

THE LIGHT OF GOD'S GLORY – A BLESSING OR A CURSE

Exodus 34: When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with ^uthe two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face ^vshone because he had been talking with God.⁴ **30** Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face ^wshone, and they were afraid to come near him. **31** But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. **32** Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. **33** And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

34 Whenever Moses ^zwent in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, **35** the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was ^ashining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Mark 9 ⁵Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁶(He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

⁷Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

If you were to look at a picture of my nephew, Tim Hillenbrand, you would see that he is quite different from me. Tim's complexion is very, very fair. His hair is fine and white, almost like angel hair. In contrast, my complexion is very dark. My hair used to be almost jet black, until it turned a lighter shade a few years ago. Anyway, because of that, we have very different attitudes toward the sun.

All it takes for me, at a beach, is just a tiny bit of sunscreen, and I pretty much will not burn. And if I do burn, a little bit, it very quickly turns into a tan. In contrast, in order to avoid burns, Tim must slather on loads of sunscreen and it better be a high block number. If he even misses one little spot, and then spends any time in the sun, that spot become a red, painful injury. If he forgets to put on the sunscreen, he literally resembles a human open sore. He'll be in pain for a long time.

Consequently, I never avoid tennis games, beach days, gardening, or outdoor painting. I know that the sun can annoy and even hurt, but its not devastating for me. Tim, on the other hand, by nature, must have a healthy fear. He must cover up his body, or paint Coppertone on it, or stay in the shade. Otherwise, he might literally get burned and poisoned by the sun.

In our texts for today, the Sunday of the Transfiguration, we notice the theme “the Light of God’s glory.” Old Testament Moses, comes from God’s presence, glowing with the light of God. And in our Gospel, Jesus on the mount is found shining brightly as he converses with Moses and Elijah.

The light of God, we would assume to be a strikingly beautiful, amazing, wondrous thing. It makes us think of all those who have had near death experiences, who talk about the peaceful seconds as they were drawn to the light. It makes us think of the sunshine, the incredible loveliness of a full moon, or the illumination of monuments, such as in Washington DC.

But what strikes me is the reaction that comes in both texts. Both times we read that the wondrous light of God is met not by awe and wonder, but ultimately by fear and trembling. Of Moses we read that the Israelites were afraid to approach him. He covered his face, on ordinary days, so that they would not face the light of God’s presence all the time. Of Jesus, we read that the disciples were terrified, and then, that a bright cloud enveloped the disciples and they were even more afraid.

Now why do you think this is the reaction that people first have when they see this bright light of God? Why are they not gazing with joy, with mouths wide open and hearts on fire? Why are they not basking in the glow and celebrating the beauty of God?

Me personally, I think it’s a lot like our conversation about sunburn earlier. If you sense that the bright light could bring danger, harm, or pain, you might, like my nephew Tim, shrink back – be hesitant – have some fear. And it seems to me that the raw holiness of God might just make a person realize how unholy, impure and not perfect he is.

Think about actors and actresses and how much they hate being photographed offscreen. Part of it, of course, has to do with privacy. But a big part of it is that they don’t really want the whole world to be privy to the way they actually look without the makeup, the foundation, the facial touch-ups, and the like.

Or think about how you feel when a surprise guest comes to your door and you haven’t had the chance to pick up around the house. Maybe there’s some dirty dishes on the counter or an old pair of socks on the floor. And you’re humiliated.

That's the way it was for the Israelites and the disciples. When God's beacon of light was beaming upon them, they knew that every evil inner thought, every sinful, selfish action, every fault, flaw or failure was known by Him. In other words, when the sun shone, they were afraid of getting burned.

But please notice: what does the SUN say? What is the message from God? Neither Moses nor Elijah nor Jesus nor God the Father says a single word about their sin. Instead, the message is simple: "this is my beloved Son, listen to Him."

What Jesus was about to accomplish – what he was discussing with Moses and Elijah – was going to take care of the "sunburn" so to speak. He was going to break down the barrier that all sins and evils and failures created between man and God. He was going to suffer, in His own body the punishment, the wrath of God against sin. He was going to be the sacrifice that would enable man to not be afraid of the raw holiness of God any more.

Remember what happened when Jesus died on the cross? The veil of the temple – a foot thick curtain, which separated the Holy of Holies from all who might enter, was ripped in two. Which is to say, "sinner, fear not, for Jesus has paid the price. No need to fear God – no need to fear the bright light of His holiness. You are forgiven. You are given the gift of a relationship with God. Come before His presence with joy. Come to His altar with delight. For His love has washed you clean, made you new, and enabled you to hear God's voice of love."

"Listen to Him" says the Father. "Listen to Him." And, after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples remembered these words and were able to experience the joy of forgiveness. Imagine Peter, who denied Jesus so vehemently that he called down curses upon himself. Imagine the rest of the disciples, who forsook Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and left Him utterly alone to face the torture and persecution. Imagine the Roman Centurion who was convinced that he was responsible for enforcing the crucifixion of the man whom he decided was indeed the Son of God.

To them, the words ring out: "this is my beloved Son, listen to Him." And what did He say? Hear this passage from after Jesus' resurrection, when the disciples were still trying to put together all the pieces and figure out the message that had been given to them. It says:

³⁶While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

³⁷They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

⁴⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate it in their presence.

⁴⁴He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

The same truth rings out to you and me. We come before our God and we know how much we have failed Him, how many times we have neglected to do what He would want us to do or to live as we know He would want us to live. We have been selfish, greedy, proud. We have gotten caught up in the materialism of this world. We have lost our tempers, gotten caught up in addictions, broken our promises and been unkind to our neighbor. We have neglected the poor, been indifferent to the hurting, we have cheated, lied, stolen.

When the Light of God's presence shines, we should be like the Israelites and like the disciples. We should fall down in fear and trembling.

But Jesus says to us: "Be not afraid, I am the way the truth and the life, and I have come so that you might have life, and have it to the full. ²⁷My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one."

This week we enter the season of Lent with humble hearts. The Ashes of Ash Wednesday remind us that we are like the disciples, ready to be burned to ashes by the light of God's presence. But the cross we make with them tell a different story. It declares a God

who loved us so much that nothing could stop Him from rising up from the ashes and offering unto us His free forgiveness and everlasting life. We come as sinners, we leave as saints. We come as failures, we leave as children of God. We come with flaws, we leave with His purity. And behind us, all our sins lie in a heap, crumbled and destroyed at the foot of the cross.

May that Transfiguration bring confidence and joy also unto you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

