

2025 Epiphany Last Transfiguration

Every year, the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday is Transfiguration Sunday. We hear one of the Gospel's stories of Jesus going up on a mountain to pray and suddenly being transfigured into something dazzling, blindingly bright, standing with Moses and Elijah. We read how the disciples respond—usually badly—and occasionally we hear the story of what comes next. And every year I dutifully reflect on this story, with a variety of approaches to understanding it.

But with everything going on in the world right now. It feels disingenuous to babble on about light and glory and mystery without at least acknowledging it doesn't feel full of light and glory.

So, I want to back up a little. I want to look at those first two readings, which both refer to a “veil” that Moses wore after encountering God on Mt. Sinai.

This was Moses' second trip up the mountain. You may remember what happened the first time around. Moses went up the mountain to commune with God, while the Israelites remained below. These people, who had followed him out of Egypt, out of slavery, people who had been convinced that he had something to offer them after a series of supernatural plagues intended to reveal the power of Yahweh, the God of their ancestors.

They were waiting for him to come back down and continue the journey. And he didn't. For a long time. So long that they began to be afraid, and when they saw clouds descending on the mountain, and lightning flashing, they decided the hedge their bets. They convinced Aaron, Moses' own brother, to take their gold jewelry, melt it down, and create a golden calf. A "god" they could see and touch and speak to—even if it couldn't speak back. If Moses came back—great! They'd resume their journey. If not, well, they had a fallback position.

When, after 40 days, Moses descended from the mountain, carrying with him the tablets of the covenant that God had given him to share with them—ten commandments meant to help them be a stronger, more caring, community of God—he saw them reveling around this golden calf, and he was *not happy*. So what did he do? He threw them down, smashed them. It seemed the covenant had failed before it had even begun, and was just jagged, broken pieces on the ground.

But after some angry words and some really ugly consequences for those who had sinned by worshipping the golden calf, ultimately Moses—and God—gave them another chance. Moses went back up the mountain, once again communed with God, and came back down with a new set of tablets of the covenant.

And a shining face. His close encounter with God's glory had changed him. He soaked some of it in. But he didn't know it was happening.

I find that detail fascinating, because it strikes me as the most realistic part of the story. Think about the people you know who just seem to glow with the love of God. In my experience, it's always news to them that they are shining. They have no idea.

This is where, in the original text, we run into some linguistic puzzles. First, that word here translated as *shining*. It's a rare form of a word root that more often refers to horns, like the horns of a goat protruding—radiating—out of the sides of the head. Has anyone seen photos of Michelangelo's statue of Moses, and wondered why he has horns? This is why—the Latin translation most commonly used in his time picked up on that aspect of the word, and said he came down the mountain with horns. (I suspect there may be some not-so-subtle anti-Semitism involved there, but let's hold that to the side for a minute).

Even more interesting, is that the Hebrew word here translated as 'veil' is found nowhere else in Scripture. This is not as uncommon as you think. It happens in Paul's writings, and we're still dealing with the consequences of some of the translation decisions which

became “traditional” without having any firm foundation beneath them. The scholar I was reading suggested that the decision to use the word ‘veil’ came from what happened later. The Temple was built, and the Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the world by a veil. (That’s the veil that rips in two at the time of the Crucifixion, at least according to a couple of Gospel accounts).

This same scholar offered a different translation. *Mask*.

I used to think of masks as a way of hiding something about ourselves we felt ashamed of or wanted to keep secret. When those masks fall, it can be ugly.

COVID taught us a lot about masks, didn’t it? I’ve been wearing them a lot this week, too. Mom was in the hospital, and knowing how prevalent flu is right now, I wanted to protect myself.

Masks protect us, but also protect those we encounter. There is something about mask in this sense, the sense of protecting others, that resonates with that image of Moses in his mask, or veil, or whatever it was.

That scholar suggested that it is in keeping with religious practices through many generations that holy men (and women) wore masks as part of religious ritual. So it would not be unusual for the religious leader to wear

one. (It did strike us odd at Bible study this week that Moses would wear one with horns—wouldn't it look an awful lot like that golden calf?)

But this story is also a little peculiar about how and when he wore it.

Given what is said elsewhere in the Bible about the dangers of encountering the divine glory of God, you would think he would wear it while he was on the mountain and then speaking to the people on God's behalf. But he doesn't. He would speak to God, and then to the people, face-to-face, not hiding the shining. Only after he was done speaking would he don his veil or his mask or whatever it was that he used to hide the shining of his face that was just too much for them. He would wear the mask until the next time he went to speak with God—and then he would take it *off* again. It's weird, not what we expect. When he approached God, he set aside all his defenses, all his protections. He didn't need them then. He needed them when dealing with other people.

So this is what Paul is referring to in that reading from 2nd Corinthians we heard today. It is here that I have to circle back around and say that as Christians we have to be very, very careful about how we engage these texts, because they have been used to support anti-Semitism through the centuries. There are reasons Paul and the Christians of the first century were at odds with the Jewish community, but they are not justification for the

mistreatment that occurred in the centuries that followed. I do not accept any use of Scripture that justifies treating a particular group of people as less worthy of the love of God than another. If anything, *that* is what Paul is challenging here: using words intended to help us become a stronger, more loving, more just community in ways that divide the community, diminishing, demeaning and excluding some. He is condemning the attempts to hide the glory of God beneath a mountain of words and rules. The glory of God cannot be contained, and it appears in all kinds of unusual and unexpected ways.

That finally brings me back around to the Gospel account of the Transfiguration which we heard today—that moment when Peter is so overwhelmed by the naked, glowing glory of God radiating out of Jesus that he tries to contain it. His suggestion that they build a ‘dwelling’ is a reference to a particular religious celebration, but it’s also a way of saying, “Let’s just keep this right here, where we can keep an eye on it and not let it get out of hand.” He doesn’t want to let the glory loose on the world. He may have declared Jesus as Messiah the week before, but he’s still clueless as to what that really means. He wants a manageable Messiah. One he can keep in a box, or separated by a veil, or behind a mask. One glimpse of the full truth of Jesus scares him half to death.

And maybe it should. To see the full truth of Jesus, to take in so much of the glory that it begins to shine out of your own skin, is to allow yourself to be changed, challenged, called out of yourself and into the world.

The lectionary allows for the next scene to be included in today's reading. A story of Jesus healing a child that the disciples had given up on, and Jesus getting a little annoyed at the disciples' lack of faith. Jesus believed in them more than they believed in themselves. Jesus was frustrated that rather than let the glory of God shine through them, they all scrambled to put their masks back on. Two thousand years later, it seems we still haven't learned to let the glory shine. We still keep trying to protect ourselves, no matter the cost. No matter who gets hurt as a result.

Lent begins on Wednesday. Lent is a time for self-examination and repentance, discipline through prayer, fasting and good works, a time for studying Scripture to see if God is opening up some new understanding. I urge you to spend some time this week asking yourself the hard question: What masks do you wear that keep the glory of God hidden? What are the ways you try to keep Jesus in box? And are you willing to remove the things that divide you from others, keep you from shining with the light of God, declaring the redeeming, transforming

love of God to a world that too often prefers to stay in
the dark? Amen.