and can be made thin and translucent with care and attention.

I think the main way this happens is spending time with God. When we pray, when we worship, even if we are walking in the woods or by the shore and praising God for his wonderful creation, we are spending time in prayer. And prayer makes us shinier, makes us more translucent so more light shines through.

One of the things I love to do is make campfires. In the summer, we make fires on the beach and have cookouts. Whenever I go camping we always have our fire and we sit around it when we aren't doing anything else. Winter camping with Scouts we'd sit around as close as we could without our nylon snowpants melting. In the summer, we'd sit a bit further off and someone would haul out a guitar and we'd sing songs. All of us sitting with our faces to the flames, and that bright campfire glow reflecting on our faces.

And usually I and probably a few other people, would have a long stick that we would be using, theoretically to keep the fire properly stoked, but mostly just to play with it. I would push the stick deep into the coals and then take it out and hold it up and it would flare up for a bit and then gradually the flame would die out and back in it would go.

That's kind of what our prayer life is like: getting set on fire by the Spirit. And then we go back into the world and the flame dies down a bit and finally more or less goes out though it's still pretty hot to touch. This I know. So it's back to prayer to relight it. And worship is the best, gathered with other worshippers whether in person or online, because the gathered church is like the campfire that keeps the flames going for us. It's pretty easy to get relit when you get back into the campfire. Harder on your own.

I believe that the more time we spend in prayer, worship, Bible reading, and so on, the more we become clearer lamps to let the light of God shine through us. You can see this in people, you know. Think of one of our really good worship services, how we feel afterwards. Everyone is just glowing. Have you noticed that? I have. Your faces are clear and shining with joy and love.

With this pandemic, we have all had a harder time doing these things. Sometimes we couldn't worship together at all. Sometimes we could but with no music. And with reduced numbers. Most of us are tired and are finding prayer a bit hard right now. I know my clergy colleagues have been saying that. And hearing one piece of bad news after another doesn't help. Well, now we seem to be coming out of the covid times, soon out of the restrictions that have moulded our lives for the last 2 years. And I think this will actually be hard for us. We won't know what we should do, what's truly safe and what isn't. We will feel confused - I'm already hearing this. We're happy but also anxious. Excited but hesitant. I think that's fair. We need to go at our own pace and not rush ourselves or each other.

But here's one really good thing about the timing of this. We stand at the beginning of Lent. Here we are, with this wonderful resource sitting on our doorsteps and being offered to us. Lent starts on Wednesday. This is a time to refresh ourselves spiritually. I am going to say again this year that it probably isn't a time for us to be really strict with ourselves, but rather to be gentle. But enter into Lent. Ask God to make it a time of refreshment, of renewal of our spiritual lives, rekindling the flame.

Do the study, whether you come to the group or not. Spend time in prayer. Read the Bible. Give alms (esp. to the PWRDF we're raising money for). Care for each other. Look at your life and see if you're living it the way you want to, the way that will keep you burning brightly in God's Spirit. And don't be afraid to let your light shine in the darkness of this world. May God transfigure us all into the shining image of his Son Jesus, so that we may bring his light to the world.