

We're continuing our sermon series on Moses today, but I want to take a quick detour to the story _____ read for us earlier, the supernatural story of the Transfiguration. Jesus and three of his disciples go up a mountain, and Jesus is changed from his human form into this dazzlingly bright display of divinity. Then the ghosts of Moses and Elijah appear beside him, and God says, "This is my son! Listen to him." The Transfiguration is a mysterious, majestic story, and it is the final mountain-top experience before Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and the cross.

The Transfiguration is a story with no real parallel in our modern world. This just doesn't happen anymore. "Look at you! Your face is absolutely glowing today! Did you go to the spa?" "Nope. I got transfigured." We have no reference point for making sense of what actually happened. So, instead of looking in our modern context for a better understanding, we're better served to look back, because many of the peculiar stories in the New Testament have equally peculiar predecessors in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Transfiguration is no different; our story today from Exodus serves as a prototype for understanding the Transfiguration.

Let's do a quick recap of where we are in the story. Moses has led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea, and now they are making their way through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The Israelites turn out to be whiny travelling companions for Moses. "I'm hungry!" "I'm thirsty!" "Are we there yet?" "I wanna go back!" Their caravan takes a much-needed rest stop at Mt. Sinai, where Moses goes up to the mountain top and is given the law by God to take to the Israelites. It takes a while to carve all those laws into the stone tablets, and while Moses is gone, the Israelites get restless. "Where did he go? When is he coming back?" So, they give up on Moses and make for themselves a golden calf to worship. Much R-rated debauchery ensues and Moses smashes the tablets in anger. After a harsh punishment for the wrong-doers and some cool-down time for Moses, he goes back up the mountain to make a second set of tablets and gets an unprecedented glimpse of God's glory.

So that brings us up to our scripture today. Moses has been exposed to God's glory, has fashioned a new set of tablets containing the law, and is now making his way back down the mountain to the Israelites, who have learned their lesson from the Golden Calf debacle and are sitting criss-cross-applesauce and keeping their hands to themselves as they wait patiently for his return. But the Moses who's coming down the mountain is not the same Moses who went up the mountain. He's been changed by his encounter with God, transfigured we might say, and now his face glows like he's slathered it with Avon's Skin So Bright. Moses has seen God's glory, and some of it has rubbed off on him. The Israelites are already skittish about encountering God, so when they see the divine residue on Moses, they are terrified. After Moses gives them the law, he starts wearing a veil over his face to hide the glow, only taking it off when he's talking with God.

I told you this story was peculiar! Down through the years, it has been a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. In fact, the language itself is challenging. For example, the Hebrew word for "shining" is very similar to the word for "horn," so some early translations didn't say Moses' face was shining, it said he had grown horns! In fact, if you look at Michaelangelo's famous statue of Moses, you'll see that Moses has two small horns growing out of his head.

But in all honesty, that is just as easy to believe as the fact that his face glowed like a lava lamp so much that he needed to wear a veil. The apostle Paul, never one to shy away from a story just because he didn't understand it, tried to explain the veil by saying Moses was actually

losing his glorious glow and didn't want the Israelites to know, so he veiled himself until he could meet with God and recharge. Nice try, Paul, but I don't know that God's glory needs batteries.

Let's put these two stories side by side and see what we can learn. Both Moses and Jesus go up the mountain, have a divine encounter, and come back down changed. Moses' change is as plain as the glow on his face, but for Jesus, God took it one step further and tucked the glory inside of Jesus, to be radiated out in the way he healed and loved and taught. But after their mountain-top experience, one thing is for sure: both men had been changed.

Have you ever had a mountain-top experience? I would venture to say we all have. We've all had moments in our lives when we felt God's presence in almost tangible ways, when we caught just a glimpse of God's glory, like shafts of light sneaking through a closed doorway or rays of the sun shining through on a cloudy day. One author calls those thin places, places where the fabric between heaven and earth is translucent and you can almost see God, if only for a moment. I bet that Steph will have one of those moments today when we lay our hands upon her and she is ordained as a minister. I know it was for me. The days my kids were born were mountain-top experiences. Being overwhelmed by the awesomeness of God's creation can create a thin place. October 20, 1990, when Todd Benzinger caught a foul ball hit by Carney Lansford and the Cincinnati Reds won the world series. Definite thin place. I know John Royse would agree.

But those moments don't last, do they? The Reds can't win the world series every year, right? I mean, I would love it to be more than once in every 35 years, but what can you do? It would be great if we could capture that thin-place feeling, the closeness of God, bottle it and save it for a rainy day, but the glory of God refuses to be contained. I look at pictures that I took of those thin-place moments in my life, but they are only two-dimensional reproductions. Those moments of transfiguration for us can be life-changing, but not life-long. They happen, we experience them, and then they are gone, and we have to come back down the mountain.

So then what? Do we lose our glow? Does the glory of God that has been tucked inside of us fade? I hope not, but I believe the answer to that is up to us. Someone once said that faith is what happens in between our encounters with God. Faith is what happens when we come down from the mountain. Because of those divine moments, because of the experiences of God in our lives, we are changed. We aren't the same person coming down from the mountain that we were going up. God's glory peeks through the thin places in our lives and we are transformed...and then life goes on. Are we changed? Or do we forget? Do we glow or do we go back to the way we were before?

What we are called to remember, and what the experience of Sunday morning gently reminds us, is that we haven't lost the glow. The glory of God has been imparted to each of us, and we are the containers for it, the clay jars which have been filled with God's goodness. When we come together for worship, when we lift our voices in song, when we hear God's word, when we take communion, we experience God in tangible ways again, and we are sent out into the world again to glow.

In a previous house where I lived, there was a sign at the bottom of the stairs, right in your line of view when you would come down. It said, "Rise and shine and be happy." I loved that, because it was a reminder of who we have been created to be, how we are called to live out the glory of God within us each time we come down. As we come down to start our day, whether we've slept well or poorly, whether we woke up on the right side of the bed or the wrong one, we

are called to shine, to embody the glory that has been poured out on us, to be the incarnation of God's presence in this dark world. We are called to shine.

Thankfully, we don't have to be our own power source. The light we radiate is merely a reflection of what we've received. Through Jesus Christ, God has given us this blessing of grace and forgiveness and compassion and mercy, things that, if left to our own devices, we couldn't conjure up ourselves. Sure, I can be forgiving or merciful for a moment, but I can't sustain that very long. None of us can. But we don't have to; all we have to do is take what God has given us and reflect it into this world. One commentator wrote, "The presence of God should make our lives distinctive." Is your life distinctive? Could someone pick you out of a lineup as a Christian because of the way your life shines, the way you reflect the best qualities of God?

That's one of the reasons I envy practitioners of other religions, because they have tangible ways to be reminded of God's presence with them and their call to witness to their faith. When you see a person wearing a yarmulke, you know they are Jewish. Muslims are called to stop whatever they are doing five times a day to pray. So, what lets people know you're a Christian? I'm not sure a fish decal on your car or a cross necklace counts. How are we witnessing to our faith in ways that people see us glowing? How do our thin-place experiences of God's glory still resonate with us in a way that matters to those around us? Because if we're no different after than we were before, we're hiding that light under a basket.

For me, some days I shine more than others. Some days I feel less like a mirror and more like a brick wall, days when I want to knock down that stupid sign about rising and shining and being happy. That's OK. We're not called to be God. Sometimes our embodiment of God's glory will look more like funhouse mirror distortions than accurate reflections. That's why we're here this morning, to once again go up the mountain, encounter the living God through the bread and the cup, and then to go down again into this world, shining our light into all the dark places, letting the love of God cast a glow around us.

Singer Pearl Bailey is quoted as saying, "People see God every day, they just don't recognize him." So, here's what I wonder. People see us every day. Do they recognize God?