

“The Radiant Face of Moses”  
Transfiguration Sunday  
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Our first reading today comes from the Book of Exodus. Moses descends from Mt. Sinai after conversing with God, and we hear that the skin on his face is aglow. A brilliant light radiates from him, a reflection of the divine glory that he was privileged to behold. And when they catch a glimpse of him, all of Israel stands in awe and fear of Moses’s shining face – a face that has seen the face of God.

As I reflected on Moses’s radiant face this week, I found myself considering my own face.

As you all know, we’ve just welcomed Owen into the family last December. And this means that, since right around December, neither Sarah nor I have really enjoyed a full night’s rest. And while one of our boys is still trying to figure out the difference between day and night, our other boy is quite clear about when nighttime ends and daytime begins. Whether the sun is out or not, it’s daytime as soon as Benjamin wakes up! So regardless of how the night went for the rest of us, wakeup time routinely strikes around 6 a.m.

All of this, I’m here to tell you, does a number on one’s face. When I get up in the morning and look in the mirror, the face I see staring back at me is, how shall I put it, a bit *less* than radiant.

Instead of holy brilliance, I see heavy bags under my eyes. Instead of eyes that are luminous and sharp, I see droopy and bloodshot ones. And the only shine I see in that mirror, I’m sorry to say, is the oily glisten of hair that hasn’t seen the shower in a few days.

This is what it means to parent a two month old.

My point in sharing these bathroom insights with you is to say that brilliant light doesn’t always make a face look **better**. The restaurant world has known this for

years. You might have noticed that fancy restaurants *dim* the lights. They do this for a reason! We look our best when we're illumined by flickering *candlelight*, not harsh, unforgiving *fluorescent lights*. You want strong, powerful lights if you're going in for surgery, but the folks at Francesca's aren't rushing to install any of those operating room lights in their dining room. And most of us don't want them in our living rooms either.

There's a risk, in other words, that comes with stepping into the presence of brilliant light. It illumines **everything** – both what we want to see, and what we'd rather not have to see. To mix the metaphors, light is a double edged sword.

This helps us understand the Israelites' reaction when they saw Moses's shining face. Let's just say they weren't excited to see it. They were terrified. They were filled with fear. Scripture says that they went running in the **opposite** direction from Moses, so he had to call out to them to come back. They were acting like they'd seen a ghost.

What were they so afraid of?

Well there's a backstory to their fear. It turns out, they had good reason to be afraid.

If we turn back just two chapters earlier, we come across the story of the Golden Calf. Here, we find Israel freshly liberated from bondage in Egypt. Through a series of miraculous signs and wonders, God worked through Moses to break the chains of slavery and deliver Israel from their oppressors. This culminates in dramatic fashion when God parts the Red Sea, which allows Israel safe passage but swallows up the Egyptians. Israel is finally a free people, and they have every reason to be grateful to one who set them free.

And yet, nearly the first thing they do with their new-found freedom is use it to turn their backs on God.

In the Ten Commandments, God explicitly tells Israel 1) don't have any other gods besides me and 2) don't create any graven images of me. But what does Israel do? As soon as Moses steps away for a minute, they melt down their gold to create a god. They make a graven image and begin to worship it.

Needless to say, God was not pleased. Scripture says that God's wrath burned hot. Even as Moses goes back to plead with God to give Israel a second chance, God tells Moses "Leave me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them."

This is why the Israelites turned and ran the other way when they saw Moses's radiant face. They feared that this brilliant light would shine further light on their sins. It would force them to confront the truth of what they really were – covenant breakers, idolaters, transgressors of God's holy law. In other words, the Israelites were afraid of *being exposed*.

This fear of exposure was not just a problem for Israel. We have the same fear today.

It's that feeling we have when a neighbor unexpectedly shows up at our front door, and the house is a complete disaster.

It's watching all your high school friends get into their dream schools while you hold a politely worded rejection letter.

It's scrolling through Facebook and wondering why everyone else's life seems to be going so great while yours is stuck in neutral.

It's having to come home and tell your spouse that you've lost your job and you're not sure what this means for the mortgage payment.

It's running into that person from your past, someone you treated poorly years ago, and having to confront the fact that you are not the saint you like to think you are.

No one wants their shortcomings to be exposed. No one wants the skeletons in their closet to see the light of day. We can talk all we want about how important it is to be "transparent," about how "sunlight is the best disinfectant," and about how we need to "shine the light of truth" on wrongdoing and corruption. And of course, when we're talking about politicians hiding stacks of hundred dollar bills in their freezer, we're all in favor of light and truth and transparency and

accountability. But when that same light shines on us, we start to get a little squeamish.

It's a risky thing to step into the light. Light exposes what's true, and it is often painful to come face to face with the truth. When it's about *us*, the truth is rarely as tidy, or as successful, or as kind, or as generous, or as good as we'd like to think it is.

That's why the Israelites ran away from Moses. When they saw his luminous face coming down the mountain, they saw a light that would further expose them. And they feared that when that truth was exposed, the God who freed them from slavery, the God who led them out of Egypt as a pillar of fire, would finally say "enough is enough" and abandon them to their fate. Just as they had turned away from God, they worried that God would turn away from them.

But if we can learn anything from this story from Exodus and really the whole story of Israel's up-and-down relationship with God, it is this truth: that's not how God works.

When God's people break the covenant, God's covenant with the people holds firm. When God's people turn their backs and abandon God, God's presence remains steadfast and refuses to forsake them.

To get this into view, we need to zoom out again and see how this story about Moses's shiny face fits into a much larger story. Earlier in Exodus, we are told that God's glory appeared to all of Israel "like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain." The blazing light of God's glory was far off from the people, and only Moses was allowed to go up the mountain and stand in God's presence.

But here, 10 chapters later, we see the blazing glory of God's presence *coming down the mountain*. No longer will Moses have to trek up and down the mountain to relay God's commandments to Israel. In Moses's radiant face, God's presence comes down the mountain to dwell amongst the people. The next four chapters describe the construction of the Tabernacle, a mobile temple for God's presence. And by the end of Exodus, God's fiery glory hovers over the people and fills up the Tabernacle. From here on out, God travels with the people of God. Where Israel goes, God goes too.

The final image we have in Exodus is of a fiery cloud **guiding Israel** through the Wilderness and **towards its destiny** in the Promised Land.

God's response to Israel's sin is exactly the opposite of what they feared it would be. Instead of abandoning them, God chooses to dwell amongst them even more intimately. Instead of allowing Israel's sin to snuff out the divine light, God responds to Israel's darkness with more and more light.

Now this doesn't mean that Israel gets off scot-free or that God didn't hold them accountable. Quite the contrary. Whether up on Mt. Sinai or travelling with Israel, God's brilliant, radiant light illumines everything – it exposes what's true, including the good, the bad, and the ugly. To stand in the light of God's presence means to confront what's true about ourselves, our past, and our world head on.

But the point of our reading today is that God's light does more than expose the skeletons in our closet. It does more than confront us with the ways we've fallen short. It exposes a bigger truth than any of this.

It shows us that **none of that stuff** has the power to separate us from God. **None of that stuff** is going to keep God from doggedly loving the messy, imperfect creatures we are. And **none of that stuff** is going to keep us from the Promised Land.

As Paul puts it in Romans 8: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

I don't know what skeletons you have in your closet. I don't know what secrets lie hidden in your past, what personal insecurities keep you up at night, or what personal failures you fear the most. I know that if they are anything like mine, you'd do about anything to keep them as far as possible from the light of day.

And if that's true, then I hope you will hear the good news proclaimed in this passage from Scripture. God already knows all of those things. God's light has already illumined them. And God's light also exposes that we are not defined by them, that our future is not determined by them.