

14 February; Last Epiphany, 2010  
Ex 34:29-35; Ps 99  
2 Cor 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-43

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“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; for this comes from the Lord,” (2 Cor 3:18)

Some time in the fourth century, in the deserts of Egypt, Persia, or the Holy Land, a monk named Abba Lot went to seek Abba Joseph and said to him, “Abba, as far as I can I say my Little Office. I fast a little. I pray. I meditate. I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else am I to do?” Then the old man stood up, stretched his hands towards heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire, and he said to him, “If you will, you can become all flame.”<sup>1</sup>

Today’s scriptures open to us the fullness of human possibility: if we will it, we can become all flame. We can become so filled with the Holy Spirit that people around us are healed by our presence. We can love God so deeply that our faces seem to shine. We can go to God and stand on the mountain before God; we can learn from and speak with the sages and prophets of old; we can be made new: living lights of Christ in this dark world.

It is an alluring set of possibilities. First, Moses: Fresh from the ignominy of the Golden Calf, still smarting with rage at how his people have abandoned the God who just set them free (around a week ago!), trudging for a second time all the way up Sinai to receive, for a second time, the commandments of God. And on the top of that mountain, the Lord passed before Moses, and Moses heard him declare the divine name: “The Lord, The Lord, a god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.” (Ex 34:6-7) And God promises Moses that he will be with the people of Israel; that he will work for them miracles they cannot even imagine, that they will be lights for the world.

What an answer to Moses’ struggles! What a divine response to all the troubles and burdens of his heart! While Moses is still bitter with the people’s failures, the Lord says that the Lord is a god of mercy, of steadfast forgiveness, that anger need not last forever. While Moses is still struggling with his own sense of fairness -- what do these transgressors deserve? -- God replies that the world and its judgments are in God’s hands. The innocent will be vindicated, the transgressors forgiven, and, if justice is called for, justice will come. Only a chapter or two after Moses has been pleading with God not to destroy this people, God pledges that he will bless them forever. It is no wonder that, when Moses came down from the mountain, his face was shining: he was transformed by the joy and hope of God.

And we, what would we not give to hear those words, to be able to believe those assurances? We who struggle with issues of justice and forgiveness, we who try to be fair, only to meet with unfairness, we who wonder if God is still with us, would not our faces shine if we, too, could hear those words as if they were spoken to us? So often, we find ourselves craving a word from God: a speech of encouragement or healing or even chastisement, so that we could know what God wants and walk in that way. But we *do* have the words of God; what God has given to us in Scripture, God has said *to us*. We do not need a special revelation; we need only open our hearts to what has already been given to begin to burn like the Son. These words are *for us*. This God is *for us*. (And if God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:31))

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<sup>1</sup> *Sayings of the Desert Fathers.*

Christ, too, found himself shining when he went to encounter his Father. He went up the mountain with Peter and James and John and he began to pray, and “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Luke 9:29) The veil of ordinariness was stripped from him for a moment, and, for a moment, his disciples saw his true nature -- at least, as much of it as their own nature would allow them to see. And while they were struggling to comprehend, gasping for a response and babbling nonsense, a voice came from heaven and said, “This is my Son, my Chosen: listen to him!” *Listen to him.* And then it was gone.

But it had not been a dream. It had been real -- more real than the dust of the road and their own parched throats at the end of a day of travel. It was a brief parting of the clouds of illusion, a momentary glimpse of God’s reality -- the human face divine<sup>2</sup> -- and when the moment passed, the truth was still there. Why not become all flame?

Fear, for one. When Moses came down from the mountain and the people saw that his face was shining, “they were afraid to come near him.” (Ex 34:30) And when the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, “they were terrified.” (Luke 9:34) They were afraid of the true power of their own humanity. They were afraid of what they could become. And so Moses covered his face with a veil, so that the people would not have to see. And Jesus told his disciples to tell no one what they had seen. And a conspiracy was born, a conspiracy of silence, to protect us from having to see what we could become. As a parent tells a child a gentle version of the truth, and puts off harder facts until the child has grown to bear them, so Moses and Jesus draw a veil over our goodness until, in the light of the Resurrection, we might have courage to claim it.

When Christ came down from the mountain, he descended into a scene of confusion and chaos. A great crowd had gathered -- the sick, the curious, the poor, the idle -- and the noise of the crowd was pierced by a cry: a man pleading for the life of his only son. And the son was seized by a demon and convulsed and cried out and foamed at the mouth, until Jesus reached out and healed him. If you or I were confronted with that boy, probably an epileptic or someone who suffered from a seizure disorder, we would, no doubt, be acutely uncomfortable. We would struggle with our fear, try to remind ourselves that these things happen, that they are part of being human. The vision on the mountaintop, by contrast, seems special, unusual, supernatural.

But what Jesus shows us in that touch, what he and Moses show us in their faces, is that we have grasped the axe backwards. Being broken, being in pain, being seized by forces that are beyond our control, these are NOT what it means to be human. To be human is to be one whose face is meant to shine. All other things will fall away. But that shining wholeness, that is what endures forever. That is the touchstone of all we are. That is the heart of what we do, if we live our lives in Christ. That is the path we will walk forever, changed from glory to glory in the presence of God. (2 Cor 3:18)

And how do we get there? What is the path which leads from our living room to the summit of Sinai? Not visions! Not special revelations! There is not one place in Scripture which implies that they are needed. What we need, we have already been given in the words of the Scripture and the lives of the saints and the simple, devastating, earth-shattering grace of bread and wine and water.

The royal road which burnishes us until Christ shines through our mortal faces is none other than the one Christ showed us: to love our God with all our heart and all our strength and all our mind, and our neighbors as ourselves. The path which restores and reveals our humanity is to tend the needs of those around us, to listen to their joys, share in their griefs, to repay good for evil, kindness for harshness, mercy for injury. Walking in the way of Jesus, we wash feet, touch children, pay attention to those who are often ignored. Ruth Burrows writes, “For this we need others absolutely. There is no other means of purification than learning to live with others. It calls for

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<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

continual sacrifice and provides opportunities for seeing the bad in us and for overcoming it. It keeps us wholly in touch with reality, coping with real people in real situations.”<sup>3</sup> And the inevitable friction is the cornerstone of the work, for it calls us to Christ’s own path of loving those who do not like us. St. John of the Cross says, “Where there is no love, put love in.” *Put love in.*

Outside our own homes, perhaps there are few richer opportunities to witness to this or put it into practice than in our interactions with those from whom our culture tells us we ought to be divided. When an immigrant becomes friends with someone whose ancestors came here on the Mayflower, when people of different races see past the veil of misunderstandings and preconceptions we are taught and learn to delight in one another as human beings, when people learn to see -- really *see* -- that gender and ethnicity and sexuality and political affiliation do not describe the essence of any human being, but that that essence is revealed *only* in the face of Christ: then that veil begins to fall. But this takes care and deliberate attention, for generations of mistrust and abuse can make it hard to see one another truly. If I walk down a hall or a street intent on my own goal and pass by another human being, I may not mean anything by it, but that person may feel it as a deliberate slight if they are accustomed to being invisible because of how they look or how they dress or whom they love. If those around us are used to being forced to wear a veil, it behooves us to be deliberate about inviting relationship, even if it takes a few extra minutes or a bit more attention. After all, among the things of your day, only your neighbor is immortal. In the eyes of God, there is *nothing* more urgent than restoring one another’s humanity. There is *nothing* more worthwhile than taking time to notice that someone’s face is shining.

There is no shortcut to the mountaintop. It is so easy, so tempting, to act as if the transfiguration were all that mattered, and not the healing which came after. The transfiguration shows us our destination, but it is the healing which shows us the road. The press of the crowd is our truest way. The healing touch is our soul’s daily bread. When Christ said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” he was not speaking from the mountaintop, but from the brink of the grave.<sup>4</sup> When he prayed for us to be forgiven, he prayed it from the cross. When they broke him and buried him and laid him in the tomb, *then* he began to shine. Not just for a moment, not just for the eyes of a few, but for all of us forever, showing us what we can be -- what, by God’s grace, we will be. What, by God’s love, we can become. Hold up your hands to his flesh and blood. Hold up your lives to the truth of his word. Why not become all flame?

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Burrows, *Interior Castle Explored*, p.96. It’s worth noting that Burrows says such work draws our attention to our own limitations. It is easy to focus on the other person’s behavior rather than our own, but that’s not what allows us to practice self-giving love.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Burrows, p. 109.