

Exodus 34:27-33

The Shining One

In what seems another lifetime- and having just graduated from Austin Seminary, I moved north and worked for a while in one of Dallas' biggest bookstores as I tried to get my film career started. I had seen the ad in the paper, and thought that if there's one thing I know, it's books. Well, I learned, and I keep learning, that there is always a lot more to know about books. Indeed, that may be the underlying theme of this sermon, that there is always a lot more to learn, about everything. So I went down to the offices and talked to Mr. Taylor, and after a somewhat bizarre interview, he told me I was just the man he needed, and hired me to work as a salesman/resource person in the section my co-workers later informed me was called the "Whacko Department." You see, they had the privilege of selling novels and literature, or books of history or travel or reference; I got the whacko section: religion and philosophy, psychology and self-help, Bibles and other sacred texts and esoteric writings, as well. I suppose that seminary had given me the expertise to help my whacko clients- for the most part; but in the past couple of days I've realized that perhaps my expertise in the bookstore helped prepare me for this passage about Moses and the Shining Face.

Because some of this scripture we should consider whacko- esoteric, strange, occult. Moses as the shining one. We may think we understand it, it seems straightforward enough: Moses has just come down from his second 40-day mountaintop retreat with God, and he brings the Law with him. And so what if his face is shining, or if it's turned all red, like a bad sunburn- we would expect that- he being in close contact with God for so long, of course, the radiant glory of the Lord would make him glow. How could it not? Something like those special persons we know, who always seem to radiate goodness, their faces show it; whose kindness and honorable simplicity make us feel like better people just by their presence; and this is kind of the same, only multiplied 10,000 times.

No, it's not, it's more like this. Isaiah 6, the vision of the prophet in God's throne room; and Isaiah hears the voice of God that shook the foundations of heaven, and he begins to tremble; and one of the seraphim notices him and flies to him, and takes a burning ember from the altar and burns, purifies, Isaiah's lips and speech. It's like that- Moses, has been confronted by God; he didn't just sit around for 40 days as God told him all the commandments of the Law; he was confronted by God, and he has suffered. He has burned: the shining face is not only the result of one who has met God and experienced God's might and holiness, it is the face

of one who has felt the pain of being examined and challenged, and then, changed and remade; one who has seen close-up the terror of ultimate power, and who at last has learned the great truth; and now returns to the rest of us, transformed; who comes back as the great teacher and as the messenger of God. That is who the shining ones are, they possess the light, and they speak for God. If we want to understand Moses and his shining face, we must realize that the fire had burned away ego and falsehood- and half-truths, too; his face wasn't just red and glowing, it was on fire, the light of perfect truth, that only those whose shallowness has been burned up would know.

Don't you think that's why they were afraid to come near him? People who lived in the desert would not be alarmed by red faces, but to see a man's face aflame, that is terrifying; Moses is the man who knows the depths, has been to the mountaintop and beheld the abyss before him, and had every triviality burned away. No wonder Moses covers his face, it doesn't merely emit a warm glow, rather, God's light surges out of him with frightening, almost irresistible, energy.

And maybe there's somebody else you're thinking of- the forty days, alone and hungry; and that time the light streamed off this other man's skin: Jesus, and two odd stories from his life. The forty days in the wilderness, where he was met

not by God, but confronted and tempted by the evil one. I think we can understand how his suffering in that event burned away all the superficial: all the easy answers and comfortable faith, and easy relationships. And then, his own moment on the mountain, when his clothing glistened a brilliant white and his face shone like the sun. The disciples were afraid then, too, just like the Israelites. They had to have known by that time, they had heard him speak of it, that his shining face meant suffering; they must have understood that he knew the great secret, that all the truth of the world comes out of pain. And yes, Jesus, too, was the shining messenger of God- remember- the voice calls out from the cloud, “This is my son; *listen to him.*” He had the words of God; his suffering made his life good and even sinless, and made his teaching utterly true.

Here is Moses, closer to God than any person who had yet lived, save perhaps Enoch, who “walked with God,” we are told in Genesis 5. Moses, the burning face a sign of his profound wisdom- and cause for others to fear him. The wisest man, who brings God’s teaching to the people. The Law-Giver, they call him, but he brings to them not simply a list of rules for religious living, but rather, the truth about God, summed up in a few verses from earlier in the chapter (verses 6-7 and 10): these words that show us what God is, merciful and gracious,

abounding in love and faithfulness and forgiveness; and what God desires, to make covenant with his people. This is the God we see in Moses' writings and in his life- in his suffering and in his wisdom: the God who wants to be with us, and the God who wants to burn out all the selfish pride, and make us his own, and make us fit to be a faithful community, generous, caring friends of every tribe joined together, and willing even to suffer for each other; to know the truth and to share it, and to love one another enough to show the truth about God with lives given in service to others.

Maybe you remember the scene in "The Ten Commandments," when Charlton Heston as Moses comes down from the mountain with the stone tablets in his hands, and he has changed. He is transfigured; he seems bigger and stronger, and his hair and beard are now beautifully white and flowing. His appearance is how we picture God. He had spent all this time listening to God, and burning, and had become almost holy himself. I'm not trying to be sacrilegious, but as he heard and learned on the mountaintop, he became more and more like God. That's why the light flows out of him, and power exudes from him, and the truth comes out of his lips. The word for this- it's a great word- is *apotheosis*: the elevation of a person

to divine status. (Much like when we induct our athletic heroes into halls of fame, or carve the images of presidents on mountain sides, or canonize particular holy persons: we lift them to a higher plane, and see them as more than mere mortals.) It doesn't mean that we should worship him, but it does mean he knows the truth, that he has been with God, and we should listen to him.

And this is the deep truth about God that all the shining ones have taught us: that God is close, sometimes silent or fearsome, but always near; and full of love for every creature. This is truth as a great light, that shows us the way; and the truth as a fire that burns away the impurities, and human pride and selfishness. This is the word of scripture, the teaching of Moses and the prophets and of our Lord Jesus and his apostles; and the lesson we must learn- out of the experience of our own pain- and out of the joy of God's nearness, so that we too may shine the light of God's mercy, and God's love for every person.