

# Sermon: Epiphany 8

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Year C

Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-43a

In Exodus 20... God gave Moses the Ten Commandments... for the first time... then there was that whole "golden calf" thing... and in response... in Exodus 32:19... Moses threw the tablets to the ground and shattered them... in Exodus 33:18... not many chapters before today's reading... Moses and God were talking... Moses said... *Show me your glory...* and God said... *I will make all my goodness pass before you... and will proclaim before you the name... The LORD... but you cannot see my face... for no one shall see me and live... and God said... there is a place by me... I will put you in a cleft of the rock... and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by... then I will take away my hand... and you shall see my back... but my face shall not be seen...*

The Hebrew word that's translated as *face*... also means *before*... as in *what is in front*... what comes first... it's what you lead with... it's like a first impression... it's what represents you... it's how you are known... and what we are most often drawn to... are the eyes... the windows to the soul... but many of us wrestle with looking through those windows...

One thing I've noticed... is the when I'm a passenger riding down the highway... and a car comes alongside... and I look over... and my eyes catch those of the other passenger... they almost always... immediately... look away... even across ten feet of roadway and through a window or two... there's too much intimacy... they don't want that connection to linger... and when I pass someone on the street... and say "Hello..." even when they respond... they most often respond to the ground...

There are some people... for whom making direct eye contact may be difficult... those with social anxiety disorders... perhaps autism... or Aspergers... and it's important not

to press the issue with them... and if you've seen the movie *Victoria and Abdul*... you know there have often been strict protocols against making eye contact with royalty...

In the United States... we make eye contact when we're introduced to someone and when they're speaking to us... we don't need to stare someone down... but frequently glancing away... or refusing to make eye contact may be interpreted as weakness... disinterest... or as being disrespectful... and it's much the same in most of western Europe...

But in most Asian... African... and Latin American cultures... extended eye contact can be taken as an affront... staring at a superior can be seen as a challenge to their authority... or as a sign of disrespect... in these cultures not making eye contact is usually interpreted as simply being polite... or reverent... and not understood as being rude or disinterested or even submissive...

In today's reading from Exodus... Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two new tablets... he didn't know... that because he had been talking with God... his face was shining... and Aaron and the others were afraid... and so Moses put on a veil when he spoke to Aaron and the others... and when he went in to speak with God... he took the veil off... in today's reading from Luke... Jesus too has been transfigured... the appearance of his face is changed... and a cloud... maybe like the Pillar of Cloud which led the Israelites... enveloped them all... and Peter is terrified...

*You cannot look into the face of God... and live...* author Doug Hershey writes... the word that's translated from Hebrew as *live*... is *chayay*... it's a word is taken from *chai*... which means life... *chayay* is sometimes used... not to describe mortality or physical survival... but *to be revived... to be strengthened internally...* into a full life... and God wants us to choose life... and be our source of strength...

That was the clear message in Deuteronomy 8:3... when God told Israel... that one does not live by bread alone... but that we are strengthened by every word that comes from God's mouth... that's why Jesus quotes this verse to Satan during his 40 day

fast... because his temptation wasn't about eating physical food... his temptation was about being distracted by that which feeds only the body... at the cost of being fed by God... and that's a temptation we all face... whether we're fasting or not...

And this... Hershey wrote... is what God is communicating in this passage... that no one can see God's face... no one can look deeply into that Mystery... no one can look directly at the Creator... and simply call it *a nice experience*... looking into the face of God... changes us in such dramatic ways... that our previous life is destroyed... is over... and we are reborn from above... and are transformed... *but that's what we want... isn't it...*

In Luke 9:44... just a few verses after Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit... and healed the boy... Jesus spoke about his own Exodus... he said... *Let these words sink into your ears... the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands... is going to be rejected by God's people...* and both Moses and Elijah knew what that was like...

Moses had to deal with the grumblings of the Israelites... *let's get back to the place we knew... alongside the fleshpots in Egypt... it was bad... but it was ours...* but God encouraged Moses to forge ahead with them... and he goes up another mountain... where he is relieved to see the promised land... but doesn't get to go there... some traditions hold that God assumed Moses in a cloud... and he ascended into Heaven... on the eve of Israel's entry...

And after that fire starting contest in 1 Kings 18... between Elijah... and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah... and their deaths... Elijah is pursued by Jezebel... and he enters a cave on Mt. Horeb... and the voice of God said... *Go stand on the mountain... for I am about to pass by...* there was a great wind... and an earthquake... and fire... but God was in none of these... then the sound of sheer silence... and Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle... and stood at the entrance of the cave... basking in the pure presence of God... maybe Elijah thought he'd stay there... on the mountain... but God said there was more work to be done... including Elisha's appointment... and then he too was taken up in a chariot of fire...

And Jesus and the disciples... don't get to stay on the Mount of Transfiguration either... Bp. Satterlee said... the Good News is that Jesus didn't stay and dwell in the place of glory... but went down to the places we need him the most... and whenever we find ourselves in pain... sorrow... sin... or death... Jesus will be there with us... Jesus will not dwell on the Cross helpless... but rises... and will bring us with him...

And so the things we need to die to... are the things we love the most... and when we don't do that... when we hang on to them... we make a bee line right back up to the Mount of Transfiguration... to relive our glory days... so the church is not about staying... the church is about looking into the Pillar of Cloud... looking deeply into Mystery... looking deeply into Jesus' eyes... it is about departure... about dying and new life... you cannot look into the face of God... and live the same old life you've lived before...

Lent begins in three days... the light of the Incarnation in December... was followed by the light of Epiphany in January... today we celebrate the light of Transfiguration... in some ways these lights sustain us... until we are bathed in the light of Easter... but they also illumine our sinful and dark places... and they shine a light on the path God creates for us... and so I wonder... will we stay on the mountain... or come down into the wilderness... and make our way to Promise...

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