

Bible Study
Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year C
February 7, 2016

[RCL] Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]; Psalm 99

Exodus 34: 29–35

When we read the Bible, it's easy to squint dutifully at the small print and wonder what exactly it is that God is trying to say through these ancient and holy words. We read hoping for an encounter with God that increases our understanding. But we can treat this passage from Exodus as a challenge to reframe what a successful encounter with God might look like: it is not, first and foremost, a matter of understanding, but rather one of transformation.

There is Moses, back at the base of Mount Sinai, and in his arms are the holiest of God's laws, the Ten Commandments. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (and, indeed, throughout Jewish and Christian history) there will be no shortage of effort to understand the content of those two tablets. But here, for a brief moment, the laws resting in Moses' arms seem entirely secondary next to the astonishing realization that "the skin of his face was shining." Moses' shining face helped the Israelites know that God was indeed working through him.

- How do lives of holiness help us see the ways God is at work in the world?
- Have you known people who seem to glow with faith-fueled joy, peace, and compassion?
- Is your faith outwardly visible to others? In what ways do you wish it were?
- The image of the veil might be useful in thinking about our prayer practices. When we pray, how can we learn to remove the veil of busy-ness, distraction, selfishness and impatience – a veil that our split-screen culture so often encourages us to wear?

Psalm 99

Many psalms celebrate God by using the metaphor of a king. In Psalm 99, God is "enthroned," and we hear that all people should "tremble" and "[p]roclaim the greatness of our God," falling "down before his footstool." Ancient kings would boast of their military power as being the evidence of their greatness – and, of course, some modern leaders still do. But note how the psalmist portrays God's greatness as coming from a very different source: God's justice.

It's hard, likely impossible, to speak at length about God without using metaphors. The Psalms offer us an astonishingly rich library of images and understandings of God. In one moment God might be portrayed as a king perched on a throne (Ps. 99:1) and in another as a midwife delivering a child (Ps. 22:9-10). It is always important to remember that no single metaphor for God is sufficient on its own – for each obscures as much about God's nature as it reveals.

- Have you ever been a part of a community where there are leaders whose authority comes not by virtue of a title, but rather as a consequence of their goodness?
- Pick two hymns and examine the metaphors that each of them uses to describe God. In what ways do the hymns present different understandings of God? How do the hymns complement each other? You might find it particularly fruitful to compare the militaristic imagery of a hymn like #473 "Lift high the cross" with the pastoral images of one like #664 "My Shepherd will supply my need".

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Too often, passages like this one from 2 Corinthians have been used by Christians to justify ugly, and frequently anti-Semitic, dismissals of Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures – as though the value of these sacred texts is limited to how they can be viewed in light of Jesus’ life and death. Read in its context, amid Paul’s defense of his teaching authority, the passage seems less a treatise against the Jews and much more a polemic about Paul’s teaching authority in Corinth. When he assures his readers that: “we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word,” we hear the implication: *unlike some other people I know.*

One of the joys of the passage is that it allows us to peek over Paul’s shoulder as he reads the passage from Exodus 34 discussed above. He interprets Moses’ shining face as evidence that encounters with the glory of God leave their mark on believers, transforming them “from one degree of glory to another” till the divine image shines more clearly in and through them.

- How do we hope our encounters with God will transform us?
- How might these hopes shape our intentions when we study the bible or partake in Holy Communion?
- When does God’s image shine most brightly through us?

Luke 9:28–36, (37–43a)

This passage contains Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, the mountaintop miracle when Jesus’ appearance so thoroughly reflects God’s glory that even his clothes seem to glow a “dazzling white.” It’s a well-told narrative, full of dramatic touches. The sleepy disciples who must have wondered whether they were dreaming; the mysterious appearance of Moses and Elijah; the voice of God speaking from a cloud, calling Jesus “my Son,” and telling the disciples, and us, to “listen to him!”

We know that Jesus’ life and teachings provide our clearest window into the nature of God. But we often forget that Jesus also provides our clearest illustration of what a human life looks like in its highest form. The account of the Transfiguration is a useful reminder to look to Jesus as a paragon for what our lives might be. There on the mountaintop the distance between God and man utterly collapses. The task for us, the journey of Christian discipleship, seems clear: start climbing towards God.

- In what concrete ways can we strive to obey the voice of God as it spoke through the cloud, called Jesus “my Son” and told us to “listen to him”?
- Surely we all are aware of a persistent gap that divides the life we live from the life we ought to live. What practices have been helpful in your efforts to “mind the gap” and grow closer to becoming the person God is calling you to be?

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