

Sermon 3/3/19
“The Universal Christ”
Exodus 34:29–35; Luke 9:28–43a
Transfiguration of the Lord
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor

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.

Some *Downton Abbey* fans may remember that in one episode *Dame Maggie Smith* quoted from the Church of England hymnal. With *Lady Violet's* trademark grandeur, she said, “*God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.*” She quoted it *ironically*, but the original text is anything but ironic. *William Cowper*, the 18th-century Englishman who wrote it, suffered from suicidal depression for most of his life. He knew a thing or two about the *mysterious* and often impenetrable ways of God.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, “*Truly thou art a God who hidest thyself*” (Isa. 45:15). This verse has had a lot of attention over the centuries. Throughout Christian history, the question has always been asked: “*When terrible things happen, where is God?*”

Many people, of course, have been conditioned not to ask these kinds of questions—as though they were disrespectful, intrusive, or dangerous. Some worry that asking such a question is like opening a door to not believing in God at all.

But the people of the Bible *do* ask, directly and bluntly. The questions are asked over and over again in the Psalms. The wonderful little book of the prophet Habakkuk asks it this way: “*Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why are you silent when the wicked man swallows up the one more righteous than he?*” (Hab. 1:2, 13).

The *silence* of God, the *absence* of God, is a major theme of scripture and a common struggle in the Christian life. Habakkuk’s questions are part of every believer’s struggle for faith. I suspect that many *seasoned churchgoers*

have had occasion to ask why God so often seems to be absent. Anyone who has not asked this question hasn't been fully tested yet.

As the hymn by *Walter Chalmers Smith* says:

Immortal, invisible God only wise
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most gracious, most glorious, the ancient of days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

You see, the idea that God lives in "*light inaccessible*" is an ancient one. For example, when Moses came down from speaking with God on Mount Sinai, his face reflected *God's light* so brightly that he had to wear a veil over it so as not to blind the people (Exod. 34:29–35). And when Moses asked God to show him his glory (*shekinah*), God placed him in a cleft in a rock and covered him with his hand to protect him from seeing the glory directly (Exod. 33:21–23).

Hymns from older times refer to these biblical stories in a way that assumes the congregation will know them and make them their own. One hymn has these words:

"(God) shelters me [me! you!] in the cleft of the rock and covers me there with (God's) hand." (*He Hideth My Soul*, Frances J. Crosby).

It's a tender *personalization* of the story about Moses, but today's average churchgoers may not recognize the connection. Smith's hymn makes a biblical reference to God as "*ancient of days*." That phrase comes from God's appearance in Daniel 7.¹

So, God dwells in *inaccessible light*—light that we can't directly look at. It's uncreated light that emanates from God's very being. This light was already there before God created the light that we see—"*In light inaccessible hid from our eyes*." This also is a basic biblical idea. God isn't a *product* of human imagination, a human wish raised to the nth power, or a projection of human hopes and fears. God is *outside* and *beyond* our ideas of God, so we can't see God from a human point of view at all. Put another way: *God is invisible not only to our eyes; God is also invisible to our imaginations*.

But how then do we know who God is? How do we even know if there is a God?

Well, there are two different ways of asking "*Where is God? Why does God hide God's-self?*"

One way is scornful, hostile, and truly *God-less*, like the abuse and mocking hurled at Jesus on the cross: "*He trusted in God to deliver him, so let God deliver him!*" The people who yelled that insult thought they knew who God was and what God would and would not do (Matt. 27:43; also Ps. 22:8).

But the other way of asking, like Cowper's way, comes from *deep faith*. It comes from having at least a *partial knowledge of God* and of the darkness that opposes God. Anyone who has received *even a tiny glimpse* of the majesty, holiness, and righteousness of God will have an increased sense of the darkness, disorder, and malevolence that's loose in the world. These forces would swallow us up had not God set in motion God's great plan to reclaim God's creation.¹

Jesus, of course, always had that full glow of *divinity* within him. This *Transfiguration moment* is not simply the *God-light unveiled*. The divinity and humanity can't be separated like that. I wonder whether the focus should be on Peter, James, and John, who were able to see that *shining light* because they had come away, because they had stayed awake, because they had left behind the concerns of this world. Maybe Jesus was always *shining* like that but only visible to those who emptied themselves of the disquietude of this world

¹ Fleming Rutledge, "*Divine Absence and the Light Inaccessible*," *The Christian Century*, August 27, 2018

Beholding Jesus as the true *God-Man*, however, is not an operation of the *intellect* alone. It is a process that requires our *whole selves—mind, heart, soul, body*.

Ask yourself: *When we come to church, are we looking for a wise teacher or for God?* Whether we encounter the *living God* in the person of Jesus the Christ *may* depend on whether we bring our *whole selves and lives* to worship.²

Richard Rohr puts it this way:

The first *Incarnation of God* did not happen in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. That is just the moment when it became *human and personal*, and many people *began to take divine embodiment as a serious possibility*. The initial Incarnation actually happened around 14 billion years ago with "*The Big Bang*." That is what we now call the moment when God decided to *materialize and self-expose*, at least in this universe. The first "*idea*" in the mind of God was to make *Divine Formlessness* into *physical form*, so that everything visible is a further revelation of what has been going on secretly inside of God from all eternity. Love always outpours! God spoke the Eternal Blueprint/Idea called *Christ*, "and so it was!" (Genesis 1:9).

This is the "*Cosmic Christ*" through which God has "let us know the mystery of God's purpose, the hidden plan made from the beginning *in Christ*" (Ephesians 1:9-10).

As (Paul) in Colossians puts it: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation" (1:15); Christ is the one glorious icon that names and reveals the entire arc of history. "The fullness is founded in Christ . . . everything in heaven and everything on earth" (Colossians 1:19-20).ⁱⁱ

The Light (inaccessible) was coming into the world.

All of us, then, without exception, are living inside of a cosmic identity, already in place, that is drawing and guiding us forward. We are all *en Cristo (in Christ)*, willingly or unwillingly, happily or unhappily, consciously or unconsciously.

This means that every single creature—the teen mother nursing her child, every one of the twenty thousand species of butterflies, an immigrant living in fear, a blade of grass, you hearing this meditation—all are "in Christ" and "chosen from the beginning" (Ephesians 1:3-4, 9-10). What else could they/we be?

Something to consider as we ponder the *mystery* of the *Incarnation* at the Lord's Table on this Transfiguration Sunday.

ⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, "*The First Incarnation*," February 21, 2019

² Evan D. Garner, *What Ascetics Have Taught Me About Divine Light*, "The Christian Century, August 3, 2017