

**Transfiguration of the Lord
(Sunday preceding Lent)**

February 18, 2007

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; Luke 9:28-36 (37-43); II Corinthians 3:12—4:2

The Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent traditionally celebrates the Transfiguration of the Lord. Therefore, the scriptures for that Sunday deal with the three instances of transfiguration in the scriptures: the shining face of Moses from his direct meetings with God on Mount Sinai, the transfiguration of Jesus before chosen disciples, and Paul's theological commentary on these two transformational events.

Exodus 34:29-35 tells 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. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 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, 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".

Exodus tells us that because he was repeatedly in the presence of God, Moses' face shone. The text tells us quite simply, "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" (34:29). Both his repeated and continued being in the presence of God caused Moses to radiate the presence of God – and he didn't even know it! He reflected the glory of God simply because he spent so much time with God.

This passage lends itself to spiritualizing, for we who work with this passage could easily interpret it to say that we as lovers of God should spend great time in the presence of God – and being so much in God's presence will manifest itself in our very inner being! Now, it is important to practice the presence of God, and to rest and abide in God's proximity. But this passage doesn't take such a devotional approach to this event. It is important to note that the primary sentence of this scripture begins, not with the assertion that Moses' "face shone because he had been talking with God", but with the statement "As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand". Moses was on a mission from God. He was bringing the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments – to the people of God.

It is important to put this passage of Moses' shining face into its context. In chapter 19 of Exodus, the children of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai with Moses. Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, and there Yahweh told him, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you

shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites” (19:3-6).

Moses does precisely that. But the question this declaration from Yahweh begs is, “What does it mean to be a nation of priests? How do we act as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation?” Moses returns to the top of Mount Sinai to receive God’s answer to that question (19:10-25), leaving the Israelites waiting below in the valley.

There, on the mountain, Moses remains a long time. He receives from God a summary of God’s expectations of them as they act out being a priestly kingdom (“God’s own people”); that summary, in the form of Ten Commandments, is engraved by God on two tablets (20:1-17). But God gives more than these commandments to Moses; God also teaches Moses the “statutes and ordinances”, the rules and regulations necessary to live out those Ten Commandments in the every-day life of the Israelite community (20:22—31:18).

Moses returns to the people, expectantly carrying the two tablets of the Law. But when he arrives in their camp, he finds that the Israelites are flagrantly disobeying all his instructions to them, Aaron the high priest has lost control of the people, and they are worshipping another god than Yahweh. Enraged, Moses flings the two tablets at them, and punishes and chastises them (32:1-35).

Once the people are repentant, Moses again goes up Mount Sinai where God re-dictates to him the Ten Commandments and which this time Moses carves on two tablets (God carved them the first time). With the re-making of the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, God renews his covenant with Israel and repeats it to Moses (34:10-26). “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.’ Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments” (34:27-28).

Thus, Moses was on the mission of bringing the Ten Commandments (and therefore, the Law) to the Israelites – this “kingdom of priests” – when they saw that his face shone from being in the presence of Yahweh. The shining of his face was the authentication of the Ten Commandments and the Law! We have to remember that, on Moses’ first delivery of the Decalogue, the Israelites never got to see nor hear these ten commands. On arriving in the Israelite encampment, Moses threw the tablets at the Golden Calf they were worshipping; thus, the tablets were destroyed. Therefore, no one (not even Aaron) had any idea what those two tablets contained! Now Moses was returning with the substitute tablets. Did he really receive them from God, and were they consequently to be obeyed? Or did Moses just carve his own regulations for the community while he sat alone on the mountaintop? The shining of his face was the authentication that Moses had been with Yahweh! Therefore, these commandments were from God, not Moses, and must now be obeyed!

Moses’ face glowed with such brightness that he had to place a veil over his face when with the Israelites, so as not to hurt their eyes. But when he spoke of the Law and of their need to obey it, Moses did so with his face unveiled, so that there would be no question that these commandments for building a nation of priests had come from God – and God alone!

Incidentally, the Hebrew that is translated “shone” in verse 29 (“the skin of his face shone”) is literally “sent out horns”. That is, it is describing that rays of light issued from Moses’ face; light came forth from his face like rays breaking forth in every direction. It was not simply that his face was bright, but that light issued from his face in rays.

In the Latin Vulgate translation, the word “horns” is actually used at this point. That, in turn, led to the tradition that Moses sprouted horns on Mount Sinai. And that tradition was captured in Michelangelo’s famous statue of Moses, showing him with horns!

Psalm 99 is a psalm that obviously has in mind the story contained in Exodus 34. It begins, “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!”

Once again, justice, being in a right relationship with God and people, and the holiness of God are all integrated. The praise, worship and enjoyment of God is directly related to our acting justly, equitably sharing wealth and being in a right relationship with people. How the Church can ignore the justice dimension in what is clearly meant as a trilogy throughout scripture is hard to understand. But there is none so blind as those who will not see!

The poem, having laid out the trilogy of a right relationship with God and one another, acting justly toward all and respecting the holiness of God now moves from a concept to the actions of specific people. “Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them” (vss. 6-7). The Psalmist now returns to the specific incidents: God’s meeting with Israel on Mount Sinai and giving them his Law, and their ignoring of that Law through their love of debauchery and greed. Therefore, the problem with the ignoring of the justice and right relationship sides of God’s call to humanity is not peculiar to the church. It was the frequent temptation and sometimes the outright actions of Israel!

What, then, was God to do in the face of such rebellion? “O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Extol the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy” (vss. 8-9). God loves and God forgives. But God holds people accountable for their actions against each other and against God, as well. Thus, sin cannot be overlooked, but retribution must occur. And why? “Because the Lord our God is holy!”

Luke 9:28-36 is the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. It begins, “Now about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray” (9:28). “Eight days after these sayings.” What sayings? With such wording, it is clear that Luke

intends this story to be linked with the stories immediately preceding it. Those stories are Peter's declaration that Jesus is "the Messiah of God" (9:18-20) and Jesus' foretelling of his death and resurrection (vss. 21-27), with the disturbing words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (v. 23).

Luke means to weave the story of the transfiguration with these events that precede it, even if those events are eight days earlier. Jesus has accepted Peter's witness that he is the Messiah, but he has begun to redefine what Messiahship is about by indicating that Messiah must be crucified as a political enemy of Rome and Israel – and that what is to happen to him is to happen to them, as well. This confession of his person and mission, and this call to the disciples for equally stern obedience must now be confirmed as God's word, and not simply his. And it is confirmed by God in the most dramatic and overwhelming way.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain to pray. There, as he prays, he is transfigured before their eyes. "The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white". The text tells us that two men – Moses and Elijah – appear before Jesus and begin talking with him about "his departure" or death. This symbolizes, of course, both Jesus' Messiahship and his integral relationship as such with Israel and the Hebrew Bible. In this story, clearly Moses symbolizes the Law and Elijah the Prophets. So Jesus is presented here as the fulfillment and "perfecter" of the Hebrew tradition of the Law and the Prophets and its continuity into that present day. The implication of Moses and Elijah "planning" with Jesus his crucifixion and resurrection indicates his continuity with the Law and the Prophets, the Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year. It symbolizes his fulfillment of the intent of that Law, of Jesus' bringing of the Law to its apex and completion as they now meld into a new dimension of salvific history.

Finally, the whole scene is completed as a dark cloud overshadows them, and a voice speaks from that cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (vs. 35)! Jesus is now confirmed in his role of suffering savior, of a dying Messiah. It is clear to Peter, James and John that there is now no place for further question or disagreement. Both Jesus' vocation and their vocation are clear. It is now simply a matter of obeying or refusing to obey God's call!

One of the significant elements in this story is its intentional parallel with Moses' meeting with Yahweh on Mount Sinai that made up today's Old Testament lesson. Both Moses and Jesus had gone up onto a mountain to meet with Yahweh. Both the countenance of Jesus and of Moses are transformed, and their faces shine. Both are surrounded by a cloud that symbolizes God's presence. The conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus at the transfiguration deals with his "departure" (which, in Greek, is literally "exodus"). Both Moses and Jesus face the potential of idolatry – Moses with the golden calf, Jesus with Peter's "three dwellings" that could substitute an object for a direct encounter and relationship with God. It is obvious that Luke is seeking to portray Jesus as a prophet like Moses but greater than Moses (Deut. 18:15), for he is the Messiah and even the Son of God.

The most important statement of this story is the statement with which it ends. It is Yahweh who speaks from the mountain. But rather than presenting the Ten Commandments as was done with Moses, God's words are "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (v. 35)! For this one brief

shining moment, Peter, James and John see Jesus for whom he really is, God's Son, the Chosen One, present in all his glory.

But what does it mean to be God's Son, God's Chosen? In the story that immediately precedes Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, Jesus feeds the 5,000 (Luke 9:10-17). In that story, it tells us, "And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd" (9:16). In the story of the institution of the Last Supper, Luke tells us "Then Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying "This is my body, which is broken for you"" (22:19). Finally, in the story of the resurrected Jesus' walk to Emmaus with two undiscerning disciples, they stop for dinner at an inn, and Luke tells us, "When he was at table with them, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (24:30-31).

Taken, blessed, broken, given. Jesus was the One who had been chosen by God, blessed to be a blessing, broken for the domination, oppression and exploitation of the world, and given for their redemption and liberation. That was the privilege of being called "God's Son; God's Chosen"!

And what about the disciples? Listen to what the Son, the Chosen is saying. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words (the words of Jubilee and the shalom community of the kingdom of God), of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (9:23-26).

II Corinthians 3:12--4:2 is the passage in which the apostle Paul uniquely interpreted the story of the veiled Moses and the unveiled (transfigured) Christ as authentication of his mission to the Corinthian church. One Hebrew tradition was that Moses placed a veil over his face after having met with God to receive the Ten Commandments and the Law because his face shone so brightly, it hurt the people's eyes. But another Hebrew tradition was that he placed the veil over his face in order to hide the fact that the glory of his shining face was gradually fading the longer Moses was no longer in God's presence. Paul embraces that second tradition and argues here that as God's glory on Moses' face faded, so the old covenant of Israel (Exodus 34:29-35) was fading away because it was meant by God to be only temporary and inadequate, awaiting the coming of Christ. But now that Christ had come and had been transfigured before all humanity through his death and resurrection, there is no need for the old covenant that is "fading away".

Now, therefore, unlike Moses who appeared before the people veiled in order to hide the fading of his face, Paul appears before the Corinthian Christians with "unveiled face", knowing that the gospel glory realized in Jesus will never fade. So we too stand before the world, reflecting to them the undiminishing glory of Christ. Rather, our glory in Christ keeps ever increasing (3:18), as we are slowly changed into the very likeness of the transfigured Christ.

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