

“Removing Our Veils”
A Sermon Preached by Debbie Mansell
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Transfiguration of our Lord – March 3, 2019

Exodus 34:29-35
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

I have to admit that my first thought when I read the Old Testament lesson was to think about sunburn. You see, I have a complexion that only has 2 extremes: albino and tomato. I’ve never tanned. If I’m outside, I wear SPF 50. I have two red-headed daughters, so we use a LOT of sunscreen in the summer time. I’ve had second-degree sunburns, where both of my shoulders were so burned that they blistered. I have many memories of vacations where I ended up with burns that were the shape of a hand – you can tell exactly where my fingers reached with the sunblock! And I’m all-too-familiar with aloe vera gel as a relief from the pain of sunburn. Much as my girls and I try to keep covered in the summer, it’s almost inevitable, so we buy the stuff in bulk, just because.

So, when I read this text about Moses coming down off the mountain, and his face was glowing from being in the presence of God, my first thought was to wonder about the ancient Hebrew equivalent of CVS and whether his people offered some aloe vera or other home remedies. But, obviously, Moses’ glow was altogether different from that. His glow was a radiance! It was a sign that he had been in the very presence of God and he was glowing because of it!

When we think of things glowing, many images may come to mind. One of my favorite images is of stained-glass windows. I absolutely LOVE walking or driving by a church in the evening, when the sun is down, and the lights inside the church are shining through the stained glass windows for those outside to see. There’s something rather magical to me about that view. During the daytime, you can’t usually see the stained glass windows on the outside, because the light from the inside isn’t brighter than the sunlight. But at night, the lights inside the church are brighter than the moonlight, so you can see the images and colors glowing. In some ways, the stained glass windows are a kind of beacon, shining from the inside, out for the world to see. The same is true of a lighthouse – it shines from the inside, and that light is reflected out for the ships to see so that they can navigate. Even our houses can have this kind of effect. If you take a walk in the night-time, the houses with lights on, shining out through the windows, always seem very cozy to me. At Christmas time in particular, many people put candles in their windows, which shine out and announce a welcome and a warmth, even when the rest of the house is dark. With all of these things, it’s the light from inside that is important – the stained glass itself isn’t beautiful without the light shining through it. The mirrors of the lighthouse beacon are useless without

the light that they reflect out. And houses are just wood and brick and other building materials, until there's a family living there with life and light to shine out the windows.

The same was true about Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai. He had been in the presence of God for 40 days, receiving the covenant – the 10 commandments on the tablets – to bring back to the people. His face was shining because he had been in God's direct presence. That in itself was pretty amazing – most of the scriptures say that people couldn't be in God's direct presence because it was too glorious and humans would die. But Moses didn't die. He gloried in the presence of God, and he was bearing a mark of that experience when he came back down to be with God's people. He didn't even know that his face was shining. And his brother Aaron and the other Israelites were actually afraid of Moses because his skin was shining. Moses decided to put a veil over his face when he was with the other Israelites, so that they would feel more comfortable in his presence. But whenever he would go up Mt Sinai to speak with God, he would remove the veil so that he could see God face to face and be fully in the presence of God with no barriers. Every time he went up the mountain to spend time in God's presence, he would come back down the mountain with his skin shining.

That's a pretty amazing image to me! Not only was Moses affected personally by his interactions with God, but he had an outward manifestation that others could also see. Maybe this is where the phrase "a mountain-top experience" came from originally. Have you ever had such a mountain-top experience? Maybe you had a special project at work, where you worked with others really well and you put all of your energy in it, and you knew that you had done your very best work. When the project was over and you turned it in to the supervisor, you were probably glowing with pride, and others could see it on your face that you were feeling accomplished. Or maybe you went on a spiritual retreat for a weekend, or you went to a concert where God's music was played, and you felt God's presence in a very powerful way. When we've had such out-of-the-ordinary experiences, we are glowing from the inside out, and those around us can tell that we've had a powerful experience. Then, we are confronted with the reality of the "real world." Those mountain-top experiences are really powerful, and we can often feel the glow and energy from the experiences for a while. But the reality of every-day life inevitably breaks in, and we have to come down off that mountain. Much as I would truly love to do so, I can't live on the mountain-top forever.

Paul was talking to the people in Corinth about this experience of being in the real world – coming down from the mountain-top, and engaging with the world that is around us. Many in Corinth had questioned whether Paul was a legitimate apostle of Christ. And this passage comes in the midst of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which he is giving his defense, and reassuring the people that he is truly preaching Christ's message. And the crux of his argument in this passage is that the Corinthians don't have to believe him alone – they should be able to see the glory of God shining forth

from him. He is reminding them that they should all be seeking to be in God's direct presence, without any veil over their faces, soaking in the glory of God which they then reflect out to one another.

What kind of veils do we put over our faces? Veils work two ways - they keep others from seeing us clearly, and they also keep us from seeing others clearly. Sometimes we put veils over our eyes so that we do not need to see others fully - we don't have to acknowledge their pain, we don't have to engage in their grief, we don't fully see their needs. It's really hard to see the needs of the world, because we often feel powerless or insufficient to make a difference. I have this feeling every night when I watch the news. I see the pain of the world, the shootings, the crime, the needs of those who are going without, the injustice that so many experience on a daily basis, the conflict both here in our community as well as the conflict and war all around the world. It's overwhelming. Sometimes I choose to put a veil over my face, and I literally turn away and turn off the news. It's the human equivalent of sticking my head in the sand and pretending that I'm not affected. But the reality is that I AM affected. The pain of humanity causes pain within me. And just putting my hands over my ears and closing my eyes and humming loudly - my version of putting a veil over my face - doesn't really work. Inevitably I'm still affected and I feel the pain of the world anyway. The most faithful way for any of us to respond to the pain of the world is by letting the light of God through Jesus Christ, which we have inside our heart, letting that light shine out from within us so that others might see and recognize the love and warmth that we are reflecting. It's not our own warmth and glow that others experience - it's the love of God that we choose to allow to shine through us!

The other way that a veil functions, though, is that by putting a veil over our face, we don't allow others to see us fully. In my experience, this is much more common in our American society. We put on many veils, so that others don't really see us. Many times we put up a façade of strength and security, when we really feel afraid and insufficient. We post "highlight reel" pictures and stories on Facebook, when the reality looks a lot messier. You know what I'm talking about. You post the picture of the beautiful birthday cake with the candles lit and the perfect, smiling faces around the wrapped packages on the side. The reality looks more like running into the Meijer on the way home from work because you didn't have time to make the homemade birthday cake the night before, and you had an argument with your husband on the way out the door in the morning, and you have been worried about the credit card balance because of the car repair you got last week as well as the presents that you bought. You know that your faces aren't typically smiling and everything isn't usually picture-perfect. But we smile for the camera, and we post the pretty picture for others to see. We inevitably end up feeling worse about ourselves, as we compare our real-world situations, which are not reflected in what we posted, with the "highlight reel" pictures that everyone else has posted, not realizing that those pretty pictures are not the entirety of others' experiences either!

What would it be like, as Paul tells the Corinthians, if we removed the veils – in the words of 2 Corinthians 4:2, “We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.” That is a very vulnerable stance to take, and sometimes it’s unsafe to let others see your vulnerability. But more often, it’s either pride or embarrassment that has us reaching for the veils. I’m actually imagining a veil with a smiley face painted on the front – so when we interact with others, what they see is the smiley face instead of the true expression that is hidden beneath. Taking off those veils requires a great deal of vulnerability and courage. One of my favorite authors is Brene Brown. She is a PhD in Sociology, and she has spent her entire career researching shame. She has a TED talk about the power of vulnerability, and I would highly recommend the whole TED talk to anyone. I show it to all of my chaplaincy students! It’s a very powerful message which relates to our passages this morning, because in talking about the importance of vulnerability she is talking about removing the veils so that we allow others to see the fullness of who we are. Let me share a brief excerpt.

Brown says, “If I roughly took the people I interviewed and divided them into people who really have a sense of worthiness — that’s what this comes down to, a sense of worthiness — they have a strong sense of love and belonging — and folks who struggle for it, and folks who are always wondering if they’re good enough. There was only one variable that separated the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging and the people who really struggle for it. And that was, the people who have a strong sense of love and belonging believe they’re worthy of love and belonging. That’s it. They believe they’re worthy.... What they had in common was a sense of courage.

And I want to separate courage and bravery for you for a minute. The original definition of courage, when it first came into the English language — it’s from the Latin word *cor*, meaning heart — and the original definition was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart. And so these folks had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect. They had the compassion to be kind to themselves first and then to others, because, as it turns out, we can’t practice compassion with other people if we can’t treat ourselves kindly. And the last was they had connection, and — this was the hard part — as a result of authenticity, they were willing to let go of who they thought they should be in order to be who they were, which you have to absolutely do that for connection. The other thing that they had in common was this: They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn’t talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they really talk about it being excruciating — as I had heard it earlier in the shame interviewing. They just talked about it being necessary. They talked about the willingness to say, “I love you” first, the willingness to do something where there are no guarantees, the willingness to breathe through waiting for

the doctor to call after your mammogram. They're willing to invest in a relationship that may or may not work out. They thought this was fundamental."

What Brene Brown talks and writes about is being fully present with one another, taking down the facades and masks that we put up, taking off the veils that we have put on for our own protection. Because if we aren't willing to take off the veils, two things happen: first, no one will truly be able to see us for who we really are; and second, the light that we have inside us from God - the glow that we get every single time we spend time in God's presence - no one will be able to see that light shining forth, because the veils we put on hide it.

So let your light shine forth. Take the first step of removing the veils that are covering your face. Allow others to see you - to REALLY see you - because YOU ARE WORTHY! God has made you worthy through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So go forth and let God's light shine through your unveiled face, in the beautiful, messy, vulnerable, full life that you are living.