

That Sun-Kissed Glow

by

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February 27, 2022

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses 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. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but 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, ³⁵the 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.

Luke 9:28-36

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

You can tell, you know. At least I always could. You could see the flesh of it as clear as day. Growing up in my small town, you could always tell which of us went down to Florida on our spring break, and which ones were confined to the cloudy and cold Eastertide relationship our midwestern climate had with the sun. It was easy to tell.

Seemed it didn't matter where you went in Florida, you came back looking the same. Whether you were in the panhandle, where many of our neighbors flocked, or someplace really hip like Miami Beach. We, of course, went to neither of those places.

We spent a week every spring down in Naples; which is a lovely place to retire, but less enthralling for teenagers. But it didn't matter. I wasn't aware of any friends or classmates who went to Miami Beach, so I told them I vacationed there instead.

We all came back with a bit of a glow. We spotted one another in the school hallways, tacitly aware that we had been kissed by fate, and good fortune, and the sun.

When he came down from the mountain that day, Moses' hands were full. And not having time to even check his hair in the hallway mirror, he had no idea that his face was shining like the sun. But the Israelites took one look at him and were scared half to death.

Whatever had happened to him, they thought, this is more than a simple case of falling asleep in a tanning bed. Moses has been exposed to something, something perilous, and there was nothing he could do to hide that truth. It was written all over his face.

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We call today Transfiguration Sunday; that day in the church year where with the disciples Peter, John, and James, we behold Jesus' transformation on the mountain, as his clothes turn a dazzling white, and where Moses and Elijah appear alongside him.

It's a fascinating, little vignette. It's not considered a high holy day on the average calendar. In fact, I recently went to Target to see if I could buy my wife, Abby, a Happy Transfiguration Day card and couldn't locate a single one. It's not really a big deal to most people.

We quickly bypass this story as one about the disciples missing the point. But maybe we miss it too. We just heard from Luke's gospel. V. 29 says, "And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed..." We get so caught up in Jesus' wardrobe modification that we forget to look at his face, which seems to have taken on new features somehow. What do we do with that?

Again, from Exodus, we see that Moses' face changes by his exposure to God's presence. Every time he comes down from Sinai, the Israelites would start staring, and he would have to be reminded to cover it with a veil, lest they continue to be frightened.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of the Bible that it is "a book in which wonderful and terrible things happen by the power of an almighty God, whose steadfast love for us does not seem to preclude scaring the living daylights out of us from time to time."¹

There's something about needing to look away from someone that has encountered the divine. Just as there is something sometimes about needing to shield our eyes from someone who has descended into the depths of grief, sorrow, and suffering. We want to turn off the news. It's just too much.

It's not just that it makes us uncomfortable. It might be because we suspect that people who have gone deep in that way can often see through the veneers we put on to prop up our own realities. It's hazardous.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, (Maryland: Cowley Publications, 1993), 62-63.

It's worth remembering that this scene with Moses, holding the two tablets of the law, came after he broke the original two tablets in a rage. Believing he was taking too long up on God's mountain, The People Israel decided to create their own god, from the melted gold of their jewelry. When Moses came down and laid his eyes on that divine bovine they had formed, he loses his cool.

Eventually Moses constructs a tent, just beyond the camp grounds, and there at this tent of meeting, he encounters God. The presence of the Holy One descended on this tent in a pillar of cloud, and as the text says, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend."

Maybe it's the intimacy that's frightening to us. We don't know what to do when others show public displays of affection. It feels a bit too demonstrative. We can become even less comfortable when those displays of affection are directed towards God.

In our modern vernacular we might call those who speak intimately of their encounters with God as mystics. History is peppered with people who seem to be more attuned to moving back and forth between the thin places, where the sacred and the mundane intertwine.

In the fourth century, the biblical translator St. Jerome, when he became very sick, had a vision of Christ on the judgment seat. Believing himself to be a good Christian, Jerome declared himself so in front of the judge. But the judge said to him, "Thou liest. Thou art a Ciceronian, not a Christian."

As punishment for the lie he didn't know he was telling, the judge asked the angels present there to whip poor Jerome. He awoke from his vision healed from his affliction, but with bruises on his back, saying what was more painful than the lashings was his seared conscience.

There was Hildegard of Bingen, who as a child in the twelfth century began experiencing overpowering visions, which took the form of bright flashes of light in jagged geometric shapes. In one vision she saw the Triune God, imagined in a multisensory way, embodying three qualities of light, with an image of Jesus at the center, his hands up in blessing as the light of the world.

Hildegard called her visions the Shadow of the Living Light. For in this world, the fullness of God’s brilliance is so bright for mortals we can only see its silhouette.

George Fox experienced God on the top of an English hillside, and came down determined to share his vision that creeds, rituals, and sacraments are immaterial to Christian faith. He subsequently formed the Religious Society of Friends, better known as Quakers.

Sojourner Truth encountered Jesus in such a personal way through a vision in 1826 New York, that she broke free from her bondage one year before the enslaved were emancipated there; spending decades working to free others.

But sometimes the visions aren’t as awe-inspiring as they are absurdly concrete. Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose writings inspired people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and for whom the great Bryn Athyn Cathedral just down the road from us was built: he had a vision one night alone at dinner where the floor was covered with all kinds of crawling animals, and then God appeared to him, sitting in a corner and said to Swedenborg, “Stop eating so much.”

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Those who see visions, in one way or another, are still among us. And their sensitivity to whatever is beyond our faculties can unnerve us. We see their faces glow, and need to look away.

We say to ourselves “Oh boy, here comes Phil. You know he’s loony as a bat, don’t you? He’s always telling us how the Lord spoke to

him, or how he had a dream...” We want to dismiss folks like that, shoo them off somewhere, ignore their ecstasy and utterances.

But maybe, given the diversity of creation, God has actually spoken a word or given a vision to them. Maybe the word or vision is just for them, but maybe it’s for us too. Have you ever listened as your loved one talked to someone on the phone in the other room? You don’t mean to eavesdrop, but you also want to know what’s going on. It’s like that.

We don’t need to pick up the phone ourselves, but maybe the glowing faces among us are letting us listen in to something. Calvin wrote that God comes to us, not as a flood, but as little drops. Maybe that’s all we get, a drop here and there along the way. A part of a conversation overheard from another room. A shining face through whom we might see a shadow of light.

Carrie Newcomer, one of my favorite singer-songwriters, herself a bit of a mystic, writes, “There are endings and there are beginnings. One emerging out of the other. But most days I travel in an ever present, and curious now. A betwixt and between, That is almost, But not quite, The beautiful, but not yet.”

I don’t know exactly what that means, but it’s haunting nonetheless.

As much as I am perplexed by these people, I’m also drawn to them. My spirituality doesn’t work like theirs seems to. I’m a Presbyterian because I like my religion like I like my martinis, very dry. But I also know that the Jesus I encounter in the gospels, the Jesus who has claimed my life, and yours, comes to us in a myriad of ways.

Who am I to determine how God will choose to speak, and through whom? Perhaps I should pay more attention to the glowing faces that surround me. Perhaps you should too.

These days it's not the places that feel thin, but our lives. We are tired; worn down from this never-ending public health crisis, which is just one of numerous crises that plague us. And we are anxious and scared; worried about the economy, about our families, about our futures; even now about the people of Ukraine and the tyranny of Russian tanks. So we see the sun-kissed glow of these friends of God and think "what's this all about?"

But as Karl Barth said, the Risen Lord makes all of us radiant. This isn't the kind of glow you get from Naples or even Miami Beach. It's the kind of glow that is reflective of the One who shines upon all those who turn to face him, in whose presence we are made whole, find peace, and make it.

Perhaps what we need today is a willingness, not to forgo reason or rationality, but to allow for God's longing for us—to give us eyes to see and ears to hear. To pay attention to the glowing aura of the divine presence that permeates creation. To listen as those voices we know who live betwixt and between, help us step into God's beautiful, not yet.

With humility, and hope, and great courage. Amen.