

March 3, 2019 (Transfiguration Sunday)

TEXT: [Exodus 34:29–35](#)

TITLE: Removing our Veils

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

God spoke to Moses a lot. According to the Old Testament, there are many interactions between God and Moses, from the burning bush encounter when Moses was a young man to a long conversation near the end of Moses' life. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and laws on how to live. God also gave Moses blessings to speak over the Israelites and ultimately over us. The most famous one is this blessing you've likely heard before: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.* (Num 6:24–26)

May the Lord's face shine upon you. As a metaphor, that is a lovely image—the idea of God looking kindly upon us, looking lovingly upon us so that it feels like sunshine on a cloudy day. Receiving that kind of positive attention from someone we care about makes us feel good—it makes us smile and makes our face glow in response.

Being close to God means metaphorically to experience the glory of God. On Christmas Day long ago, angels brought good news to the shepherds out in the fields and scripture says “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” When Jesus went up the mountain to pray, a transfiguration occurred in which his clothes became a dazzling white and his disciples had a vision of Moses and Elijah and Jesus surrounded by the glory of the Lord. And in the blessing I recited earlier, our prayer even today is for God's countenance to look kindly upon us and for God's face to shine upon us. So no matter what storm clouds are over us or shadows may threaten us, there is a sense that God's loving spirit is near and that the light of the Lord will show us the path forward for our lives.

But when this closeness to God happened to Moses, something interesting followed. Supposedly Moses' face shone and it terrified the people. So Moses hid his face behind a veil. Nevermind that Moses was carrying two stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on them. Nevermind that he had received laws for faithful living from the God of all life. The crowd initially seemed to ignore all that and became fixated on one detail: Moses' face was shining. To settle them down and get down to business, Moses decided to put on a veil to cover his face.

The comedian John Mulaney has called sermons “book reports that frankly should be a lot better since we've had the book for 2000 years.” So if I wanted to give you a book report, I would present a scholarly excursus on how human encounters with the sacred have often involved setting things apart and hiding them behind veils—like the veil in the Jerusalem temple that hid the Holy of Holies from public view. But I'm not going to do that. Instead, let's consider this simple question: What are you hiding behind your own veils?

None of us shows our complete self to others. We choose our words carefully, leaving some things unsaid. We bite our tongues; we don't send the e-mail we were tempted to dash off in anger; we refrain from sharing our secrets or naming our scars and wounds for others. In this world, we spent a lot of time reflecting back what people want to see in us. We reflect back that we're a good employee. We reflect back that we are a caring partner, a trustworthy friend. And in most cases, that is what we truly are—good employees, caring spouses and friends. But we don't reveal everything to everyone. When someone asks "How are you?" they don't want to hear about our bad knees, about a spot the doctor just found on our x-ray, about the credit card bill that is going unpaid, about a family member in treatment for anorexia or depression. We don't start conversations saying today is an anniversary of when a divorce became final or a parent died. We typically refrain from sharing those things. We hide them behind a veil. It's a natural act of self-protection.

Having said that, the reality is that the secrets and unspoken truths we bury within us can become a powerful force shaping our identity (what we see when we look in the mirror) and guiding all our interactions with others. We convince ourselves that if others knew about our past—the times of abuse or of addiction or bad judgment—then they wouldn't love us or respect us. Their faces wouldn't shine upon us. Suddenly the things we hide behind veils to preserve ourselves become the very things that keep us from being at peace and most fully ourselves with others. The veils we wear keep our light from shining on others.

Ash Wednesday is coming soon. Ashes will be smudged on our foreheads and the hard truth will be spoken that cuts through all pretense of self-sufficiency: *Of dust you are and to dust you shall return*. Eventually the things hidden behind veils come out. Over time, we tell our secrets to those we trust, or perhaps our secrets simply can no longer be hidden. The Catholic Church is dealing with this now, as their history of abuse must be reckoned with. The Methodist church, sadly, has chosen a backward path of exclusion and more veils, insisting either "don't ask, don't tell" or outright punishment for the LGBTQ leaders and members God has placed in their pews. Today lawyers for politicians and the president tell the secrets no amount of money could keep hidden. Today energy companies pay fines for abuses they inflicted on the land as their misdeeds are finally revealed by good journalism and public advocacy.

In a real sense, what you're doing today—worshiping in church, belonging to a community that prays—is how we learn to take off our veils. We say prayers of confession as part of our worship service, acknowledging our brokenness before God. We say silent prayers here or at home, admitting our scars, our wounds, our regrets, our fears. Those prayers are a good start, but there's more I hope you'll remember today.

Soon we will celebrate communion and literally serve one another the bread of life and the cup of salvation. It is a ritual of our faith, yet it is more than that. It is one way we connect honestly with each other. It is one way we let our face shine before others and see each other without judgment, without pretense, without veils. All are invited to share

in this meal which doesn't discriminate or segregate. It's designed to be a topsy-turvy banquet where the first are last and the last are first; where children are guides for their elders, and where blessed are the meek, the poor, the humble, for of such is the Kingdom of God. It is not a matter of what your place is at this table; rather the fact that you and everyone else have a place is all that matters.

Moses came down from the mountain carrying the Ten Commandments and his face glowed with the glory of the Lord. He didn't fully realize this until he saw the people's reactions. He was new to this "spokesman for the Lord" role, so he chose to put on a veil so that his shining face didn't distract from the Lord's laws. By contrast, Jesus went up a mountain and before his disciples' eyes he met with the ancient lawgiver Moses and the prophet of the coming kingdom Elijah. And the glory of the Lord shown around them. But when Jesus came down from the mountain, Peter wanted to save the sacred moment by building booths. In effect he wanted to put up veils to capture this bright shining moment. Jesus would have none of that. He simply continued down the mountain and went back to the crowds, to the teachings and miracles—and basically said to his disciples, "C'mon, follow me." This is the same Jesus who said in his Sermon on the Mount, "*You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*" (Mt 5:14–16)

The good news is this. God is close to each of us, and as we look into the face of God, into the face of Christ, we receive the glory of the Lord—and then we reflect that glory into the world. Our faces shine. Our light chases away darkness in the world, not because of who we are but because of the face—the glory—the love of God that is reflected from us. For this process to be truly effective, we need to remove our veils. We need to be ourselves—honestly, imperfectly, trusting in the one whose grace is made perfect in our weakness. That is our calling.

I don't know what demons you carry around within you—what voices of self-doubt and self-criticism are suggesting you are unworthy of this calling. But know this: Just as you are, you are known by God, redeemed by Christ, and held by the Holy Spirit. Let that good news reflect from you and all you do. And as has been said many times: *The Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; for the Lord's countenance is looking upon you with love and will give you peace.* May it be so. Amen.