

2 Corinthians 3:12-44:2 “Never Hidden Away”

I'm so glad you all showed up here for “Transfiguration Sunday!” Not sure what “Transfiguration Sunday” is? Let me educate you. It happens every year on the Sunday before Lenten Season. It's a when the church recognizes and celebrates the presence of God's glory. All the scripture options that the lectionary has this week are about being in the presence of or in the midst of God's glory. And when I say, “glory” I'm talking about what ancient rabbinic literature calls the *Shekinah*, or “the settling of God's presence.” If I chose Exodus today, the story would be about God's presence settling down on Mount Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments. If I chose the gospel lesson, it would be from Luke 9 when God's presence settled on the “Mount of Transfiguration” while Jesus, Peter, James, and John were there getting away from the crowds for some much-needed prayer time. This is a favorite passage for people who work in outdoor ministry because it illustrates how we can have special moments with God on the mountaintop, but in the end, Jesus calls us back down to the valley to minister to hurting people rather than building a permanent house on the mountain. Even our Psalm mentions how God was present when God spoke to Moses, Aaron and the priests through a pillar of cloud. But I chose 2 Corinthians today because it's Paul. And sometimes we get the impression that Paul sucks the fun out of everything then leaves us to figure out what to do with the leftovers. I want Paul to shine today. We give Moses and Jesus all sorts of time in the spotlight because ... well ... they're Moses and Jesus. But I want to give Paul a chance to speak up and show us the way this morning.

Paul is writing to the Corinthian church about the glory and presence of God, so it's appropriate for transfiguration Sunday, right? But instead of lifting Moses up like you'd expect most Jewish teachers to do, Paul *criticizes* Moses for putting a veil over his face “to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.” You might be thinking, “Jesse, are you sure you want to give Paul time in the spotlight?” Yes! I'm sure. Because I don't think Paul is picking on

Moses so much as he's picking on the humans who developed a tradition of placing a veil over their faces whenever a priest read from the "Old Covenant." Paul is saying, "Why cover your eyes from God's glory? God's glory is a good thing!" If we put a veil on every time the Bible is read, how can we see what God is trying to reveal to us? You're missing the reality of God's presence! You need to find a way to get past the veils that you've put over your faces if you're going to understand what God is trying to teach you. Both Matthew and Luke's gospels indicate that when Jesus died, the veil in the temple at Jerusalem that separated humankind from the "holy of holies" or what they believed was the presence of God, was torn in two. The implication here is that Christ rendered the veil in the temple *unnecessary*. Now there is no longer a separation between God and humans. In Christ, we see the fullness of God's glory and we don't have to cover our eyes. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." So thank you Paul for reminding us. Maybe you don't suck the fun out of everything after all.

So the question that I want to put on the table this morning is, "What forms does this metaphorical veil take in our lives?" In other words, what are some of the veils that we've put in place that keep us from experiencing the fullness of God? First of all, Paul is suggesting that *religious traditions* can be a veil that keeps us from experiencing the fullness of God. Not long ago I had a talk with someone about *our* religious traditions. I was trying to explain how we as Disciples of Christ try to find a balance between not being bogged down by rituals and traditions, and actually using them to communicate our core values. I was trying to explain how sometimes we follow the lectionary but other times we don't. We may change the order of worship now and then, but there will always be a time when we sing, pray, worship through stewardship, hear the word proclaimed and interpreted, and of course we take communion every week. And in our churches, this may look *very* different from congregation to congregation. There are no two Disciples churches that structure their worship exactly the same way.

I often use my “tale of two churches” comparison from the time I worked on Regional staff in Virginia to illustrate this point. If you were to attend worship at Seventh Street Christian Church in Richmond, Virginia, you’d wonder if you accidentally walked into an Episcopal church. There are rituals for everything. They have arched ceilings, elaborate stained glass, and an organ that makes ours look like a bargain basement, scratch and dent closeout model. Not only do all the clergy wear robes, but the choir, the kid who lights the candle, *and* the three kids who carry the Bible, the cross, and the chalice in wear robes too. They call their worship leaders, “liturgists.” It is highly structured and highly scripted. There’s no dress code. No *written* dress code that is. But it’s very clear what one is to wear and not to wear to church.

Two hours West of Richmond and twenty minutes East of Paint Bank is the Gravel Hill Christian Church. Worshippers wear jeans. The preacher, at least on the Sundays that they have a preacher, wears jeans too. You would be looked upon with suspicion if you showed up wearing a tie. Just like Seventh Street Christian Church in Richmond, there’s no *written* dress code. But it’s there nonetheless. Sometimes music is led by a pianist. Sometimes it’s led by two women playing a hammer dulcimer and a mandolin. Sometimes they don’t use any instruments at all. Two very different “flavored” congregations, yet both fly the chalice of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). What they have in common, though, is: They both sing, pray, worship through stewardship, hear the word proclaimed and interpreted, and of course they take communion every week.

The big question to ask when you’re talking about religious rituals is *why* do you do them? Is it out of habit? Is it because you think that somehow there is only one “correct” way to perform them, and if you don’t perform that ritual exactly as prescribed, are you putting your eternal soul in jeopardy? Someone posted a great meme on a FaceBook page called “Things They Didn’t Teach You in Seminary.” It said, “Every minister starts out in their first church wanting to change the world ... until they almost get fired for changing the order of worship!”

Another veil that Paul mentions that keeps us from seeing God's glory is *the way we approach and interpret scripture*. I love how some churches distinguish themselves among others as, "A Bible believin' church." As if others somehow aren't? The Bible is necessary to be a follower of Christ. The Bible is our instruction manual. It's what we use to understand the character of God, the witness of the Holy Spirit and the person of Jesus Christ. But when you start asking specific questions of those who distinguish themselves as "Bible believin' Christians," you realize what they mean is, "*You are not a Bible believin' Christian because your interpretation of the Bible is not the same as mine.*" Ah hah. There's the distinction. Because some people's interpretation of the Bible has been used to justify some very un-Christ like behavior in this world including slavery, genocide, the subjugation of women, violence against sexual minorities, human trafficking, child abuse, and countless other evils. Don't tell me you're a Bible believing Christian if you're not willing to follow every word of the Bible *literally*. Don't tell me you're a Bible believin' Christian if you've ever played football! Because the Bible says that touching the skin of a dead pig is an abomination and renders you unclean! Read the Bible prayerfully, with the direction of the Holy Spirit, with the best scholarship available, and for heaven's sake study it with other Christians who aren't just like you!

So how do we get rid of these veils? Paul says it is only in Christ that the veil is removed. It's when Jesus becomes the lens through which you read your religious traditions rather than your religious traditions being the lens through which you read Jesus. But for this to happen, you need to allow Jesus to intervene. You can't penetrate the surface of reality simply by trying: you need Christ to remove the veil, to open your eyes, and to show you the depths of reality that are beyond the reach of ordinary eyesight. When that happens you'll see things that will begin to transform you. They will impact on you so dramatically that they will begin to reshape who you are, making you more and more like Christ. This transformation ... this *transfiguration* will be so significant, it may even have an impact on the way you look. The transformation that is

taking place in the core of your being can begin to show on your face. We sometimes talk of seeing someone's face light up, and Paul describes it as being like an ongoing, progressive lighting up of the face.

Paul explains that *we* are likewise *transformed/transfigured* when we find ourselves in God's presence. However, unlike Moses who covered his face, we aren't meant to hide how we are changed because of our connection with God. In fact, when we're truly in union with God, it should be as if people are looking at Jesus himself when they see us. Our faith should not be a source of shame or secrecy, but rather a living, breathing example of our faith. This is an essential part of our respective ministries. And we are all in the ministry together.

Whether it happens for you here in worship, or at camp, or away on retreat, or just spontaneously and completely out of the blue, the next step in removing the veil is always the same: Jesus leads us back down the mountain to reconnect with the activity and demands of normal life. We are to face life on life's terms with all its pain and struggle. But normal life with all its pain and struggle will never look quite the same as it did before and you will re-enter the life of service and mission with a new vision of what it's all about. Christ is pulling back the veil from our eyes, and every glimpse of the depths of reality — of the depths of God — every glimpse becomes a new piece in the vision that sustains us and transfigures us and makes us more and more into what we were created to be and are destined to be: The glorious body of Christ.