

Face to Face with Holiness
Luke 9:28-36; Exodus 34:29-35
Transfiguration Sunday

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

²⁸Jesus 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.

The Sermon

Somewhere between 100 and 200 men—all men—are gather in a large room. They cast ballots. One candidate has received more than two-thirds of the vote.

The Cardinal Dean—the head of the College of Cardinals—goes and asks the candidate whether he accepts the office to which he has been elected, and by what name he wishes to be called. “The candidate accepts, and states the name he will use as Pope.”

He is escorted into a small room whose walls are covered in red damask, just off the Sistine Chapel, and he is vested in his newly appropriate attire.

Now they open the doors of the conclave. The Master of Ceremonies receives the official recognition of the election.

The Cardinal Scrutatores, the ones who handle the voting, collect “any notes and all ballots, thread them through with red thread, [and] take them to the stove” where all the previous ballots have been burned. Those were burned with a substance that burns black; these will be combined with a substance to insure that the smoke pouring from the Sistine Chapel stove pipe will be white.”

That’s what happens in the uppermost echelon of the Catholic Church immediately after a new Pope is elected. And it’s about as much as anyone outside the room will ever know. The Conclave is over, and the notes and ballots have been burned. Only the white smoke tells the world what happened in that conclave.

If you could ask one of the Cardinal Electors to tell you exactly what happened in that room, what do you think he would say?

Was it a cleverly calculated business meeting? Or did the Holy Spirit choose to enter the room and lead them to their conclusion? And if so, how, exactly, did that work?

What happened in there?

What do you think that Cardinal Elector would say—and, would a Catholic layperson, let alone anyone from outside Catholicism, “buy it”?

Sometimes, you can’t articulate it.

The young Lakota man in what is now South Dakota comes back from his Vision Quest. He has made the transition now into adulthood after several days and nights in the wilderness.

What happened out there? If you could ask him, what do you think he would say?

Did he have a nice few days out in the woods, and figure out what he wants to do with the rest of his life? Or did God—*Wakan Tanka* as he would say, “The Great Mystery”—visit him in the depths of his soul?

Sometimes, you can't articulate it. Maybe you're not supposed to.

Because a lot of times, when we try to articulate something so filled with holiness, so filled with mystery, so indicative of God's personal interest in us, we just end up reducing it to something suitable for mass consumption—something that won't make us look weird, something that says to the world, “Yeah, I have some beliefs and go to church, but don't worry—you can count on me not to make any big deal out of it.”

So what had been a mystical moment, wherein God reached out to you from the unseen field of holiness that surrounds our simple, physical world, becomes, in the retrospective telling, like it was nothing at all.

An evening in which you had dissolved into tears while contemplating the people in the world who mean the most to you, at which time you were conscious of God speaking directly to you, in the thought of the gift of the universe, and the utter impossibility—the unthinkable series of coincidences—that had to take place in order for you to have been born, and to have known the people that you know in this life...

All of that becomes, the first time you try to say something about it to someone else, a sensible report, tidied up as best as you can, on how you were thinking about something kind of deep the other night, “but don't worry; I didn't go off the deep end, ha ha ha...”

A session meeting in which, at the time, those gathered around the table in intensive prayer felt the Holy Spirit speak prophetically into their divided deliberations, unexpectedly unifying everyone in the room with the faith to trust that God will deliver as long as they are faithful to the mission of Jesus Christ,

becomes, in the re-telling, simply a discussion in which a number of people somehow managed to make a convincing enough argument to change the others' minds. Spoken to someone who was not there at the time, it will usually get a response like, “Huh! Must have been some persuasive arguments made in there. I'm not sure that was the right decision...”

A mountaintop experience, in which God has clearly revealed the overwhelming, divine presence to one whose heart is now burning with new hope and a previously unrecognized, deeply rooted love for humankind,

becomes, upon more level-headed reflection, “Well, I was out hiking, and, I don't know, I just figured, maybe I could be a little bit less of a jerk sometimes.”

Maybe those mountaintop experiences—those mystical encounters that take place “with sighs too deep for words” as Paul says in Romans 8—are meant to be incompatible with human speech. Maybe there are no words that can be put together in such a way that anything like the actual experience could ever be articulated or shared.

Peter and John and James had gone up the mountain to be with Jesus while he prayed, and something happened there—

something dazzling with revelation, but profoundly mysterious;
something you had to be there to believe.

The late, great Luke scholar Francois Bovon said about this event,

“The divine reality shines through human reality like lightning: in the annunciation to Mary, at the baptism, at the transfiguration, and at Easter. Not only salvation history, a category of time, but also the divine sphere, a category of space, becomes accessible...”

It’s like the glorious, cosmic reality of God has broken through the same membrane they talk about in Celtic spirituality, that separates the physical world we see around us from the divine reality of the spiritual world—which is why you sometimes hear Montreat spoken of as a “thin” place. For so many people, this is a place where that supposed dividing line is particularly thin.

James, Peter and John were said by Luke to be “weighed down with sleep” while the Transfiguration was taking place. Unlike today, when that would usually be taken to mean that it probably *wasn’t* real—you were just having a dream, which means none of it really happened—Bovon and other Bible scholars remind us that sleeping or dreaming is when people in Bible times believed they were actually closest to the spiritual world.

In Old Testament times, the Israelites who saw Moses after he had been in the presence of God saw that his face was shining, and they were afraid.

Now James, Peter and John had also come face to face with holiness.

A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

And when the voice had spoken, Moses and Elijah were gone, the cloud was gone, and they saw that Jesus was there alone.

“And they kept silent, and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

Sometimes, you can’t articulate it. And maybe, sometimes, you’re not supposed to.

I found early on here in this part of the world that my cell phone camera is utterly useless in trying to capture the dramatic changes in the sky over the mountains; it's hopeless. It captures nothing.

It was a liberating experience, the first time my breath was taken away by a spectacular light over the mountains at dawn, and I just knew that it could never be captured in an image that would look remotely the same to anybody I would try to show it to.

So just enjoy this moment; don't waste precious seconds with your face behind the camera. Just be there in the astonishing moment. It's a love letter from God to you. And all over this valley, anyone else who is also marveling at this majestic beauty is seeing it from the perspective that only they can have, looking from the exact spot where they are standing or sitting or just waking.

It's just for you, a moment between you and your infinite, intimate Creator, and it defies being encapsulated or articulated.

Just enjoy it. You don't need to try to bottle it. This is God. There is plenty more where this came from.

You certainly don't have to try to build a booth to keep it in.

How does God speak to you? How do you listen and watch for God?

Picture, if you will, the face of someone who means the most to you in the world. (There may be several who fit that description; I invite you to choose one to whom this morning you would like to give a special, random blessing.)

And I would suggest thinking of it as looking at a portrait, so you're not mentally looking at them in an intrusive way that would make you both feel awkward.

What do you see in that face?

What color are their eyes?

Are there lines on the forehead? What have they worried about or been stressed over, in their lifetime?

Are there laugh lines? What did they say or hear that made them smile a lot, or laugh out loud?

Do they have any scars or markings? What happened to them that caused those distinguishing features to be there?

Frederick Buechner wrote, “All the major Christian creeds affirm belief in resurrection *of the body*. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God in spite of everything prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of human beings but a new and revised version of all the things that made them the particular human beings they were and that they need something like a body to express: their personality, the way they looked, the sound of their voices, their peculiar capacity for creating and loving, in some sense their *faces*.”

What do you see in the face of the special person you are picturing? What is God saying to you through that face?

I submit to you that if we pay close enough attention, we can see the revelation of God all around us—but particularly in the faces of the people who mean the most to us.

The first thing that happened when Jesus and those three disciples came back down from that mystical experience was another healing: another life helped, another physical being tended, the heart of a parent eased by knowing that that parent’s child has been helped back to health by someone who cared enough to get involved.

Jesus keeps finding people whose lives are in turmoil, and they keep finding him, and he keeps healing.

He keeps being stronger than their worst problems.

The people keep being astounded. And they keep being healed.

God may be speaking to you in the faces of the people you love the most, or the faces of the people you understand the least.

God may be speaking to you high on a mountaintop, in the shining appearance of the Son of God.

God may be speaking to you in the sickness and in the healing of a child.

Maybe God can see the holiness in your face. You can believe that it is there.

And if God can see it, maybe you can, too.

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