



## SHINE

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

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### **Exodus 34:29-35**

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

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now 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. Just 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. While he

was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When 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.

Every year we go up the mountain with Jesus and friends. Then we hike back down into the mess we call *Lent*. To make matters worse, this year the church's lectionary greets us with two mountain climbers. First, there is Moses on his second trip up the mountain, this time to get a non breakable set of the Ten Commandments. And, then, there is Jesus sipping tea with Elijah and Moses in rarified mountain air. In each story, first Moses and then Jesus shine more brightly than your reflection in a mirror on the hottest summer day, and in each story, people around them are flummoxed, wondering what to say and what to do.

These two mountaintop stories read almost like cartoons in our 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. Honestly, what are reasonable, well-educated people to make of glowing gowns and neon faces? Is it any wonder that we have lots of Christmas and Easter hymns from which to choose in our Presbyterian Hymnal, but only three Transfiguration hymns and even fewer about a literally radiant Moses and Jesus? You and I may not like the ashes that will mark our foreheads later this week, but at least we can connect the dots between ashes and death and our own mortality. We've seen enough death in Haiti alone not to flinch at the Ash Wednesday refrain, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." But what sense do we make of two bright and shining, mountain climbing Jews?

Well, if I'm right, what shines in the face of Moses and later Jesus is not some mysterious, inexplicable inner light as if they were aliens that have landed on earth; what shines in their faces is the glory of God. As a kid, I learned the logical progression to glory. It goes like this: you seek fame for recognition because recognition means celebrity and celebrity means glory. It seems so logical, but it's as about as phony and hollow as the idol Moses smashed before he made his second hike up the mountain.

Charles Schultz, the late artist of *Peanuts* fame, had an alternative idea about fame and glory. He would regularly test out his theory by giving two quizzes to any willing takers. Since I have a captive audience, I thought I'd give you these two quizzes on this Valentine's, Presidents' Day Weekend, and oh, by the way, Transfiguration Sunday.

Ready?

1. Name the ten wealthiest people in the world.
2. Name the last ten Heisman trophy winners.
3. Name the last ten winners of the Miss America contest.
4. Name ten people who have won either the Nobel or Pulitzer prize.

So, how did you do? Schultz writes, "The point is, none of us remembers the headliners of yesterday. These are no second-rate achievers. They are the best in their fields. But the applause dies. Awards tarnish. Achievements are forgotten. Accolades and certificates are buried with their owners."

Now, for the second quiz.

Ready?

1. List three teachers who inspired you to learn.
2. Name three friends who have helped you in a difficult time.
3. Name five people who have taught you something worthwhile about life.
4. Name four people who have made you feel appreciated and valued.

Schultz continues, “Easier? The lesson. The people who make a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money, or the most awards. They are the ones that care.” I would go beyond Schultz’s conclusion to say: “They are the ones whose faces shine, reflecting something of the glory of God.”

One of the great prayers repeated throughout Scripture is not, “Lord, make me famous” or “Lord, make me filthy rich” or “Lord, make Einstein’s brilliance pale in comparison to mine.” No, the prayer that echoes from Genesis to Revelation is: “Lord, make your face to shine upon me.” Why this prayer? Hopefully, so that our faces can in some ways reflect the glory of our God and so that our lives that can be set free from idle pursuits and from pursuing idols, even American ones!

On the mountain, in the transfiguration, the disciples see Jesus as God sees Jesus, aglow with the life-giving grace of God. I love what Barbara Brown Taylor says about these texts, “The lives God is calling us to are the ones we are living right here, right now. . . . Every night when we lie down to sleep, there is either more life in the world because of us or there is less life in the world because of us, and this remains true whether or not we have even seen a burning bush [and I would add, a transfigured Jesus]. Our purpose, for God’s sake is to increase the abundance of life in this world” (from Feb. 21, 2001 edition of *Christian Century*).

Moses and Jesus each came down a mountain to increase the abundance of life in this world. What about us on whom the transforming light of God’s grace has shined? “Over the years,” writes Adam Thomas, “our luminosity tends to fade. Every inhospitable word spoken, every neighbor mistreated and every resource hoarded layers grime over our radiance. Every hand unextended, every gift squandered and every road not taken leaves layers of apathetic dust. The world tells us that the radiant things out there are things we purchase: ‘When you wear the shiny stone or drive the shiny car, you will shine’. Too often we cede our light to the glossy detritus of the world and forget that we are the ones God made to shine” (*Christian Century*, Feb. 9, 2010, p. 18).

A few years ago, Jennell and I traveled to the Bronx where we had a glad reunion with two dear friends from my Seminary days. Chris, is from south India and there he served congregations five times the size of Central. When he and Sarah and their girls moved to the States, he began to pastor a combined Lutheran-Reformed parish of two small congregations, one in New Jersey and the other in the Bronx, one composed mainly of Indian immigrants and the other German immigrants. These congregations have no children, few young people or even those who are middle-aged. In order to have enough people to worship on Sunday, Chris takes his van and picks up older members and then drives them home after morning worship.

When I first arrived, I thought, “How sad. A promising and gifted pastor, who led huge, thriving congregations in India, is now left to try to resuscitate churches on life support in desperate urban areas.” I was not proud of harboring these thoughts, but I imagine even Chris sometimes has had to fight them.

In a society that measures fame and glory by numbers and notches and names, Chris seems like anything but a success. New York rushes on in a frenetic pace while he visits immigrant widows who can't wait to fix him a cup of tea and chat, while he teaches Gospel stories to members for whom English is a second language, while he goes home not to a palatial palace, but to a cramped few rooms separated by curtains above the church, while he is the glue holding together two congregations alive largely because he feels called to be there.

As Jennell and I drove away for home the next day, I still felt a deep pain inside me, but it was no longer a pain of sadness or sympathy; it was a pain of envy. For as I looked back, I could swear I saw the faces of Chris and Sarah aglow, shining with the very glory of God.

AMEN