

February 27th, 2022

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 “Be Free”

Welcome to our last Sunday together before Lenten season. Back in 2020, Lent started on Wednesday, February 26, and we were able to have an Ash Wednesday service here, live in the sanctuary. But we only had three Sundays in Lent before we had to shut down because of the pandemic. In 2021, Lent started on Wednesday, February 17, but we still couldn't meet in person. We spent *almost* all of Lenten season 2021 on Zoom, Face Book Live and YouTube. But by the time Palm Sunday arrived, we had a COVID vaccine in place, so we chose to hold live services here in the sanctuary in addition to our online services. On April 4th 2021, we had our first service in the sanctuary in 55 Sundays. That was a heckuva long Lenten season, but I'm thankful that we never missed a Sunday of online services the entire duration of the shut-down. The good news is that in 2022 we are, once again, offering an in-person Ash Wednesday service which is this Wednesday at noon right here in the sanctuary. God willing, in 2022, we'll be able to meet in person all the way through Easter and beyond.

When the pandemic first started, there were a lot of predictions floating around about how it would affect us. How would we react to the presence of this microscopic organism and what kind of adjustments would we have to

make? How would history judge this pandemic and our response to it? How would we as human beings change for better or for worse? On the positive side, I think we're much better about washing our hands and practicing good hygiene. I also believe that, for the most part, employers are better at encouraging their employees to stay home when they're sick rather than passively punishing them for taking sick days. We've all discovered that you can get a lot of things done over Zoom. Even though our Regional Church has utilized Zoom since 2014, we realized that it really isn't necessary to require people to drive up to three hours one way to attend a live two-hour Regional Board Meeting. When you use Zoom, we learned that meetings are better attended, and you can tackle more things on the agenda than when you meet live. I also think we've learned some healthy new habits like reading and meditation. And we've taken up some useful hobbies like gardening and cooking. We could spend the rest of the day going over these positive things, but let's address the things that weren't so great.

Want to take a wild guess at what's number one on my list of bad things that happened during the first week of the shut-down? Toilet paper. I hesitate to call it a "toilet paper shortage" because it wasn't really a *shortage* as much as it was a human-created supply and demand issue. The shortage of bleach and cleaning supplies didn't surprise me at all. That actually made sense. Of course,

bleach wipes are going to be in short supply when you've got so many more people using them. But toilet paper? I mean, *everyone* uses toilet paper at a fairly ... consistent rate. What happened at the start of the pandemic was just plain old *hoarding*. Remember the eight people down in San Diego that were arrested for buying all the toilet paper and hand sanitizer they could so they could sell it out of their garage for twenty times over the retail price? So there ... hoarding is at the top of the list.

The second thing on my list that really surprised me was that even when they developed a vaccine, there was vaccine resistance. There are people alive today who remember what life was like when the threat of death from polio and smallpox was real. Vaccines have pretty much eradicated measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, and tetanus. They even do a pretty good job at lowering death rates caused by the flu. But during this pandemic there were so many people who stubbornly refused to be vaccinated. And I sympathized with the people who were resistant when the vaccines weren't fully FDA approved. But even after it was cleared, people *still* refused. Some said, "I'm not going to put something potentially harmful in my body unless I know exactly what's in it!" Some said this while smoking a cigarette ... eating a large chili dog ... with a side order of their cat's heart worm medicine ... then washing it all down with an extra-large diet Mountain Dew.

Then there's the controversy over masks. I watched a documentary about the 1918 Spanish Flu that was made a year before our current COVID pandemic ever happened. The big takeaway lesson from that period of history was, "Masks stop the spread of airborne diseases." This was long before vaccines were a common thing. But 100 years later, masks are seen as ideological symbols to show the world what "tribe" you belong to rather than a tool for common-sense disease prevention. Here's something good that has come out of mask-wearing though. I think we've become much better at reading each other's eyes. Early on in the pandemic, I was grocery shopping at WinCo and a woman bumped into my cart in the produce section. She said, "Oh, I'm so sorry!" I said, "No harm done." She said, "I know. I can tell. Your eyes are smiling." Even though our faces were veiled by masks, we could still see a glimpse of something there in each others' eyes.

Paul talks about veils in our scripture this morning. This is his second letter to the Corinthian church and it's definitely more encouraging and kind-hearted than the first letter where he was calling them fools. Last week I said that probably everyone in that church was born right there in the heart of the Roman Empire, but that most of them were also Jews who, over the centuries, were displaced from their original homeland in and around

Judah and Israel. These folks were familiar with the Hebrew scriptures but were fascinated with this emerging “Jesus Movement” within the Jewish faith. Paul spent a lot of time trying to help these people who grew up in Greek and Latin speaking parts of the Empire to understand how Jesus fits into their existing faith. What Paul is talking about here in this passage concerns the purpose of Moses’ law. He wanted to show the Corinthian church how through Jesus we have access to God in ways that people did not think were possible.

To illustrate this, Paul uses a relatively obscure example of deep lore about how Moses sometimes wore a veil to protect the people from the presence of God. And I know how weird that sounds coming from a church who is constantly seeking God’s presence. Back in Moses’ day, however, the people believed it was dangerous to look upon God. God was perfect and people believed that if they saw God, they’d drop dead because they were not perfect. For a while Moses was, for lack of a better word, kind of “shiny” because of the time that he spent in God’s presence. So the people wanted Moses to wear a veil to protect them. For the people in that time and place, the closest they felt they could get to God and be safe was to meticulously observe the Law. But Paul said that this meticulous observance of the Law actually closed people’s minds. Paul said the Law brings death because we are unable to follow it. The Law is carved on stone

tablets rather than written on our hearts as it was meant to be. If you feel like you have to veil your faces from God, that means your hearts are veiled too.

God's Spirit is life-giving. It brings righteousness. It's written on the hearts of God's people. It is glorious, bright, and everlasting. So those who look to Christ and trust him don't need a veil. For Moses, the veil was there for the people's protection, but that's not necessary anymore because the truth has been revealed through Jesus. Christ reveals God's glory to us. We no longer need to hide or be hidden because God's grace is perfect.

Over the past two years, we've spent a lot of time wearing veils over our faces. We've also spent a lot of time communicating with people online whether it's on Zoom or FaceTime or Snap Chat or some other video communication platforms. We've also had limited interaction with friends and family who we typically see on a regular basis. As hard as it may be, let's try to recall what life was like before these veils. Let's think about what it was like to interact with each other without masks.

When we meet new people, we all have different evaluative tools that we use to determine if someone is a potential friend or acquaintance. I was talking to someone the other day about how pet owners often say that they judge a person by whether their cat or dog likes

them or not. Because we are human, we let our prejudices get in the way of relating to other people. “Oh, that person chews tobacco, so I doubt we’d ever get along.” Or “Oh, that person’s political views don’t match my own, so to heck with them.” It’s not fair, but it’s real. But when you open yourself up to the possibility that *anyone* can be a friend, you find that your old evaluative tools are quite often flawed. How do we get to know people? We get to know people by talking with them. The more you talk with others, the more you get to know them. But if the person is wearing a veil, you’re going to miss an important part of communication. You miss little nuances. Sometimes it can work as in the case of the woman who ran into me at Winco, but for the most part, it’s hard to communicate if all you can see are the eyes. You miss an essential part of relating to someone when there’s a veil present. Paul says the Law is like talking to someone wearing a veil. You get to see a *glimpse* into the heart of God, but not fully. Christ removed the veil, and now we can see God’s face more clearly and get to know God on a much more intimate level.

Seeing God through the Law alone is like talking to a person wearing a veil. Or maybe another way to look at it is, “Seeing God through the Law alone is like getting to know someone only through text messages.” Seeing God through Christ, however, is like talking to a person face to face. So the question now is, “How do we

let people see Christ in us now that we don't have *real* veils over our faces?" I don't have any easy answers to that question because we're just now, and I'm talking just in the last four days, getting to the point where the CDC is saying that it's safe to go without masks. My guess is that it's going to take some time to readjust. But just remember that we are all created in the image of God. That means each one of us, no matter what we look like on the outside, carries that image of God within us wherever we go. During this time when we're trying to find some semblance of "normal" in this turbulent world, remember these words from Paul to the Corinthian Church - "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." Stay engaged. Be gracious to others and be gracious to yourself. Be merciful to others as God is merciful to you and let the glory of God who dwells in you shine for others to see.