

## THE SEARCH FOR SHINING FACES

Sunday, March 3, 2019

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark D. Hostetter

Scripture: Exodus 34:29–35 and 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Good morning!

Before we dig down into today's scripture stories of transfiguration and glowing faces, I am reminded of the story of a boy who came home from Sunday School, where they had a lesson on the parting of the Red Sea. When his mother asked about what he had learned, he told an elaborate story of these Mach 3 fighter planes that came swooping down, dropping inflatable pontoons and rafts, and how the Israelites were able to escape the Egyptian soldiers as they floated across the sea. The boy's mom, knowing that 6-year-olds were prone to flights of imagination, asked, "Is that really what they told you at church today?"

The boy blurted out, "No . . . but if I told you the story that the teacher told us today, there is no way you would ever believe me."

I had a smile on my face when I thought of the sermon title today: "The Search for Shining Faces." I couldn't help thinking about Jack Nicholson in the movie "The Shining." And that poster for the movie – you remember it – with Jack Nicholson's unshaven face underlit by a flashlight. Nightmarish, scary. I don't think that's the kind of shining face we hear about in today's scriptures. But maybe . . .

Exodus talks about the shining face of Moses when he came down from Mt Sinai with the tablets of the 10 commandments. Because he was in the presence of God, in relationship with God – the scripture says, "because he had been talking with God" – Moses' face was shining. Even further, the scripture tells us whenever Moses encountered God again, he would return with the skin of his face shining. Maybe it *was* frightening, and that's why he had to wear a veil until it wore off. Only his elders knew what it meant, and how significant it was that God was present.

And we heard in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, when he speaks of that shining face of Moses. And how the veil image somehow clouds our true view of the truth, of the shining face. And that it is only through Christ that the veil is removed and we can accurately see the shining face of God. Or maybe it's that the veil can be put aside only when we are ready and willing to see the face of God, to recognize the face of God, to live our lives in the presence of God.

But the concept really, whether we take the story literally or metaphorically, God transforms us. In relationship with God, even the skin of our face shines. And others can see it too.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday in the season of light called Epiphany, the last Sunday before we begin Lent. And it's intentional that this is Transfiguration Sunday.

We did not read the actual Transfiguration story today, from Luke, actually it's in three of the four gospels, when Jesus went up to the mountain to pray to figure out what was to come next. Like for Moses, the mountaintop is the bible's place apart – maybe a little like our heading for a walk in Central Park, or a weekend up at the Presbyterian camp in Holmes. Mountains become a place to experience God. A close friend of mine swims laps at the end of every day, and for her, that's her mountaintop for reflection, for meditation.

Anyway, on that mountaintop near Galilee, probably Mt Hermon near Caesarea Phillippi, Jesus goes to pray, to reflect, to plan. Peter and James suddenly saw Jesus' face shine, and they see Moses and Elijah too, all with shining faces. Kind of like that scene in Star Wars, where Luke Skywalker sees ether-like glowing images of his three departed mentors: Yoda and Obi Wan and his father. Or for those of the Harry Potter generation, in the last movies of the series, where Harry – on the very edge of survival – sees his parents alive again, transfigured.

Just as an aside, there's quite a bit of traditional Christian theology in a lot of our current cultural film and TV icons. There's even a book series that preachers know about: The Gospel According to Peanuts (that was the first one); The Gospel According to Star Wars; The Gospel According to Harry Potter; Tolkein; the Simpsons; Dr Seuss . . . Sort of a nerdy confession I suppose as to the kinds of things preachers read for fun.

Anyway, lots of shining faces in our scriptures for this Transfiguration Sunday.

In our Madison Avenue marketing world of advertisements, we can't avoid the images, the ideal, of having a shining face. So many products and creams, gels and emollients, prescription and over-the-counter, that promise our faces will shine with radiant beauty. Or Hollywood's rom-com scripts, we hear over and over again about how that wonderful couple in new-found love had faces that glowed. You could see, you could feel, their love reflected in their shining faces.

It's a marker, an indicator, sort of like a tattoo maybe – of love, of health, in our TV images of glowing faces. You can't miss it in our media-soaked world. Or in our own community of faith, it's a marker, an indicator, a tattoo if you will, of the presence of God, the rightness with God, the light of God that can not be hidden, that radiates from our faces.

The Hebrew language has a word, "shekinah," that reflects the holy light, the holy fire, the indwelling of the presence of God. In Judaism, it reflects the feminine attributes of the presence of God, "shekinah" being a feminine noun in Hebrew. Even our Christian concept of the Holy Spirit shares a common family tree with the Hebrew "shekinah" – the indwelling of God, the continuing presence of God in the lives of humans.

"Shekinah" is not the Hebrew word used for "shine" in our Exodus passage. That's the verb "qaran" – to send out rays, to shine. Moses' face was radiant. But that radiance, that shining, is the indwelling of that presence of God. It's that "shekinah" of God that we search for in shining faces.

So many bible stories of finding that light of God in places we don't expect. Being willing to search for the shining faces in the most unexpected places. God works through prostitutes and taxpayers. God works through fishermen, and strong women in patriarchal society. God works through children. God works through the poor and weak. God even works through those who would, in the end, try to kill him.

Where do we see shining faces?

This congregation has found them in our partner church in Taguasco, Cuba. Where the shining faces of the members of that congregation, even in a harsh and relatively rural subsistence day-to-day life, reflect God's light in their shining faces. As they provide education to their town's children, regardless of faith, not just their own members' kids. As they provide needed services to seniors of all faiths across their community. As they provide clean, fresh water to those in need. As they provide a beacon of openness and acceptance for LGBT people. We have seen the shining faces of our Cuban partners.

We see the shining faces greeting us as ushers and as elders and as deacons, providing warmth and care on snowy Sundays in February, friendship to the hospital and homebound. We see the shining faces of our children in Sunday School classrooms and up here on the steps. The shining faces in the kitchen and behind the reception desk and serving coffee. The shining faces of our new members and new officers, and of the multitude placing hands on shoulders in apostolic blessing. We see shining faces in each other, as we pass the peace. And we share Christ's meal of bread and wine.

We see the shining faces of business associates and leaders whose shining faces look to more than short-term profit, honoring and respecting workers and executives alike, being responsible stewards of the environment and promoters of equality and justice for issues that come their way. We see the shining faces of marchers on Washington, and in pride-filled parades just outside our 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue doors. We see the shining faces of our immigrant sanctuary families.

From way up here in this precarious pulpit, this mountaintop your preachers have to climb every week, we catch glimpses. Like doubting Thomas whose eyes were opened and he recognized Jesus in those days after the crucifixion, when he said, "Oh, there you are, Lord." From up here in this high pulpit each Sunday, we can catch glimpses of shining faces. [Pointing] Oh, there you are, Lord. And there you are. And there you are. And there, and there, and there.

In this season of Lent that begins this week with Ash Wednesday, this season of preparation for Easter's new beginnings, this Lent, rather than giving up meat or chocolate or some other pleasure, maybe this Lent there might be something instead – in making a promise to search for shining faces.

Now I am not sure I qualify as an Old Testament theologian. But I do know we've certainly got to be clear about misreading signals. It reminds me just a couple weeks ago the son of an old friend of mine came back from a college semester abroad in Vienna, Austria. And over dinner the other night he was telling the story of how when Halloween rolled around, a bunch of his friends decided to get dressed up for the night, for Halloween. It turned out he lived quite a distance from downtown, so had to take public transportation to meet his friends.

He told me, that Halloween night in Vienna, he learned two things: First, that Austrians don't dress up for Halloween. And second, that a 6 foot 3 werewolf complete with fangs and fake blood and realistic slash wounds across a bare chest . . . scares the hell out of most anyone taking public transportation in Vienna.

In any case, the repetition throughout the Old and New Testament alike, of that image, that metaphor if you prefer, of the shining face, it seems pretty clear that metaphor is pointing towards something important. And it appears a lot in the bible. Even the faces of the highest angels shone with that kind of light. The divine nature within, radiating out from the soul, as though the love and wisdom of God that fills their hearts and minds is so bountiful that it has nowhere else to go but to overflow.

We sing about that shining light in our Christmas hymns: "Radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace; Jesus, Lord at thy birth." We even pray about God's shining face: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace."

Of course, it's the power, the truth, the purity, the light, the love of God reflected in those shining faces. Something remarkable, something wonderful, something unmistakable, when we witness the will of God, the light of God, when we see the love of God in those shining faces.

I think maybe this idea of shining faces has a lot to add in our own search for meaning, our search for direction, our wanting to stand on holy ground. Doing what our values, our faith, would have us do. Knowing we are living out the life our God hopes and dreams for us.

So many times in life we are faced with choices. How can we stay bold and courageous? How can we live our lives to the fullest? How can we avoid letting inertia nail us to the ground of where we stand?

In our late teens, we decide on what college, what major, what friends we'll have. In our twenties, we start off with our first job, then our next, as we begin our career journey. Then decisions about relationships, about starting a family, or not. Where we'll live, how we'll spend our free time. We take on new jobs, moving from job to job. Or starting on a new career later in life. Even going back to work after we think we've retired.

How to know? What are we supposed to be doing? Where are we supposed to be going? What new beginning are we supposed to choose?

Of course, our faith lets us step back just a bit, calming our anxieties with the knowledge that God travels with us. Moses didn't know where the journey with those tablets would lead him and his people. But he knew that he was standing on holy ground. That he was exactly where he was supposed to be. That the only thing that mattered was that he was in right-relationship with God.

Karl Barth, one of the leading theologians of the last century, focuses on our total dependence on God in this process. Despite our human egos and feelings of self-importance, our participation, in his words, is really just "our being grasped" by God. God is the one who chooses, not us. Or hear St. Augustine, back in the early centuries of our faith: "I do not say to you, seek the way. The way itself is come to you. All you need do is arise and walk."

We make space to hear that quiet voice of God in our lives. And like Moses, and Jesus too, we go to the mountaintop, our place apart, our mountaintop journeys of discovery. Time and again, the bible affirms our need for solitude and silence, to be able to listen to the still and quiet voice of God. In Mark's gospel alone, there are 23 references to Jesus seeking solitude and silence. We need our mountaintop time to put things in perspective.

But then, like Jesus, we come down to reality, down into our valleys of day-to-day life, and the search for confirmation begins. We long for, we treasure, we look for places, for people. We search for those shining faces that give us insight into where God is present.

That's why we come back into our beloved community of our church. At times of stress and at times of change, certainly. But also in those normal days, when we just want to be sure we are on the right path, that we haven't lost our way, our perspective. Keeping the most important thing, the most important thing. We need our search for shining faces.

I know for me, since 1998 when I joined the staff here at First Church, the shining faces I see every Sunday keep my perspective clear, my values in balance. Even as I run a billion dollar company, your shining faces have been my touchstone. If our life's quest is to search for shining faces, to search for the presence of God, to listen for the voice that sets us right, then we've got a lot better chance not heading down a path of darkness, not making the wrong choices.

Even as we search for shining faces, to grasp glimpses of God in the world we encounter, don't you know, too, we want to be sure that we are reflecting that light of God, that love of God, in our own shining faces as well.

It's maybe about recognizing that mark, that tattoo, of God. Seeing those shining faces, drawing close to those shining faces. Those shining faces that show the world, like that old camp song says, "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

I'll leave you with another funny story about how you can recognize what people are about. There was an elementary teacher who gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. Each student was instructed to bring in an object to share with the class that represented their religion. The first student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is a Star of David." The second student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Mary. I'm a Catholic and this is a Rosary."

The third student got in up front of the class and said, "My name is Erik. I am Lutheran, and this is a hot casserole dish."

So this Lenten season and always, as we go through life's decisions, the crossroads of taking one path or another, as we encounter all those we meet, I for one am going to keep a close eye out in my search for God's presence. Our quest, our search for shining faces. In the hope of being able to reflect back to the world our own shining face to all we encounter.

AMEN.

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