

Scripture Readings for February 27th, 2022

Exod 34:29-35 (NIV)

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.

³³ When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

2 Cor 3:12-18 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Luke 9:28-36 (NIV)

²⁸ About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. ²⁹ As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. ³⁰ Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. ³¹ They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. ³² Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. ³³ As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what he was saying.) ³⁴ While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." ³⁶ When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.

Sermon: “Transformed from One Degree of Glory to Another”

The season of Epiphany ends today; next Sunday is the first Sunday in Lent. And you will remember that “epiphany” means a divine mystery is being revealed; it’s the season in which we look for *manifestations* of God’s *presence* in the world. We began with the visit of the Magi who came to worship a child who they believed was born to be the true King of the Jews; they recognized this sign even if Israel’s religious elite didn’t.¹ Jesus’ *identity* was further revealed at his baptism. Luke’s account tells us that following Jesus’ baptism, while he was praying, “The heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”² The lectionary then took us to the wedding in Cana where Jesus turned water into wine.³ The significance of this extraordinary story is not so much *what* happened but *who* and *why*. The incident points *to* Jesus; the reality of God’s presence - or God’s glory - being wonderfully revealed in this creative and excessively generous miracle. And then we switched back to Luke and considered Jesus’ first sermon at Nazareth, where he cites the prophet Isaiah, who wrote: “The *Spirit of the Lord* is upon *me*, because he has *anointed me* to bring good news to the *poor*. . .”⁴ and then Jesus boldly stated that this oracle had been fulfilled in their hearing.⁵ And we have just finished considering Jesus’ sermon on the plain where he begins: “Blessed are you who are *poor*, for the kingdom of God belongs to you. . . .”⁶ In these sermons, Luke not only reveals the nature of Jesus’ kingdom ministry but the fleshes out what messiahship itself means.⁷ Today we culminate this season of divine revelation with the account of the Transfiguration, as witnessed by Peter, James, and John.⁸

We know the story. Again, while Jesus was praying, we are told: “The appearance of his face was transformed, and his clothes became very bright, a brilliant white.” Elijah and Moses were also seen in glorious splendor and were talking with Jesus about his forthcoming “exodus” to Jerusalem. Before long, Luke states “a cloud came and covered them, and the disciples were afraid as they also entered the cloud. Then a divine voice came from the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One. *Listen to him!*” After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.”⁹ This is a powerful, mysterious, even confusing encounter; so what is going on?

¹ See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Truth-is-Stranger-than-Fiction.pdf> .

² Luke 3:21b-22. In Luke’s version, only Jesus seems to have heard this voice.

³ See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gods-Gracious-Extravagance.pdf> .

⁴ See Isa 61:1-2a and Luke 4:14-30.

⁵ See also: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Whats-the-Good-News.pdf> .

⁶ See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Jesus-Speaks-Plainly-on-the-Plain.pdf> .

⁷ In Luke 2:11, he reveals Jesus’ identity through the words of the angel: “Savior, Christ (or Messiah), and Lord.”

⁸ See also: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Jesus-Transformed.pdf> ; <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Jesus-as-Messianic-King.pdf> .

⁹ Luke 9:34-36a.

To understand it better, we need to go back to Moses in the wilderness and his experience of the presence of God on Mount Sinai when receiving the Ten Commandments. God's very presence was also said to descend upon him like a cloud.¹⁰ This kind of intense spiritual experiences are called "theophanies," and the burning bush is another example.¹¹ We are told that when Moses came down the mountain, his face shone brightly because of his encounter with God and all of Israel were afraid. So Moses covered his face with some kind of veil - not a mask! Somewhat bizarrely, we are told that whenever Moses spoke to God or later when he relayed God's instructions to the people, he would remove his veil. But otherwise he would wear the veil. God's glory or presence was signified in the brightness of Moses' face whenever there was a communicating of the word of God. Moses was therefore functioning as a divine messenger or mediator in both a visual and audible way.¹² Incidentally, we are told God's presence or glory was earlier evident *at* the mountain top:¹³ however, now it's been brought *down from* the mountain via Moses *to the people*.¹⁴ Later, God's glory would *reside* in the tabernacle, the portable tent of worship among the Israelites.¹⁵ Much later, God's presence came to reside in Solomon's temple in Jerusalem,¹⁶ that is until the temple was destroyed and the Babylonian exile began - at which point God's presence or spirit departed.¹⁷

Returning to the Transfiguration story, Luke's description of Jesus' transformed face and of his clothing shining brilliant white *mirrors* that Old Testament language of the intense divine presence being now *embodied* in the person of Jesus, rather than Moses. Jesus is therefore completing the vital work begun by the great lawgiver, Moses, and Israel's great prophet, Elijah. In addition to the radiant face and clothing, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all relate a *cloud* covering them, again signifying God's powerful, palpable presence, which is made more vivid by the divine voice. That voice affirms to the disciples what Jesus was told at his baptism: "This is my Son, whom I love." Then the voice adds emphatically, "Listen to him." This short speech not only verifies Jesus' divine authority, it also echoes the earlier prophetic words attributed to Moses, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. *You must listen to him.*"¹⁸ That's quite an epiphany: A divine manifestation of glory, the very presence of God, indwelling the person of Jesus in the presence of reliable witnesses!¹⁹ Jesus is also revealed the new *mediator* between God and the people, fulfilling the

¹⁰ See Exod 34. (Note, this was the second time Moses received the set of commandments . . .)

¹¹ See Exod 3.

¹² Fretheim writes "Moses is not simply a speaker for the word of God, in some sense he *embodies* the word. The people not only hear about word being spoken; they see it standing before them." (*Interpretation: Exodus*, p311.)

¹³ Exod 24:15-18.

¹⁴ Exod 34:29-35.

¹⁵ Exod 40:34-38.

¹⁶ 1 Kings 8:10-11.

¹⁷ Ezek 10 – 11 relates Ezekiel's vision of the divine presence leaving the Temple. See also Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know*, chapter 7.

¹⁸ Deut 18:15 (NIV). Moreover, these words are witnessed in the presence of Moses himself (and Elijah). Furthermore, this account looks back to Jesus' baptism and forward to his resurrection, dramatically disclosing Jesus as God's beloved Son (or, equivalently, the Messiah) to Peter, James, and John.

¹⁹ Elijah and Moses function as two (unimpeachable) witnesses to Peter, James, and John.

role begun by Moses. I suggest that just as Moses came down the mountain bringing God's glory or presence to the people, Jesus is symbolically doing the very same thing as he comes back down the mountain and heads toward Jerusalem.²⁰

With those rich and profound stories of the Transfiguration and Moses' veil in mind, let's now briefly consider what Paul writes to the Corinthian church. Paul's strong rhetoric can seem both disrespectful and confusing. We need to appreciate that even though he founded the church in Corinth, his authority was being challenged by rival Jewish Christians.²¹ It appears that Paul's critics were questioning his interpretation of Torah, the mosaic law, and perhaps his forthright, no-nonsense style of teaching. He boldly insists that he has a better understanding than do they because he reads the scriptures through the lens of "the Spirit of the *living* God, not the *stone* tablets of the human heart."²² In defending his ministry, he then contrasts himself with Moses, whom he claims *lacked* boldness because he put on a veil to hide the fact that the glory of God, which had been *reflected* on his face, *had faded* with the passage of time. In other words, Moses put on a veil, so the people didn't know that this divine glow wasn't permanent!²³ While it may seem that Paul's interpretation is discourteous to Moses here, his real argument is which his critics, so we need to be cautious and not see this as an anti-Jewish text. Paul is more concerned with the way his rival Jewish contemporaries viewed the Torah *in relationship to Jesus*. Paul adapts his metaphor and suggests that his critics read the Torah with a veil covering *their* minds. In other words, they couldn't *see* how the old covenant of Moses *pointed to* Jesus as the culmination of that covenant.²⁴ Or put differently, the contrast is between what fades, i.e., the role of the mosaic law, and what persists - namely, God's glory or presence reflected in the risen Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to claim that just as Moses removed his veil when he turned and faced God, so when *we* also *turn to the Lord*,²⁵ (and the word could also mean "repent"), we too see the divine glory as *without* a veil, just as Moses did. That being the case, there is now *freedom*, because the Lord's Spirit is evidently present.²⁶ This freedom is a gracious gift that liberates us to be what God created us to be.²⁷ It's *not*, however, freedom to now do anything we want!²⁸ Ethics matter! But our actions are now motivated by love and not by law. (And certainly not by war!)

So, how might we better understand what Paul is saying, as he draws from Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, and in light of the transfiguration of Jesus? Both readings from Exodus 34 and Luke 9

²⁰ Moreover, and significantly, Jesus approaches Jerusalem *from the east*; see Ezek 43:2; 10:19; 11:23.

²¹ Those eloquent opponents may be impressing the Corinthians with their credentials.

²² See 2 Cor 3:1-11, esp. 3, 6.

²³ Put in very different terms, and somewhat trivially, to hide the fact the "tan" was fading! The fading splendor is that of the Torah now that the risen Jesus the Messiah has completed his work.

²⁴ Something Paul likely believed Moses anticipated. Moreover, Paul fully appreciates he used to think like that himself!

²⁵ While "the Lord" likely means "God" here (contextually), it is ambiguous, allowing for Lord to be Jesus in 2 Cor 4:4-6. Even then, Jesus as a *perfect* mirror is perhaps a better analogy. (Note Paul adapts Exod 34:34 to "turned" from "went in/out.")

²⁶ 2 Cor 3:17; cf. Rom 8:1-2.

²⁷ Freedom, for Paul, is not something we generate for ourselves or something we achieve by our maneuvering or decisions.

²⁸ Paul has elsewhere expressed that he has problems with the Corinthian zeal over their new "freedom" in Christ; see 1 Cor 6:12-20; 9:19-23; 10:23-33.

speak of *God as light*. Moses' face glows as he *reflects* the light of God after his encounters. In the way Luke describes the transfiguration, Jesus *exudes* light, the glory of God. Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul invites us to remove the veil that covers *our* minds so that when we read Scripture, we will *see Jesus*. This requires the presence of the Holy God who enables us to see the things of God in a new light.²⁹ Then, as we draw close to God in Christ, we ourselves *reflect* that glory of God as if we are a mirror. So instead of being dazzled and needing to use a veil, we find ourselves – like Moses - reflecting God's glorious presence to others. Moreover, Paul says we experience *transformation* "into *that same image* from one degree of glory to another" because the "the Lord, the Spirit" is at work within us.³⁰

Let me stress two key points here. First, as we look *to Jesus*, we see the very *image* or the *reflection* of God; put another way, we see God's glory or presence being revealed.³¹ In short: Jesus reveals the very nature and character of God. It's like seeing the glorious rising sun in the reflection of a neighbor's window. And that insight figuratively places us with Peter, James, and John on the mount of Transfiguration. And that's a powerful thought to reflect upon – pun intended! Second, as we draw closer to Jesus, *we too reflect God's glorious light to others*. God's Spirit is therefore also at work in us. The work of the Christian believer, then, is to allow the love of Christ and the freedom of the Spirit to be manifest in daily living. And we are encouraged to work and not lose heart, regardless of life's circumstances, because we have confidence that God's redeeming work of love and mercy will come to its full completion. God is *not* finished with us; we are all "works in progress." This being changed "from one degree of glory to another" is a powerful affirmation that the Christian life is one of growth, however slow that might seem *to us* at times. (Paul talks more about that in his great "love chapter."³²) Nevertheless, the issue here is *do others* see Jesus reflected in *our* lives? And do *we* see Jesus reflected in *their* lives – after all, this letter is written to a church community. How, then, is our *transformation* going on this Transfiguration Sunday? I leave you to reflect on that too!

In conclusion, the season of epiphany may be ending, but manifestations of God's presence in the world continues through us. As we gather to celebrate the risen and glorious Jesus, we too can reflect in our lives the God's glory with unveiled faces. We too can be changed by our encounter with the glory of God, as happened with Paul on the Damascus Road. Consequently, may see also Jesus as he truly is, along with the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. And may others see Jesus in us. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁹ Cf. the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3.

³⁰ See 2 Cor 3:18. The Spirit and the work of the risen Jesus are one and the same. Paul goes on to say that "the Messiah, who is the image of God, is the same Jesus we proclaim as 'Lord.' And just as God said at the very beginning 'Let there be light' (see Gen 1:3; Isa 9:2), so God also is the one who shined in our hearts to give us the light of the glorious knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ"; 2 Cor 4:4-6 (paraphrase/adapted).

³¹ See [30].

³² See 1 Cor 13:8-13.