

The Face of Christ  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
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**2 Corinthians 4:3-6**

<sup>3</sup>And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup>In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. <sup>5</sup>For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

**Mark 9:2-9**

<sup>2</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

Paul is remarkably human in our first reading for today. You might worry that the opening line is directed at any one of us who struggles with Revelation or even the Gospel of John when he writes: "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing." As if those of us who might not get it are doomed. Knowing the context changes all of that. Paul wrote this to the church in Corinth as a corrective measure and what he says is a bit of "So there!" to others who have been instructing the people in Corinth in a way that is contrary to Paul's teachings.

When Paul writes "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers," there are very specific people he considers unbelievers. Professor Ronald J. Allen explains about these people known as "superapostles" saying,

"The superapostles (according to some scholars) taught a gospel of glory without suffering. They likely believed that the present possession of the Spirit with dramatic ecstatic experience and esoteric visions meant that believers would not have to undergo suffering but would receive the fullness of God's purposes through a series of ups, ups, ups, and upper ups. The superapostles may have used the language of light to describe their experience, and they likely did not believe that the present age was ending and a new world was coming."<sup>1</sup>

I don't think it would be a stretch to guess Paul was angry that the people in Corinth were believing these things, and even angrier at the people who were teaching them.

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, p. 448.

These were a persecuted people who had been accepting persecution as righteous in the face of defending the gospel, the good news, yet there were some who were telling them that suffering couldn't be what God wanted for them. I can only imagine Paul's tirade as this letter was written. Christ had suffered and died a horrible death for the sake of all people. He endured a tremendous darkness and his resurrection and defeat over death was the light that came from that. So Paul writes, "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." The metaphor of darkness fit Christ's death just as easily as it fit the suffering of the Corinthians but the promise of relief through resurrection is not an empty promise. The proof of this promise, the knowledge of God's glory, can be found in the face of Jesus - for Paul, for the Corinthians, and for us.

This description of seeing God in the face of the holy was not a new one, nor was Paul the first to make such a reference. Our reading from Mark describes the transfiguration simply saying that Jesus' transfiguration was evident as his clothes became dazzling white. Mark's counterparts, in Matthew and Luke, included another detail in their accounts of the transfiguration. Matthew says, "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."<sup>2</sup> Luke's account reads: "And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white."<sup>3</sup> There is a great precedence for such imagery, and we find the origin in the midst of our second reading: Moses.

Listen to these verses from the thirty-fourth chapter of Exodus: "When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but 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, the 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."<sup>4</sup> For Moses, being in the presence of the Lord made his face shine. And where did Moses enter the presence of the Lord? On top of a mountain, in the midst of a dark cloud. It is no mistake that these accounts feel familiar. Professor Stanley P. Saunders sums it up, explaining: "The six days, the three witnesses, the transfiguration itself, the cloud, and God's voice from the cloud all recall the story of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets containing the Law (Exod. 24:9-18)."<sup>5</sup>

Let's move from Moses' mountain to Jesus' mountain. We read, "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 17:2.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:29.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:33-35.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, pp. 455/457.

them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.” The event ends when Mark writes, “Suddenly, when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.” It is very important to note here that generations of biblical scholars, living in a Christocentric world, suggested that Jesus’ coming was to institute the superior Christianity over inferior Judaism. Much of this understanding developed from the condemning words spoken in the gospels regarding “the Jews.”

What scholars today have come to understand is that the gospel writers, writing decades after Jesus died and rose, were writing to audiences who were suffering great persecution because the Jews were setting themselves apart from these new Jews who followed Christ, so as not to lose their monotheistic worship privileges within the Roman Empire. Just as Paul was writing angrily toward the superapostles, the gospel writers were voicing the hurt and anger toward those who were making their lives and their worship difficult. Remember in those same gospels that Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law [the first section of the Hebrew Bible] or the prophets [the second section of the Hebrew Bible]; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”<sup>6</sup> To this point, Professor Rodney J. Hunter states, “While Jesus attacks abuses of the Jewish tradition in Mark 7, and Christ ends up ‘alone’ in solitary splendor in the transfiguration (Moses and Elijah having disappeared), Mark’s Gospel clearly assumes a profound spiritual continuity with the Law and the Prophets of Israelite tradition, and views Jesus not as its nemesis or successor but as its unique exemplification and fulfillment.”<sup>7</sup>

Having established that Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus signifies that he is in good company of persons chosen by God, what does it all mean to us here today, far from any mountaintop? For us, who have seen neither the faces of Elijah, Moses, nor Jesus, all are veiled to us. Paul would say to us the same thing as he said to those in Corinth – we have received the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The Corinthians had not seen Jesus either but actual sight is not needed. We have seen Jesus in his teachings – for this reason we have all been instructed through God’s words through Mark: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” We don’t need to see the face of Jesus to know his presence through the teachings we read each week. You don’t need to see to sense the presence. Have you ever navigated a hallway in the dark? Without even touching the walls, you know you’ve gotten close when you can “feel” the presence of the wall without actually touching it. You don’t need to see to sense the presence.

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment now. In this space, can you sense the light? Could you turn to face the windows even with your eyes in the darkness caused by your eyelids? You can open

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:17.

<sup>7</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1*, pp. 456.

your eyes now. In this space, can you sense Jesus? Could you turn to face Christ even with the darkness caused by the events of this world and of our personal lives? It is God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. You, too, have seen the face of Christ. After Jacob wrestled with the angel, he remarked that he had seen God face to face, and yet his life was preserved.<sup>8</sup> We might say something similar – we have seen God face to face, and, because of this, our life has been preserved. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Help us listen to your word that in doing so we might see you, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 32:30.