

Glory Doors
Exodus 34:29-35
First Presbyterian Church
August 16, 2020

Introduction to the Reading

To understand this morning's story, we need to catch up on what has happened since last Sunday. You recall that last Sunday Heather explored one of Israel's most glaring failures: worshiping the Golden Calf. Sure, Moses had been up on Mount Sinai a long time – nearly six weeks. But for goodness sake, the smoke and thunder and lightning of God's presence were still visible when the people told Aaron, "Moses must not be coming back so let's make a new god!" Which Aaron quickly did.

The problem with a god you make with your own hands is it will never really challenge you... it will never expect more of you than you do of yourself... it cannot offer you more than you can imagine... and the funny thing – our self-made god always agree completely with what we think already. Which may explain why... not long after Aaron sculpted a golden calf... a kind of drunken orgy broke out in the camp... because that's another funny thing about false gods: they never pass up a chance to party and party is just what the people did... until the sound of their "carrying-on" made its way clear up to Moses' ears and Yahweh's ears. Well, Yahweh got so mad at "this stiff-necked people" that he threatened to wipe them out and start over fresh with Moses. Moses convinced God not to do that... but then HE got so mad he took the tablets containing the Ten Commandments and smashed them into a thousand pieces. It was all very ugly. But now in Exodus 34 the smoke has cleared... the dust has settled... and Yahweh and Moses start all over with, literally, a clean slate. New tablets will be chiseled, and God once again will give his law to this people... but not before God descends over Moses in a cloud and pronounces his "holier than holy" name... revealing who this God really is: "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate One, the gracious One, the abundantly forgiving One, the One brimming with lovingkindness." This is who God is... these are the essential characteristics of God that his people will celebrate and depend on until this very day.

And now we come to this morning's story when Moses comes down from the mountain carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hand. ²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him. This is the world of the Lord.

Sermon

When I am spending quiet time with God in the morning, I do not have experiences that leave my face shining in such a way that Kris or our church staff are afraid to come near me. When I am in worship... and I'm caught up in the liturgy and music, the beauty and mystery of it all, I am never so overwhelmed that I'm afraid to come back the next week. It's clear that Moses' face (shining as it did) was very important, both for him and for the Israelites... but it's also a very puzzling thing.¹

If you studied art history in school, you may have come across the famous statue of Moses by Michelangelo. Carved out of pure white marble, he is all flowing beard and billowing robes, with the two tablets of the law cradled in his arms... and strangely, two distinct horns coming out of his head. Do you see them? If you are not prepared for the horns, they can come as quite a shock since they make him look as much like a devil as a prophet. Why would Michelangelo carve Moses with horns growing out of his head? This passage from Exodus holds the clue: ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. You see, the Hebrew word for "shining" is spelled the same as the word for "horn." The only difference is in the vowels which are not included in ancient Hebrew scrolls. So, some interpreters, including Michelangelo, read the text and decided that Moses' face had sprouted horns, not light, during his encounter with God. Good thing they got this figured out before Charlton Heston came along!

What EVERYONE agreed on is that something BIG happened to Moses during those forty days on Mount Sinai with the Lord God Almighty. And what we come to learn is that while he was up there, Moses made a bold request – he asked to see God... he wanted to witness God's glory. And God obliged... wedging Moses into the cleft of a rock and passing by so that Moses saw God's back. Though it was only a small part of God, it was more of God than any human had ever seen before. No one could look upon God's face and live... (at least that's what people thought) until this day Moses saw more than anyone ever had – he saw God's back – and it was such a strong dose of glory that some of it rubbed off on him. And when he came down the mountain the skin of his face was still shining.

Well, understandably, the people were afraid of him and wouldn't come near him... until he finally persuaded his brother Aaron and a few other leaders it was OK to come close to hear what he said. And when the rest of the Israelites saw that none of them dropped dead, they came up as well... and Moses delivered the commandments to them for a second time.²

Again, THIS has never happened to me... and Heather assures me it hasn't happened to her either. So, it remains for us to try to understand - not so much what happened – as what it meant for Moses and for the Israelites and for us so many years later.

¹ John Goldingay, *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (WJK-2010), p. 127

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Glory Doors," *Bread of Angels* (Cowley-1997), p. 4. This sermon borrows liberally from Taylor's work.

And to do that... I think we're going to need to wrap our minds and hearts around the word "glory." Glory. What is God's "glory?" What do we mean when we sing, "Glory be the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost" ... when we sing "God of grace and God of glory." What are we pointing to when we pray, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever? Amen." When Moses saw God's back, it was such a strong dose of glory that some of it rubbed off on him and his face shone brightly for the longest time.

So, let me try this; God's glory is what we humans can actually see and feel whenever our awesome and mysterious God enters our earthly experience. You've heard folks talk about "thin places?" Well, thin places are actual places on earth where God's glory is palpable... is seen and heard... they are times in which God's glory is experienced to whatever degree we limited humans are able to experience it.³ In the Bible it is often seen as an envelope of light – God's glory was what the Israelites saw in the pillar of cloud and fire... sometimes it was like a live volcano... and though it often took the form of a natural phenomenon, no one ever mistook it for one. They knew who it was! It was brighter and more powerful than anything on earth – it was almost like a doorway to some other world... and though that door remained closed most of the time, even the shafts of light that got through the cracks could blind you if you looked right at them. This light was the sure sign of God's presence on earth... and though they could not see God and live to tell, they could see God's glory reflected in the face of Moses. God was gracious enough to give them someone they could talk to and listen to... and who would speak God's word to them.

You may remember that the same thing happened to Jesus a thousand years later. His mountain was in Israel, not Egypt, but it was clearly the same glory that enveloped him in light. Taking three of his disciples up a mountain to pray, he was transfigured before them – turning brighter and brighter until his whole body was bright white. Moses and Elijah appeared inside the glory with him, speaking together about his death and departure... but even that sad and tragic topic couldn't make the light go out.

Still, you have to wonder if things might have been different for him if his glory had lasted longer, like Moses' did? Jesus never had to wear a veil... he didn't need one. By the time he came down from the mountain his face was back to normal... which inspired one preacher to imagine: it's almost like God took the glory one step further, taking it off his face and tucking it inside him to see if people could see his glory without the visual aid.⁴ Many could not.

So, this morning we remember Moses THROUGH WHOM God's very presence was clearly seen in his shining face... and we remember Jesus IN WHOM (as John writes) we have seen God's glory - the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.⁵ With Moses, the glory was so bright they needed a veil to look at him.

³ For more on God's "glory" see Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (MacMillan-1950), p. 175

⁴ Taylor again, p. 4.

⁵ John 1:14 NRSV

With Jesus, the glory was hidden inside the One who hung from a Roman cross saying: “My God, my God” ... and, “Father, forgive them.” And this morning... having heard again these two stories... what you and I are asked to do today is believe... believe that at certain breakthrough moments in time, that the glory of the Lord is still visible as it was in Moses’ face – so visible we need a veil to protect our eyes. And we are also asked to believe that the light is there, even when we cannot see it... God’s glory is always pulsing just beneath the surface of things, with the power to transfigure even the darkest of our days. This is the meaning of faith, of course. We believe in things we cannot always see... we trust in the One who will hold us when we fall. And by the power of our belief to choose what kind of world we will live in – a world where glory is always possible... where light might break through at any moment... a world where somebody’s face may just begin to shine... including your own.

Benediction

This morning we’ve had the privilege of hearing two important Bible stories – the story of God’s glory shining brightly in the face of Moses... and the story of God’s glory hidden inside of Jesus - hidden as he teaches and heals... hidden as he challenges authority and washes feet... “tucked inside him” as he offers up his very life on a cross. And what you and I are asked to do today is believe... believe that at certain “breakthrough moments” the glory of the Lord is as visible as it was in Moses’ face – so bright we may need a veil to protect our eyes. And we are also asked to believe that the light is there even when we cannot see it... that God’s glory is always pulsing just beneath the surface of things, with power to transfigure even the darkest of our days.

With the way the Israelites acted in the whole golden calf affair, God would have been completely justified in withdrawing his glory – just taking it back. Instead, after the whole golden calf thing when God reveals God’s name to Moses, we discover just who God is... a God of grace and glory as they hymn says.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate One, the gracious One, the abundantly forgiving One, the One brimming with lovingkindness.”