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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, February 7, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

Unveiled Boldness

2 Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2

Luke 9:28-36

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Followers of Jesus are to live with unveiled boldness; we are to live in true freedom; we are to commend ourselves to every man's conscience. Michael Horton in his book *A Better Way* writes, "Today people want to see God. Not content with hearing God's Word, they want to see God's glory."¹ Today is Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday. The glory of the Lord was shown to Peter, James and John that day in the first century, twenty centuries ago. Like then, but today even more so, people want to see the glory of the Lord and experience it.

One of the amazing stories in the New Testament is the account of the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared Elijah and Moses, the two great former teachers, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter got real excited. "Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters - one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Luke 9:33). The transfiguration was quite a scene and Peter wanted to make it permanent. Three permanent shelters with Jesus, Moses and Elijah in them; what a religious attraction that would be! But a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). The disciples looked around and they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

For the early Christians, the life of Jesus was often seen through the life of Moses. In 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2, Paul utilizes the Old Testament story about the veil of Moses as an analogy to talk about the Christian life. The tie between our sermon text and our gospel lesson on the Transfiguration is

¹Michael Horton, *A Better Way* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2002), 36.

an appropriate one. Moses, Elijah and Jesus were the three great professors of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Moses, the lawgiver, Elijah, the founder of the first seminary and Jesus, who is called “Master” by Peter, represent the totality of the legal, prophetic and evangelical perspectives.

Paul harkens the religious memory back to the Old Testament scene where Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone on which were chiseled the Ten Commandments. The people were focused not on the tablets but on the face of Moses. They could see that something had happened to Moses up on the mountain. Moses’ appearance had been shaped by his experience with God. It was in his face. Consequently Moses wore a veil over his face because people were afraid to look there. The Old Testament Jew was forbidden to look into the brightness of God. One had to be veiled from the glory of God.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians clearly states that the Christian experience is to be the exact opposite of the people’s response to Moses. Just as the Hebrews looked at Moses and knew he had been talking with God, so people should be able to see in the face of Christians some evidence that they have been with Jesus. In short, Christians have an unveiled face when it comes to letting the world behold the glory of God. The love of Jesus will shine through the faces of those who have encountered Jesus and through the institution called the church which is made up of followers of Jesus.

Unfortunately that has not always been the case with either Christians or their churches. Many of our doctrines have become veils which systematize the faith and hide the love of God behind tinted windows and closed blinds. Christianity can, indeed, become a veiled experience, separating us from our fellow human beings as we retreat into what Paul calls “secret and shameful ways” (4:2).

Paul clearly renounces the “chosen people” ideal of legalistically keeping to laws (the Jews had 613 of them) as a kind of divine insurance policy. Rather than viewing faith in Jesus Christ as a divine sedative to take in secret to ease anxieties and fears, Paul encourages his readers to expose themselves and let their faith become public as it interacts with the world around them. In this regard, Paul’s mysticism shines through. He sees the love of Jesus as a power pulling all things together toward their fulfillment.

As others see the radiance in the loving lives of Christians, true freedom is experienced for those who see Christ in us.

Can you and I remain Christian in an affluent society if all we do is sit behind tinted windows and closed blinds, wondering about our own health and personal salvation? This sermon probably doesn't feel very comfortable, for you or for me. But, in the final analysis, I'm not certain how much God cares about our feelings. God appears to be as much concerned about the way we treat others in our world and the visions we exchange with one another as God does the way we feel about ourselves. God apparently wants us to be visible to the public.

Paul's insistence that this reflection of the Lord's glory is an ever-increasing event cautions against an episodic approach to this visibility. We have a ministry that is to reflect the ministry of the Lord himself. That ministry of Jesus was very much a public ministry in which he called on those who followed him to visit the prisoners, feed the hungry, heal the sick, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger.

In a country like ours where the disparity between rich and poor is growing and every 44 minutes an American child dies of the effects of poverty, a veiled faith will not work. We must do more than discuss hunger. We must do more than debate the morality of the appearance of those who are naked. We must do more than offer the sick our private prayers thanking God for our own health.

If Christ truly be within us, the veil has been lifted. The glory of God is visible in us.

The Transfiguration is an event in Jesus' life, which is attested to in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-10; and Luke 9:28-36). In all three Gospel accounts, Peter, James and John accompany Jesus to the top of a mountain and witness his transformation (Gk. *Metamorphoomai*, "to undergo a metamorphosis"). Jesus' clothes become an intensely brilliant white and the prophets Elijah and Moses converse with him. Peter responds by suggesting that they set up three shelters, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Before Peter can be verbally rebuked, a cloud moves in, casting a shadow over them and a voice says, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Michael Horton is correct. Today, people want to see God's glory. But once we see the glory of God, it is what we do in response that matters. Do we keep the experience to ourselves or share it with others? Blaise Pascal writes, "God made man in his own image and man returned the compliment." We have shaped Jesus over the centuries into a dreadfully small deity. We want a Jesus who confirms our prejudices and preferences. We want a Jesus who can be managed, not one who speaks clearly and distinctly, challenging each one of us to hear him call us to baptism, to a clear confession of faith, to a life rooted in the truth of resurrection, to a life of unveiled boldness and to anticipate the second coming.

The temptation at the transfiguration of Jesus for Peter, James and John was to capture Jesus, package him and use him for their own personal benefit. The temptation was really quite selfish and remains so today. The lesson of the Transfiguration is threefold: if we have experienced salvation in and through Jesus Christ, then we are to live with unveiled boldness; we are to live in true freedom; we are to commend ourselves to every man's conscience.

Eight days prior to his transfiguration, Jesus predicted his death to the disciples. At the transfiguration, Peter, James and John saw the glory of God just as Moses did. Peter, James and John were in direct contact with the glory of the divine presence. Moses and Elijah also appeared to these three disciples. This suggests the unity of the work of Jesus with the meaning of the Old Testament. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets as well as the imminence of the end of the age. The cloud symbolizes the Shekinah glory, the very presence of God. The suffering servant, Jesus, must die. And the Father spoke to Peter James and John and said "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."

Jesus stands in continuity with the revelation of the Old Testament, symbolized by Moses and Elijah, because of who he is and what he brings. Jesus brings the kingdom of God and the climax of salvation history. The transfiguration of Jesus teaches us that when captivated by the very presence of God we are not to veil that experience and hide it from others. To the contrary, we are to go into Wichita, Kansas, the other forty-nine and to the ends of the earth with the good news that in Jesus Christ life can be different both now and forever. But we tend to desire a selfish approach, one like Peter, James and

John when they desired to package the appearances of Jesus, Moses and Elijah in booths on the top of Mt. Hermon. Brennan Manning writes, “In every age and culture we tend to shape Jesus to our image and make him over to our own needs in order to cope with the stress his unedited presence creates.”²

Peter, James and John wanted to manage the glory of God that they experienced on Mount Hermon. Jesus would have nothing to do with it. That is why the Father said to the disciples, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.” Instead of preserving God’s glory for themselves, Peter, James and John went down the mountain into the villages and performed the works of Jesus in the lives of people.

Because of the transfiguration of Jesus, there is to be a look to those who claim to be Christian. What are we to look like? We are to live with unveiled boldness; we are to live in true freedom; we are to commend ourselves to every man’s conscience. We will live with unveiled boldness; we will live in true freedom; and we will commend ourselves to every man’s conscience when we are changed by the Word and continue to be changed by the Word. Never the same: When the Word Changes You. Let us pray!

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²Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1992), 131.