

February 10, 2013 / Transfiguration of Jesus / David L. Edwards

With Shining Faces

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...

Luke 9:28-36

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.

In the readings for today, Moses and Jesus are illuminated by their nearness to God, through solitude, listening, and prayer. And what is prayer but the opening of our lives to God's presence and spirit, practicing awareness of our lives in relation to God? Paul writes that as we behold God, we are transformed from one degree of glory to another. So, I entitled this sermon "With Shining Faces," and immediately remembered a little song we used to sing at the beginning of a Sunday school class, maybe even in elementary school. "Good morning to you. Good morning to you. We're all in our places with bright, shiny faces. For this is the way to start a new day."

I realized that the song really expresses what I wanted to say this morning. Being in our places, that is, being and becoming the unique persons God made us to be, discovering what our gifts are and the things we feel called to do as channels of God's love for the world. When we are in our places, when we dwell fully in the lives God has given us, we have "bright shiny faces". We come alive, not just existing. We wake up, no longer sleepwalking through life. I think that is what the spiritual life is about. Waking up. Becoming more fully aware of who we are in our relationship to God, who is in all moments and in all places. As Michael Morwood says, not an "elsewhere" God, "up there" or "out there", but God who is the very Power and Life of the universe, in us and around us, whose creation is infused with God's presence and glory.

Moses is up on Mount Sinai, listening to God, receiving the "ten words", or commandments. There were two ancient traditions about being in the presence of God. One

was that to be in God's presence, to see God "face to face", resulted in death. That view found its way into "Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark"! In the last scene, all the bad guys look at the Ark of the Covenant as it is opened, and they disintegrate! The other tradition, which, thank goodness, became more prominent, is found in our story. To be in God's presence, to see God, is to shine like the sun. We recognize the source of our lives and see our true nature. Isaiah 60 puts it this way: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." The nearness of God's spirit and love brings us life, awakens us, and invites us to stand up and meet the new day. Moses' face glows so brightly that it frightens the Israelites, and he puts a veil over his face. This emphasizes Moses' stature as an honored spiritual leader in Israel's life and history. He was very close to God and willing to be led by God's spirit. So his face glows very brightly!

Paul was writing to a community in which the glow had faded because of infighting, judgmentalism, and legalism. You had to be this way or that way if you were to be a "real" Christian. Paul had no patience with legalism, because he had been there himself. Then he had encountered the living Christ, in whom he experienced the love of God as pure grace (*karis*). Paul saw that God's love is an utterly free gift, not dependent on how we act or what we accomplish or anything else. This brought the freedom that comes from knowing we are loved unconditionally, which enables us to love in the same way.

Paul borrows images from the story of Moses. Because of God's love embodied in Jesus, all of us can look at God's glory with our faces unveiled. And as we behold the presence of God, the nearness of God, we are on a journey of being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Let me try to put it this way. Jesus lived fully open to God's presence, spirit, and leading. He was deeply and keenly aware of his life in God, and what God had given him to be and to do. As disciples of Jesus, and as his community, we learn from and experience in him our own lives in their nearness to God. Following Jesus means being on that journey of awakening to our life in God and discovering who we are in God and what we are given and gifted to do in the service of life. And when we are on that journey, which needs daily spiritual practice, we experience what Paul is talking about. We are on the journey of our own transformation from one degree of glory to another. It is not some unearthly, spiritualized glory, or some kind of pious, religious aura we put on. It is the glory of coming fully alive to our true selves and to the "everywhere" God, and learning something every day about what that means.

Jesus goes up the mountain with a handful of his disciples. He is off by himself praying. His face starts to change, and then his whole being starts to glow. Here again, that

image of what happens when we open to and are aware of our nearness to God, or God's nearness to us. It is an image of being fully alive. This is a picture of what prayer, in the fullest sense, is about.

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah, the great prophet, are with Jesus. They talk together about Jesus' impending journey to Jerusalem, and his death, euphemistically referred to as "his departure". Jesus stands fully in the spiritual heritage of Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets. This is one of many clear statements against the idea that Jesus intended to found a new religion called "Christianity". That is what happened, of course. But Jesus was fully within his own tradition, deepening it, calling it to its essence. I think Jesus knew that we don't need another religion. We need to really LIVE the one we have, go deeper into it, to the core, the essence. The greatest spiritual leaders, like Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, tell us not to change religions. What is needed is Christians being better Christians, Jews better Jews, Buddhists better Buddhists, Muslims better Muslims, and so forth.

Well, in spite of this spectacular scene, the disciples are dozing off. They begin to wake up just as Moses and Elijah are about to leave. Peter has a big idea. "Let's build three booths, or tents, Jesus. One for you, and one each for Moses and Elijah." Let's make this experience permanent, fix this moment in time. Let's stay on this mountaintop and never go down to level ground. Let's create a sacred site where people can have some kind of religious experience.

Peter's bright idea fizzles. The text says that he didn't know what he was saying. It was one of those times when we are in the midst of an experience of the sacred, something beyond our understanding, and we feel compelled to talk about it out of our uneasiness. Then the scene changes. A cloud overshadows all of them. And a voice sounds from the cloud: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" After that, Jesus is alone. And the disciples keep silence about what they had seen.

What stood out for me this week were the light images of what happens when we commit to and continue on that journey of drawing near to God who is already near to us. When we give sustained attention to our lives and our relationship with God and the world around us as God's creation, we come alive. We start to have shining faces.

We work with an inward journey of prayer, self-understanding, reflection, study, silence, and letting our awareness of our lives in God grow and deepen. It is about our giving attention to our inner life, learning to become non-judgmentally aware of what is going on inside us. The hurts. The longings. The fearfulness. The compulsions. The illusions we have lived by. The harmful patterns of thinking that keep us from living freely, fully, and lovingly

toward ourselves and others.

This is practicing solitude, which does not necessarily mean being alone. Solitude is a quality of our inner life that comes from openness to our relationship with God, the source and power of our lives and the life of the world. It means growing in our understanding that we are not dependent upon others' liking us or approving of us or otherwise thinking well of us. We grow in our awareness of what it means to belong first of all to God, and not to others. This frees us to be our unique selves and to love others in non-possessive, non-clinging, non-judging ways.

When we are faithful in our daily times of inward journey, both a set-aside time and throughout the day, we will know what it means to have shining faces, to be transformed from one degree of glory to another. We will know what it means to dwell in our "place", to come home to our true selves, the persons God, who loves us eternally, made us to be. I have not known a single person who, having made this kind of commitment to her or his spiritual life, did not come to experience what it means to shine, to glow. It has nothing to do with getting all excited. It is not about being happy all the time or never again experiencing difficult things. It has to do with becoming truly joyful, a quiet, deep joy that comes from knowing and touching again and again our true selves in their relationship to the God who is always near us and in us.

When we are on this inward journey, we will become attuned to what our true callings and gifts are, as well as what they are not. We will begin to know what it means to listen deeply to God's call and to sense the leading of God's spirit. That is where the story of Jesus' transfiguration ends. That whole dramatic scene on the top of the mountain, the whole reason for going up the mountain in the first place, was about listening. Jesus listening to God, giving deep attention to God's call in his life. And the voice from the cloud saying, "Listen to him!" That was the problem. The disciples had not been listening. They weren't getting it. In the end, they go back down the mountain in silence, the words "Listen to him!" ringing in their minds. What really matters, what it is all really about, is not the dramatic experiences, not the lofty visions, and it is certainly not about worshiping Jesus. It is about living our lives fully each day, in growing awareness of our true selves and of life in its relationship to God, the Source, Power, and Spirit. When we are on that journey, we will have shining faces. If we stick with it over time, we will be transformed from one degree of glory to another. We will come more and more fully alive as God created us to be.