

Date: February 22, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Transfiguration

**SERMON: Faces All Aglow**

Text(s): Exodus 34: 29-35; 2 Corinthians  
3:12-18; Luke 9:28-36

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When I was serving a parish in New Brunswick, New Jersey, many of the pastors in the community got together every Tuesday morning for Bible study. We were from a variety of denominations and places of origin. We studied the passages from the lectionary that we would all be preaching on the next week, and bounced ideas off each other. One morning, a strange thing happened. (Well, a bit stranger than usual, at least—anytime you get 8 or 10 pastors together strange things are likely to happen.) That morning, we were reading these lessons for the Feast of the Transfiguration, which have in common the imagery of shining faces. One of the ministers broke into that little chorus so many of us of a certain age learned in the kindergarten class in Sunday School. “Climb, climb up sunshine mountain.” We all immediately joined in, and we all knew the words. It was a case of all of us having gone to different Sunday Schools together, I guess. For those of you who had a “deprived” childhood, the words to the chorus are

*Climb, climb up sunshine mountain  
Heavenly breezes blow.*

*Climb, climb up sunshine mountain,  
Faces all aglow.*

*Turn, turn from fear and doubting,  
Look to God on high,*

*Climb, climb up sunshine mountain  
You and I.*

Well, today is the Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, and we’ve just heard the stories of Moses, as well as Jesus and a few of his disciples climbing up sunshine mountain, where their faces became all aglow with the glory of God.

It’s generally agreed among students of the Bible that the imagery in the story of the Transfiguration harks back to the story of Moses

communing with God on the mountain with the result that his face shone with the radiant glory of God. Both St. Luke in our gospel lesson and St. Paul in our epistle lesson are working from that story, re-interpreting it and investing it with new meaning for their own times.

Each time Moses went up the mountain to commune with God, the storyteller says, God’s glory rubbed off on him—literally. When he came down from the mountain after one of these encounters, the skin of his face shown with reflected glory. We might expect that this is the reason he put a veil over his face, so that he wouldn’t frighten dogs and small children, and a good many of the adults too. But, in fact, and this is a point that aroused my curiosity when I finally noticed it after many previous readings, that doesn’t appear to be why he put on the veil.

In fact, we’re told that he took off the veil whenever he came down from the mountain and spoke to the people. He put it on *after* speaking to them and kept it on until the next time he went up on the mountain to speak to God. Why did he do that? That’s the question the text provokes.

St. Paul must have been provoked to ask the same question because he reflects on it and gives an answer that makes sense to him. Moses put on the veil, he says, to prevent the people from seeing the glory of God fade away, as it inevitably did when Moses was away from the presence of God’s glory up on the mountain. In the routine of daily life administering the affairs of this rambunctious people, listening to their complaints, dealing with their problems, getting caught up in the politics of leadership, the glow faded. And Moses didn’t want the people to see the fading of the glory. Perhaps he felt he needed the glow to maintain his control as the leader. As long as they could see his face shining supernaturally, they’d listen to him. If they saw just plain old Moses, they wouldn’t. The veil, for Moses, functioned like the curtain in the story of the Wizard of Oz; it prevented people from seeing that the Great Oz was just an ordinary little man creating a sound and light show with a machine. Moses knew he wasn’t anyone special, but he

didn't want the people to find that out. He knew the glory would fade, so he covered his face to hide, not the glory, but the fading of the glory.

Jesus' three disciples seem to share a similar concern to preserve the glory on the Mount of Transfiguration in Luke's story. Jesus and his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, go up on a mountain for a nighttime prayer and meditation session. Suddenly the disciples see Jesus' face begin to glow with an unearthly light, and his clothing becomes so dazzlingly white that they can hardly bear to look. And who to their wondering eyes should appear but Moses and Elijah, who represent the Law and the Prophets—the Hebrew scriptures, in other words— and their appearance in the story means that the scriptures attest to the glory of God that is revealed in Jesus.

The disciples understandably are dumbfounded by this vision, and Peter suggests, in a babbling sort of way, that they should build some sort of shrine—three shrines, in fact—and just stay there on the mountain where such illumination, such glorious clarity about Jesus and his mission is to be found. But suddenly a cloud veils this epiphany, and a voice from the cloud says, *“This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.”* And then the cloud is lifted, and the shining is gone, Moses and Elijah are gone, and there's just Jesus as they've always known him saying, “Come on, it's time to go back down the mountain and get to work.” The awesome experience of the glory of God, wonderful as it is, is not to be enshrined as a way of preserving it. It's designed to equip Jesus and his disciples for the work that awaits them back down in the valley, just as it equipped Moses for his task of administering the daily affairs of God's people and leading them through the terrible wilderness to the Promised Land.

I suspect that impulse to hang on to the glory is common to all of us. We all tend to attach great importance to certain “peak” experiences we have in life. And many times, we

associate those experiences with a certain place—either a physical place or an emotional place. Perhaps it was at summer church camp as a youth, perhaps it was while visiting an awe-inspiring cathedral in Europe, perhaps it was in a worship service at church or while standing on a mountaintop gazing at an inspiring landscape. But whatever the nature of the experience, all of us can usually point back to some time in our lives when God seemed very close, when we had a moment of illumination or revelation— when in the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins' words, *The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.* So from then on, we keep trying to go back to that place—either a place on the map or a place in our own emotional or spiritual history. We think we can't keep the glory from fading unless we keep returning to that place.

If only we could return to that moment of blinding clarity, that profound illumination, our faces would be all aglow and everyone would see them and know that we had truly had an experience of God. So like Moses repeatedly going back up the mountain to get recharged, we spend a lot of energy trying to return to that place of our own epiphany, our own spiritual transfiguration. All our fears would be put to rest, all our doubts would be assuaged, all the mundane and often boring or painful realities of life would be transformed, we think, if we could just stay on the mountain. So we try to hang on to the glow of glory, making that moment the touchstone for everything else, long after the glory has faded.

But Jesus rejected his disciples' pleas, and no doubt his own feelings as well, to stay up there on the mountain enjoying the fullness of illumination and clarity of vision. He knew that their work, like that of Moses, was down in the valley where the real world was, and as wonderful as the moment of revelation or illumination was, it was not an end in itself. It was a transfiguring moment, but the purpose was to illuminate the

path of duty, even hard, painful, and sacrificial duty that lay ahead. The desire to stay on the mountain is a desire for security and certainty, that while understandable, leaves little room for faith. Even Jesus could not remain on the mount of Transfiguration. In fact, his road ran back down that mountain into Jerusalem and up another hill, the hill called Golgotha where a cross awaited him. That's what Luke means when he says that Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah about "*his departure, which he would shortly accomplish at Jerusalem.*" His disciples couldn't stay there either. They had to accompany him down that mountain and along that road that led to Calvary, and not only to Calvary, but beyond it to an empty tomb.

It's no accident that this story of the Transfiguration is immediately followed by a story of the disciples' encounter with a man with a son who has uncontrollable epilepsy, and his insistent demand that they heal his child. From the mountaintop of divine glory to the valley of human despair in one quick jump. But that is just the point, you see. The disciples' real work was down in the valley of despair. And so is ours. A commitment to be Jesus' disciple does not allow us to wall ourselves off from the rest of humanity, forever contemplating the glory of God in some private, safe, haven of spiritual tranquillity. Any sort of spirituality that emphasizes "mountain-top" experiences of God is a bogus spirituality. Real spirituality accepts the mountain-top experience for what it was always meant to be, a gift of grace, a validation of our calling, an illumination of the purpose and meaning of our lives, and an empowering for discipleship back down in the valleys of reality.

If we want to keep our faces aglow, if we want life to be transfigured, we've got to stop thinking that the glory is back up there on the mountaintop of some powerful moment that we should keep trying to recover or repeat. It's not in some powerful memory of a time when God was nearer, when we felt more adequate to deal

with life, when we felt we could conquer the world because we were spiritually strong. The glory is in the face of Jesus Christ, as St. Paul says, and as long as we listen to him, which is what the heavenly voice in the story tells us to do, our lives will continue to be transfigured by the glory of God, even down in the valley where the path of discipleship leads through the painful realities of the human condition.

For Christ comes with us down into the valley of human need, and as long as we listen to him, as long as we follow him, as long as we "*gaze on him with unveiled faces,*" as St. Paul so eloquently puts it, we discover that we ourselves "*are being changed from one degree of glory to another.*" God isn't "back there" somewhere or "up there" on some mountaintop. God is with us down in the valley of human despair.

I remember a woman from my hometown who knew understood this truth perhaps as well as anyone I've ever met. Ruth was a very ordinary sort of person, a housewife, with nothing but a high school education, but one who loved to study the scriptures and who spent a great deal of time in prayer. Back in the days before the civil rights movement even began to have an impact, before Martin Luther King came on the scene, Ruth Lutz, because she was gazing at, and listening to, Jesus, felt led to leave her safe, lily-white neighborhood and go down to the section of town where mostly poor African-Americans and poor immigrants lived. She used her own money, which wasn't much, for she was not at all a well-to-do person, to rent an old dilapidated Victorian house and called it "The Neighborhood House." Several afternoons a week, she came to that house and invited the children of the neighborhood and their mothers in, and she taught them Bible stories, and she taught them to pray, and she helped them with their homework, and baked them cookies, and held those kids on her lap and hugged them when they needed to feel loved. And all this in a town where prejudices between whites and blacks ran deep, and where

any attempt to bridge the gap awakened anger and fear and scorn. But Ruth had been on sunshine mountain and had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus, and she had listened to what he told her and that listening gave her the courage to follow him down the mountain into the valley of despair. Her interpretations of the Bible often were a little weird, and she could be a bit eccentric sometimes, but no one ever doubted that she knew Jesus or that her heart of love was as big as all outdoors. There was a sort of shining about her that brought light into a lot of dark corners of poverty and hopelessness.

It is down in the valley of the shadow of death where the hard work of discipleship must be carried out among people who are groping about in the darkness, lost and hurting and hoping desperately for some glimpse of glory. And where will they see it if not in the faces that are shining with the glory that comes from looking on the face of Jesus and in our words of kindness and in our deeds of love which we do because we have listened to Jesus? It is into those dark corners that we who have been on sunshine mountain are called to journey with “faces all aglow,” offering to others that shining glimpse of glory that can transfigure even the worst of situations with love and with hope.