



LIGHT FROM THE LECTIONARY

STUDENT PAGES

TransfigurationC

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From BIBLE STUDIES BY E-MAIL

RCL Readings:

Exodus 34:29-35

Ps 99

2 Cor 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

KEY THEMES

Mediators. Moses plays a mediator or intercessor between God and the people. Through him the people learn God's will. The Psalms mentions Moses and Aaron as mediators who spoke to God and then to the people. In the epistle lesson Paul notes the failure of Moses and even the law to be the true and adequate mediators of the love and will of God. Christ does what they cannot do. In the Gospel lesson Jesus is the ultimate revealer of God, the greatest mediator. From God's own voice we hear the words, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." If we wish to know who God is and what God wills, we have but to look at Jesus. Can it be that we, too, are called to be in his presence until we also glow with the love and grace he radiates?

Mountaintop Experiences. Moses meets God on Mount Sinai and is forever changed. The Psalmist speaks of worshipping God on God's "holy mountain." In the Gospel reading Jesus and three of his

disciples are on a mountain, and there they see Jesus for who he truly is.

God's Immanence and Transcendence. These passages show us both the holiness of God and God's incarnational character. God is king, reigning above all, yet also close to us. God is just and also forgiving. e God Jesus taught us to pray to as "Our Father," we are also to think of as "Hallowed be thy name."

Exodus 34:29-35

All the chapters before this provide the context for this part of the stories, especially chapters 19 following, for there we see the people have been delivered from Egyptian bondage, crossed part of the wilderness, and have been encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai (the location of which is still in dispute). They stop here because is where Moses received his calling from God through the burning bush and also because God told him to bring the people there. This would be the site in which the relationship between God and the people would be established, largely through the laws God would give Moses.

In today's lesson Moses comes down from Mount Sinai again (he has been up there at least four previous times). He comes down this time holding a new set of tablets with the law written on them, for he threw down and broke the first

ones upon discovering the people worshipping a golden calf. Through mediation, Moses was able to go back before God and help the people to start over again in their relationship with God.

But something had changed about Moses. He was glowing. His exposure to the presence of God had turned his face white, shining. In other words, he had been in the glorious presence of God and now God's glory was reflected in him. The people were afraid to look upon him. This is theme in these readings - the fear of the people to come into the presence of God. So they ask Moses to intercede for them, for they cannot bear the holy presence of God. Now, in his shining countenance, they sense in some way the very presence of God in Moses. But Moses was unaware of this at first. He calls the people together to give them the law once again. At some point he is told about his face, how it was impacting the people, but he does not cover it while he speaks to them. Only when he is finished speaking does he cover it with a veil or perhaps even a mask of some kind. It is likely that he kept his face covered until he had to stand before the people in some official way as their mediator. Moses did not wear the veil either in God's presence (perhaps when he entered the Tent of Meeting, the place where he would go to speak with and hear God).

Obviously this story was chosen because Paul refers to it in the epistle reading for today, Moses appears in the story of the Transfiguration in Luke, and also because we are told that Jesus received this shining glow. When one comes into the presence of God, you cannot stay the same. You are changed. You are transformed.

I young friend of mine told me about how he ran into some of his old friends some time ago. He had been in a bike gang with them and they had done some pretty rough and wrong things together. But they couldn't believe their eyes. "Something has changed about you," one of them said. Indeed, everything had changed. Charles had become a Christian and the glory of Christ radiated from his face, in his words, and in all he was.

Ps 99

This psalm was chosen because it centers on the holiness of God, mentions Moses, and even speaks of worshipping God at God's "holy mountain" (which would have been for the Psalmist Mount Zion where the temple was, not Mount Sinai). Indeed, some scholars see it as being related to if not based on Exodus 15:1-18, the song of Moses about the greatness and sovereignty of God.

Psalm 99, stressing the fact that God does reign, may have been written at a time when the Davidic monarchy was woefully lacking in living up to the hopes and promises the people had for it. In fact, it may have come from a time when the king no longer sat on the throne in Jerusalem (Babylonian exile period). The message is that even though this is true for human kings, it is not so for God. God still reigns. Moses proclaimed this long ago even before there was a king. So the call is to acknowledge this and live under God's rule.

The Psalm does stress the holiness of God. In fact, the phrase "holy is he" separates it into three parts: vss 1-3; 4-5; 6-9. This goes well with the sense of awe, reverence and even fear the people have at even being in the presence of

Moses and of how Peter feels in the presence of the divine Christ. Such is an appropriate response in the presence of the holy. (See vs 1 which says that the presence of God causes the "people to tremble" as well as the earth itself!) So vss 1-3 stress the holiness, the otherness of God.

Vss 3-5, however, stress that this holy God is nevertheless present, not aloof, distant. This holy God works among humanity as a "lover of justice." Human leaders and kings should be concerned about this also. But too often even their own kings were not lovers of justice, not to mention the kings of other nations which had oppressed them. But they are reminded that the true and great King still reigns and is working for justice.

Vss 6-9 list the names of such mediators as Moses, Aaron, and Samuel who interceded for the people and helped gain God's forgiveness for them. Just think how many times in Exodus Moses has to plead the case for his sinful and rebellious people. God's love is such that they are forgiven, yet still are required to give obedience. Herein lies the problem - they had the law, they knew what God desired, but they broke it. Something, Someone else was needed to do what the law could not do. This we see in the epistle and Gospel readings for today.

2 Cor 3:12-4:2

This is a passage that has been interpreted in a variety of ways, largely because we are not fully certain all that Paul says and means here. Some take it to be part of his answer to those who had been accusing him of deliberately hiding or obscuring the Gospel, making it a kind of mystery religion for his own purposes (it's thought that these

opponents were Judaizers or at least persons following the traditions and Laws of Moses, saying that faith was not in and of itself good enough, but one had to also follow the teachings of Moses). Thus the argument goes that it's not Paul who is veiling the Gospel but these very teachers, veiling it like the veil that covered the face of Moses.

I think, however, that something much more simple and fundamental is at the heart of this passage. Paul, having grown up a Pharisee, understood the law better than most anyone. He tried to live the letter of the law. He believed that it was the way to becoming right before God. But in his experience of grace, God's unmerited favor and acceptance, he saw clearly that the great shortcomings of the law. It could condemn sin but it was powerless really to do anything about it or to bring about true redemption.

The law was a "fading glory," like that of Moses. Paul sees the story from Exodus as an allegory. Moses, he seems to be saying, used the veil not just to protect the people from the results of the presence of God, but to keep them from seeing that it was a glory that was fading, that was impermanent. The Law, in other words, did reflect the glory of God but it did not last. It ultimately could not bring about salvation. Paul goes on to say that this veil is still there over the eyes of many who read the law, that is, who still look to the law for their means of becoming right with God. They fail to see that it's glory has faded, that there is yet another bright and shining source of glory that does bring salvation and wholeness and right relations to God - the face of Christ! The cross is the means now for redemption. The word now is not works of the law but grace. But the veil of the law was

still over the eyes of many of his own people - the Jews. Only in Christ can this veil be taken away. Paul knew this firsthand when the scales fell from his eyes, scales not just of physical blindness but spiritual as well.

The end result of all of this is that the Spirit of God in Christ gives us "freedom." The old covenant required a life of slavery (see Galatians). One had to earn God's love and acceptance through works. That is slavery to Paul. But God's grace in Christ sets us free from feeling that we must earn God's acceptance. Grace means that we have been acceptance not because of our works but in spite of them! Our acceptance is not based on who we are or what we can do, but solely on the loving, forgiving nature of God as shown in Christ.

When a person truly begins to see and experience this grace, this profound acceptance, this vision of the glory of God in Christ, he/she too begins to glow, to be transfigured (vs 18). This is not fading glory. It is the glory of the Gospel of God's grace. Paul himself had seen that glory on the road to Damascus and had forever been changed.

A warning is appropriate here. Paul is not into Jew bashing. He does not hate them. They are, after all, his own people. There are no ground here then for that kind of hateful feelings and actions that have too often been present in too many Christians. I do not think Paul sees the old covenant as somehow being replaced but as being fulfilled in Christ. He sees the Law and the prophets as pointing ultimately to Christ, to the greater glory of God's grace (note that in the Gospel reading Moses is present representing

the Law and Elijah represents the prophets - that is - they affirm and point to Christ). So, this passage nor any other should be a means for us feeling superior to anyone. All this is but the results of God's grace. If you truly experience grace, how can you look down on anyone?

Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)

This is a strange story in many ways. It seems out of place at first reading. Jesus has just predicted that he's going to die and then suddenly they are on the mountaintop and something mysterious and wonderful happens to Jesus and to them. Some scholars have suggested this is a resurrection appearance that has been read back into the life of Jesus. Others that it is an ascension story, even if incomplete one. But this story is unlike any ascension or Easter story. It has its own purpose and meaning - that, even though it is true the cross awaits Jesus, so does the crown. In Jesus transfigured they see him as he will be after the crucifixion - as the risen, gloried Lord. So even before the cross, they see the ultimate outcome. They begin to see the divine glory in Jesus like they never had before. So the message from God is, "Listen to him." He knows what he's talking about. The way to glory is the way of the cross. It would take them some time (us too) to understand this.

After eight days (six in Matthew and Mark), Jesus goes up a mountain and takes James, John, and Peter. What mountain was this? Tradition says it was Mount Tabor. Tabor is located not too far from where Jesus and the disciples had been - Caesarea Philippi. However, many scholars think it more likely was

Mount Hermon or one mountain in that area.

Why these three? We do not know. They seem to at least represent the inner circle of Jesus, the ones perhaps who, like Elisha for Elijah, had a unique connection to Jesus which made them wish to go wherever he went. They are the ones present in the Garden as you may recall. The theology behind this seems to be that of discipleship, an important theme in Mark. All of what is about to happen takes place before these three. Like for Elisha, this may also be a kind of rite of passage for them and all the disciples, for as disciples of the glorified and risen Lord, they would be entrusted with the great commission of continuing his work.

A mountaintop was an appropriate place. It was on mountaintops that most of God's great epiphanies took place, for example, to Moses on Mount Sinai. That was where God had been revealed and where God now in Christ would also be revealed. Before that mount stood Mount Calvary, Golgotha. But it was at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, which soars majestic and high above and behind it. But it was only on Golgotha where they could get the best view of this great mountain. Indeed, you did not get to it without traversing over the other.

What happens to Christ is difficult to describe. He is transfigured." He glows. He shines like the sun. The Greek word is "metemorphothe" from which we get metamorphosis meaning "taking on a new form." The story recalls the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34:29 where Moses' face is said

to be shining because he had been talking with God. I take it to mean that for the first time the disciples see the true colors of Jesus, his true glory and majesty. For a moment they get to see behind the veil (note how Paul uses "veil" in the epistle reading for today) and see Jesus as he is and as he will be after the cross.

It's interesting that Paul uses similar language to speak of what God does for us in Christ. We, too, are transfigured or transformed into the spiritual likeness of Christ (see Roman 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18). And Paul also speaks of the glorious body we will share like that of Christ (see Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:43,49,51-53).

Next Jesus gets visitors - Elijah and Moses. Some company. The three are talking. There's a lot of speculation about just what their appearance with Jesus signifies. What makes the most sense to me is that Elijah, who held great respect as the greatest of the prophets and the one who would return to announce or prepare the way of the Messiah (see Malachi 4:1-6), represents the prophets. Moses, on the other hand, represents the Law. So what you have is the Prophets and the Law all affirming Jesus, and what Jesus has just said - that he is going to die - that this is the path to bring about the salvation of the world. All the promises, in other words, in the Law and the Prophets, the sacred writings, are beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus. Moses may also be present for he spoke of a coming prophet, which was understood in messianic terms (see Deut 18:15, 18-19). Jesus then is that prophet, and Moses is present to verify that.

Peter, perhaps drawing upon his heritage of the Festival of Booths that commemorated the period of wilderness wandering, suggests that three booths or shelters be made - one for each of them - Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. It's not clear what Peter wants or why he says this. What is clear is that he doesn't understand. Is he's putting Jesus on the same level as the other two, not understanding yet the true uniqueness of Jesus? Is he trying to save the moment, to enshrine it and live there, not going back down the mountain, not going to Mount Golgotha, not yet seeing that was the only path to victory? For he says, "How good it is to be here." yeah, let's stay here. But then, like at the baptism of Jesus, the voice of God affirms the divine Sonship of Jesus, and tells the disciples, you and me, too, to listen to him. What has Jesus just said? That he was going to suffer and die. As much as Peter did not want to hear that, just as he was rebuked (see Mark 8), he needs to hear, to listen, to understand. Then the vision goes as quickly as it came, and all that's left is to go down the mountain, get back on the road to rejection and death...and glorious victory by the way of the cross.

One of the interesting things in that this time around we do not just end here. Vss 37-43 which are optional for reading today take us down from the mountain, back to ministry. Peter and the others cannot stay there. Jesus leads them back down to where people are in need. Indeed, as glorious as Jesus must have been up there, he shines even more as a father finds hope for his possessed child in the presence of the transfigured one.