

Sermon Draft

Text: Exodus 34:29–35

Sermon: Transfiguration 2024

This morning we have two Old Testament readings, one from 2nd Kings which you already heard and now from Exodus 34:

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.^[a] ³⁰ Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. ³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Jesus is “the light of the world” (John 8:12)! In him we see both God and ourselves as we really are, for the Lord Jesus is both the light and the truth (John 14:6). Today, Transfiguration Sunday, we see this illustrated in a most dramatic way! We see in shining glory how Jesus lights up our lives.

Light and truth tend to go together, as do the opposing concepts of darkness, deceit, and peril. All of us are aware of the problem of darkness. Most of us have stumbled in the dark and have a healthy and proper fear of the darkness, especially in unfamiliar situations and environments where danger can be anticipated. Scripture speaks of spiritual light and darkness and warns us: **“In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”** (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Our text from Exodus takes place almost 1500 years before Jesus’ transfiguration. Was he lighting up the lives of God’s people already way back then? The Jewish people have a special word to describe God’s glorious presence that is seen and yet also “clouded.” That word is *shekinah*. God is omnipresent, that is, present everywhere. David affirms this in Psalm 139. Yet God’s special and more personal presence is revealed to us in many historical accounts in the Bible. One of the first is his confrontation with Adam and Eve when they fell into sin.

Another is God's encounter with Moses from the bush that burned but was not consumed (Exodus 3:2–4).

In the construction of the ark of the covenant, God promised that his special presence would dwell between the two sculpted images of the angelic cherubim that adorned the mercy seat of that altar-like piece of sacred furniture. Even that was to be seen only by a prescribed priest behind a curtain. Anyone who would presume to come into God's special presence that did not follow these God-given instructions was subject to instantaneous death.

Today's Old Testament text recounts how Moses was given the privilege to come into the special presence of God and how it caused his face to radiate with a special bright light as a result of that encounter. Moses has been up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments for a second time, since earlier he shattered the two tablets of stone when he saw Israel shattering the commandments themselves by worshiping the golden calf.

Moses has been face to face with God, and now, for the children of Israel, even this reflection of God's glory on Moses' face was more than they could look at with steadfastness so Moses put on a veil.

No human can look at God in the fullness of his glory. Thus, God uses what Luther called "masks" to shield sin-ridden humans from his unapproachable light. They give us glimpses of what we can understand about God but hide that which is too profound for us to take in.

It might take a while for people to see the Ten Commandments as a path to joy and freedom rather than bondage. It might have taken God's people time to see the outlines of the Gospel in the required sacrificial offerings and days to be observed. It most certainly was a challenge to see the hand of the all-powerful and loving God in the time of the bondage in Egypt. Moses and his message were given a hearing by the people because he was attested by signs and wonders. Through him, God brought plagues upon the Egyptians, inducing them to let God's people go.

And by God's power, Moses led Israel in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea that finalized their deliverance from what was one of the most powerful military powers of that day after the Israelites had surely imagined the Egyptians would slaughter them. God's people have always been called upon to walk by faith and trust rather than by mere human reasoning based on sight and current philosophies.

There is yet another meaningful point to be made about Moses' encounters with God. Often the Old Testament refers to God manifesting himself to people by sight or sound. We call these appearances *theophanies*. Many other times the Old Testament describes what we call *angelophanies*—appearances of what the texts call “the angel of the LORD.” A number of theologians (especially Lutheran ones) have come to realize from a more careful and intense study of the Scriptures that most all of these appearances are, in reality, *Christophanies*. That is, they are encounters with the preincarnate Christ. It was most likely Christ fourteen centuries before he was born in Bethlehem whom Moses was meeting face to face.

The Old Testament constantly points forward to the fulfillment of God's great plan of salvation in the promised Messiah. While the picture of God's plan of salvation is most clearly seen in its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus, God's gracious and redemptive work is already there to behold in the Old Testament sacrifices and prophecies of God's spokesmen. Salvation has always been the work of our gracious God and fulfilled only through the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

While it often seems that the Old Testament covenant was primarily a promise that God would grant his people blessings as a nation in *this life* if they lived under his Lordship, that covenant was actually already shining brightly the light of God's *eternal* grace and love in Christ. Old Testament believers already had faith that God would raise them from the dead (Hebrews 11:17–19). Job, who belonged to the time of the patriarchs, beautifully expressed that faith that God would raise him from the dead when he declared familiar words:

“I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Job 19:25–27).

Of course, the reason for both the Old Testament Reading from 2nd Kings and our text from Exodus were chosen for Transfiguration Day is because of Moses and Elijah appearances with Jesus in today’s Gospel. And here, in Jesus and his transfiguration, the light of God’s grace and love was shining even more brightly than it had through Moses.

Jesus knew what awaited him as he made his way to Jerusalem for the final time. He knew that it would jolt the disciples whom he had prepared for three years to broadcast the Gospel throughout the world. So, he gave three of those disciples Peter, James, and John a revelation of himself that was unforgettable and spectacular.

There, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus’ appearance was suddenly altered bright, shining white, ***“as no one on earth could bleach them.”***

How the three disciples came to recognize Moses and Elijah is not explained in the biblical account, but to have such spiritual hall of famers support Jesus' claim to be the one and only prophesied Messiah can not be dismissed as anything less than stupendous. The glorious light that emanated from Jesus' body and even his attire was absolutely remarkable.

People often struggle with what Luther called the "Theology of the Cross." We naturally would prefer a painless "Theology of Glory." Although Jesus explicitly told his disciples about the betrayal, persecution, and death that awaited him in Jerusalem, the disciples did not process that until after his resurrection. Likewise, the prophecies from the Hebrew Scriptures about these matters were only understood by them after they saw Jesus overcome the horrors inflicted upon him by the hand of the Romans and the political corruption of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. When Jesus rose and demonstrated his victory, when he ascended in a breathtaking manner, the spiritual pilot lights within the disciples burned brightly.

The three undoubtedly told the rest of their colleagues about the transfiguration of Jesus they had witnessed, and in God's perfect time they departed from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the known world and turned it upside down.

Sometimes our light burns brightest to those around us when we encounter and endure hardship and challenges. But certainly the light of God's grace and love will shine brightest of all when Jesus inaugurates his eternal kingdom.

Jesus says to his church, ***"You are the light of the world"*** (Matthew 5:14). As the moon reflects the light of the sun, so we reflect the light of the Son, that is, the light of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is very God of very God. May we shine brightly and be used by God's Spirit to aid in the rescue of people who without the Gospel light will exist forever in the outer darkness.

Amen