

FACES ALL AGLOW

Sermon for Epiphany Last C: Ex 34:29-35, 2 Cor 3:12-4:2, Lk 9:28-36

LPC, 2/14/10

The Bible tells us today that Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai with his face aglow. He has been changed by an encounter with the living God. This isn't the first time Moses has spoken with God. But this time Moses has received the tablets of the Law, which he is to share with all the people (the people he has led out of slavery in Egypt by God's direction.)

Moses' face is so dazzling from his encounter with God that normal people cannot bear to look at him. Out of consideration for their sensitivity, Moses puts a veil over his face, thereafter taking it off only for his personal conversations with God.

From this we infer that an encounter with God changes people, making them visibly radiant. Other people can tell just by looking at a person, that God has been talking with him or her.

We hear a similar story about Jesus in the story from Luke. Jesus takes a few disciples up a mountain to pray. While he is praying, his disciples see him transfigured. His face and clothes become dazzling. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with Jesus about his upcoming ministry, and a voice from heaven proclaims "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!"

From this we infer that the encounter with God not only makes people shine, but confers power, authority, and family ties to God. Of course, unlike Moses, Jesus reverts to his former appearance after being transfigured. One assumes the power and authority remain.

In the Corinthian letter, Paul makes a lot out of the veil that Moses needed and Jesus did not. To Paul, the veil is like the resistance that people put up to accepting Jesus Christ as Lord. Once a person turns to Jesus the veil is removed. Unlike the people of Moses, Paul says, Christians do not need a buffer between themselves and the glory of God. Jesus has broken down all such barriers for ever. Obviously, we Christians are not quite yet the image of Jesus, but through Jesus we are in the process of being transformed like Jesus.

Will our faces shine as we leave church today? Will other people be able to tell from our mere appearance that we have been praying? Is our profession of the Christian faith in the process of visibly transforming us? Is our faith obvious to others?

On one or two occasions people have told me that my appearance while leading worship was radiant, but I suspect that was just a trick of the light. I personally shudder to think of how UN-obvious my faith is to other people. But I'm not preaching a sermon to induce guilt about how little our faces shine before others.

Of course, as Christians we *are* called to a regular cycle of self-reflection, repentance and amendment of life, as necessary. As part of that we ask ourselves if what we do adequately reflects what we believe. Beyond that, I don't think we're to be concerned about how many lumens our faces are putting out. Moses, it is said, was at first totally unconscious of his own transformed appearance.

I do think there is something to this business of shining faces, however. I am moved to tell the story of a shining face I encountered this past week.

I was in New Hampshire visiting and helping my mother. I had to check in at the nursing home reception desk to find out my mother's new room number and ask directions to it. While I was doing this, a resident passed by and said she would walk me to my mother's floor. I'll call this resident "Betty."

Down two corridors and through several doors, we reached an elevator, and I told Betty I could go the rest of the way on my own, so I said my thanks, and we both said our good-byes. As I was waiting for the elevator, I overheard, behind my back, a staff person beckon to Betty and ask after her welfare.

"Oh, I'm fine," said Betty, "But I'm also sad. I'm going to the Memorial Service today. Do you know I've lost four close friends in the last six months? It's almost too much."

The staff person made sympathetic comments, which prompted Betty to take a step out of her own sorrow. Betty said, "How do you staff people do it? You see so much death. It must overwhelm you at times."

The staff person then said something I don't think I'll ever forget. Gently she replied, "It's a privilege, really. We staff are among the last people some of our residents will ever meet. It's a special thing to be able to help them as they go on their way to meet Jesus. We're among the few who get to make that part of their journey with them."

I never saw this woman's face. But I know it was shining. Her faith was not just something she received on a mountaintop for her own benefit. It was something she brought back down to share with other people. She had built her vocation around it.

Thank God for people with shining faces. Thank God for the radiance of God's glory. Where may we yet see this glory, if we but remove the veils from our own faces and hearts?