

Feast of the Transfiguration

3.2.25

Shining like the Sun

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This is one of my favorite transfiguration stories:

In his book *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton recalled a moment when he was suddenly overtaken by the Divine Presence.

It was in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district. He wrote "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers."

Merton explains that he was caught up in the realization that despite humanity's "dedication to absurdities ... and its many mistakes, God himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race." And he suddenly experienced profound joy. He said he wanted to laugh out loud right there on the street.

*As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are, " Merton wrote. "And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. **There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.**"*

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What Thomas Merton encountered on the corner of Fourth and Walnut was a transfiguration -- the Glory of God revealed in the faces of the people there.

In those faces he saw what the Israelites saw when Moses came down from Mt. Sinai .. He saw what Peter, James and John saw when they looked upon Jesus and Moses and Elijah: The Shekhinah, the Glory of God,

To understand that we need to make a distinction between holiness and glory.¹

In the Scriptures, holiness speaks to the transcendence of God, the unknowable otherness of the divine nature. God's holiness cannot be observed.

¹ "glory." In *A Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. W. R. F. Browning. *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. 21-Feb-2022. <<http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e763>>.

Glory refers to the imminence of God. In some stories it involves physical phenomena like that Still Small Voice that Elijah the Prophet experienced, or the cloud that settles upon the camp.

The Glory of God is God made manifest to people. The stories we have today talk about it in a particular way – how it appears upon the faces of those who encounter God, and how it affects those who in turn encounter them as they walk around shining like the sun.

Glory rubbed off. Mesopotamians called it the “fearful radiance”. Moses was a particularly frightening example, his face shining as he came down from Mt. Sinai with a second attempt at the 10 commandments. You’ll remember that he smashed the first set when he found Israel worshipping the golden calf the first time around.

After 40 days in God’s presence, armed with a new version of the covenant, coming down the mountain, Moses’ face glowed. So much so that it terrified the people, and they asked him to put a veil over his face to calm their fears of dying. He would take it off when he spoke with God, and when he told the people what God said. But the rest of the time he kept it on. So the people wouldn’t be afraid.

I wonder if over time, people liked the idea of there being a veil between them and God. They got used to not seeing God’s glory among them, the signs that God was manifest, that God had a local address in their midst.

I wonder if this is why we still tend to reverse the ideas of holiness and glory. We use holy to describe things or people that are religious. The kids on the playground at St. Hilary School liked to point out that I was “so holy.” It wasn’t a compliment.

But glory -- that stays on the mountain top, that is reserved for a select few like Peter, James and John to see; it is a sneak peek to the end of the story. You get a glimpse of Heaven and then it’s back to the veil, back to the conflicts and quotidian lives waiting at the bottom of the mountain.

However, the nature of God’s glory is not that at all. Rather it’s the terrifying proof that God is with us.

In the story of the Transfiguration it’s not what stays on the mountain that is most important, it is what comes down with Peter, James and John. Just as God

accompanied Israel in the wilderness to the promised land, so God walked the way of the cross to its conclusion. I have heard it called “Holy Light on the move.”

(<https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-02/glory-goes-forth>)

And here we come to the true purpose of these glowing faces in today’s stories: to bring God’s presence more fully into the world, to bear the divine light, to reveal what we have seen and heard. Today we are asked to remove the veil that makes everyone a little more comfortable, but also a little more forgetful that God is among us on our sojourn.

What does that veil look like today? It can be anything that obscures the fact that because of God’s incarnation *people are all walking around shining like the sun*. Merton understood that his own monastic practice could serve as a veil to that fact if he wasn’t careful.

We can probably come up with our own personal lists of the things we use to shield ourselves from seeing God and revealing God in our midst. In times like the ones we’re currently in, our own despair and lament can serve as a veil to hope that came more easily to us in the past. Fear of the consequences of speaking up or being visible can serve as a veil at times like these. Or own individual stuff – our losses, our certainties, our doubts, our arrogance. That veil has become a very essential accessory of our time; it goes with everything. We wear it well.

And yet, what if we are being asked to live like there were no veil in the way? What if we were to let our faces show what we believed deep down in our hearts? What if they already do?

So my advice to us all is – let them see the glory on our faces. Let the world get a glimpse of the evidence that God has not abandoned us, no matter how messy the news seems right now. That is what the church is for. For it’s the body of Christ, the whole body, that reveals the glory of God to a frightened world.

And that world just might beg you to put on a veil, lest it die. But the cross and its glorious aftermath teach us that such a death is not to be feared. It is ultimately the reason we are all walking around shining like the sun. Amen.