

Sermon: The Veil is Removed

New North Church, Hingham

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3 March 2019

Based on **Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36**

Around this time of year, our family's thoughts turn to watching – once again – Cecille B. DeMille's classic film, *The Ten Commandments* sometime before Passover and Easter. It's a tradition in our house to mimic Anne Baxter every time she says, 'Moses!'

And it *is* an epic flick, clocking in at almost four hours with one intermission, filmed in glorious Technicolor using pioneering VistaVision technology with stereophonic sound. Mostly, I like how *faithful* the film is to the Exodus story.

But one thing occurred to me this week that I hadn't noticed before: Charlton Heston never wears a veil. And that makes sense when you think about it: if you had Charlton Heston in *your* film, would you put a veil over his face? Probably not, if you wanted anyone to go see your film.

The focus of the movie is Moses getting everyone out of Egypt, away from Pharaoh. This episode with the tablets is just one part of the whole, but it is a very important part. But the only transformation in Moses that we see is that his beard gets longer and whiter over the course of the film. That little detail aside, it's still a great film. We'll probably watch it again next year too.

Here's the thing: after all these years, DeMille's film still holds some mystery for me. Do I really want to know how they split the Red Sea? People still speculate over who played God's voice, and I don't care. And the cloud, the Destroyer that crept through town on Passover: it's still scary. These are things that can remain unknown to me till the cows come home and it won't affect my enjoyment of the movie at all.

It may be that watching it on a big screen is easier than living the story. The film is a reminder that we are part of the ongoing Exodus event. It's also a reminder that we all must receive the Law, enter the covenant, and witness God's glory before we can live as a free people. It's that last thing that we struggle the most with.

In the Bible, people go out to the wilderness for testing and preparation. But people meet God on mountains because mountains represent the space between heaven and earth. These two readings describe *theophanies*, which are appearances of God to humans, and there are many parallels between the two, with Luke mostly following the Exodus reading. And though there are many similarities in the two accounts, there are differences too.

Jesus was not alone, for one thing, as Moses was, and Peter, James, and John see God's glory revealed in Jesus' entire being, but by the time they head down the mountain, they're nowhere closer to understanding what happened there than we are.

It's a quiet walk home, probably because they had no words. But someone eventually blabbed about it, because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all included the event in their respective Gospels, though with slightly different details.

Luke's account begins oddly, 'about eight days after these sayings.' 'About eight days' takes us through one full Sabbath cycle but for the early church, 'the eighth day' became code for the Lord's day and the day of Jesus' resurrection, the first day of a new creation. And the sayings that Luke mentions are the things that Jesus told the disciples after the feeding of the five thousand and after he quizzed them about his identity.

And what he told them was this: that the Son of Man was going to suffer, be rejected and killed, and on the third day be raised. And by the way, he added, if any want to be my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. The requirements of discipleship would challenge anyone, and Luke records no other teachings or conversations until they go up the mountain. The next day, a great crowd met him and once again began demanding healing. Once again, the disciples failed to understand Jesus' sayings. No one but Peter, James, and John had witnessed God's revelation, and now that Jesus was back, things seemed to return to normal.

As Jesus said, let's let that sink in for a bit, while we talk about Moses again.

After his encounter with God, Moses' face *shone*. And when he spoke to the people, they could see how his face radiated God's goodness and glory, which was proof that it truly was God's word coming to them through Moses. He only wore the veil when he was *not* giving the people God's word. His shining face is the point of the reading.

When he came down the mountain, Moses brought the covenant back with him. What did Jesus bring? How about a glimpse of what is possible? He came down the mountain changed; people saw him differently. A voice from the cloud had said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ And the very next day, a distraught man came up to Jesus and said, ‘Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, he is my only child.’ Jesus listened and healed the boy’s affliction. Is this just good timing or did Luke mean something more by following the scene on the mountain with this healing of the man’s only son?

When we talk about the Transfiguration, we also have to talk about the Cross. Of the three Gospels that include this story, only Luke tells us that Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, and that it is while he prayed that the transfiguration occurs. Only Luke tells us what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about while in their glory, when they ‘were speaking of his departure’ – literally his *exodus*, which is the word Luke used. They were talking about Jesus’ death on the cross, his resurrection, and ascension.

So, even as we now see Jesus in his glory, soon we will see him on the Cross.

This year, the Jewish Passover begins at sundown on the Christian Good Friday, so it is appropriate for us to remember the Israelite’s Exodus from Egypt and what it might mean for Christians. The escape from Egypt is a story of salvation and rescue and freedom made possible by God’s outstretched arm and mighty hand. For Christians, the Cross represents another act of salvation by God, whose outstretched arms bring us to the freedom of resurrection.

People believed then and now that humans are changed through contact with the divine. The Bible is filled with people who were changed after an encounter with God: Abram became Abraham and Sarai became Sarah; Jacob became Israel after wrestling God to a draw; Simon became Peter and Saul became Paul. They were all changed when God looked at them differently. And now that we see Jesus differently, so does he see us.

A life-changing spiritual experience might be just the thing right now, especially if we’re struggling in the life we have. In these stories today, Moses and Jesus reflect God’s love and glory. We can reflect it too, if we allow ourselves to see it, to risk standing in God’s presence, heaven and earth coming together, not in tension but in unity.

Amen.