

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

March 3, 2019

The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 34:29-35

Moses 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. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 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.

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Probably one of the most watched movies of all times is the 1939 production of *The Wizard of Oz*. I don't know about when you were growing up, but it was on television about once a year, and it was a family event at our house. Mom would pop popcorn and we could stay up late and watch Dorothy's adventures in the merry old land of Oz. You know how the story goes; a cyclone carries Dorothy Gale, her dog, Toto and her house off to Oz, where the house crushes a wicked witch. While Oz is a beautiful and magical place, all Dorothy wants is to return to Kansas, which is very dull and dreary, but at least it is home. The Wizard is the only one who can help her, so she sets off to see him, collecting the Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion along the way.

Well, you remember how it all goes. They are sent off on a quest and the climax of the movie comes after they succeed, when they appear before the “Mighty Oz, Great and Terrible,” this terrifying floating green head with a booming godlike voice and flames flaring up all around. In spite of Dorothy and her friends doing what the wizard had demanded, he does not seem ready to keep his word and grant their requests. The tension mounts until the dog, Toto, runs off to the side, pulls back a curtain revealing a very ordinary man, manipulating levers and pulleys, and speaking into a microphone. The booming voice says, “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!” But it is too late. It is clear that it is all a sham, just an elaborate show to intimidate and frighten anyone who might question the commands of the Mighty Oz.

There is something in all of us that makes us want to be someone we are not. We love to be able to put on the personae of someone else, to make ourselves into something bigger and stronger, in some way more powerful than we actually are. If you remember from the movie, the actor Frank Morgan, who plays the wizard also plays the phony carnival hustler, Professor Marvel, along with a few other minor characters. But no one wants to be an insignificant nothing like Professor Marvel. No, everyone wants to be the Mighty Oz, Great and Terrible.

That is some of the attraction we find in dressing up in costumes and putting on masks. It is a chance for us to pretend we are something we are not, even if it is only for a moment. Many cultures have holidays that emphasize disguises and masquerades. Here in the United States it is Halloween. In England and other parts of Europe it is Epiphany or Twelfth Night that is the holiday of masks. In many parts of the world, this coming Tuesday is Mardi Gras, a celebration that often includes outlandish costumes and masks.

Our Old Testament lesson is about someone wearing a mask. Let me give you some of the background of this story. You remember, of course, that Moses was sent by God to liberate the children of Israel from slavery in the land of Egypt. Through a number of miraculous events the Israelites left Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and arrived in the wilderness, ready to enter into the promised land. But before anything else, God wanted to establish a holy covenant with them. God wanted them to understand completely that the Lord was their God and that they belonged to the Lord.

At Mt. Sinai, the Lord called Moses up to the summit, into God's very presence, and there Moses was given the Law of God, the Ten Commandments. When Moses returned down from the mountain, he discovered that the people had quickly forgotten all that had to happen for their deliverance from Egypt. They had made an idol, a golden calf, and that was what they were worshiping. Moses was furious and smashed the stone tablets where the commandments were written. After a period of punishment and repentance, Moses returned to the mountain to once again meet with God.

This time it was different. When Moses came back down, again he had the Law of God written on stone tablets, but this time the people were ready and eager to listen to what the Lord wanted to say to them. But there was something else that was different. When Moses tried to approach them they all backed off. He could not even get close to them. They were afraid of him. It must have been puzzling to him because now he was not coming in anger. Now he had something good he wanted to tell them. He was eager and ready to let them know what had happened when he was up on the mountain. But they were hesitant and unwilling to get close to him. The text says that Moses was unaware that somehow the skin on his face shone with a brightness that was completely unnatural. Somehow the glory, power and overwhelming brightness of God was present in the face of Moses, to such a degree that he made his brother Aaron and all the Israelites extremely uncomfortable. The only way that Moses could speak to the people was if he put on a veil or a mask to cover up the glory shining in his face. Only then would the people come and listen to what he had to say.

Now some critical scholars are quick to compare this story to other ancient and ethnic cultic practices. In many folk religions the priest or shaman or religious elder wears a mask or some sort of disguise in their ceremonies and rituals. Sometimes it is like the Wizard of Oz. It is all a show to create a dramatic effect and intimidate the worshipers. The shaman is hiding behind a disguise, in other words behind the curtain. Sometimes they believe the shamans put on a mask to be able to see the spirits and gods. Only through the eyes of the mask can they see the supernatural. Sometimes they believe that by wearing a mask they are both human and divine, and therefore able to intercede between the physical and spiritual world. Sometimes they believe they take on the characteristics of the spirit or god when they wear the mask, and actually become the physical personification of the god. So scholars read this story of Moses covering his face and say that this is the Jewish equivalent of some ancient primitive superstitious religious practice.

Now, I must say that I disagree with such an interpretation, for while there are superficial connections, the underlying event of this story is entirely different. In the folk religions the shamans might wear the masks to

intimidate or frighten the worshipers into obedience. Moses is wearing the veil to keep from frightening them, to protect them. Furthermore, the shamans wear the masks to interact with the supernatural, the spirit world. Moses is interacting with God, face to face. It is only when he turns to face human beings that he must wear the mask. It is after the mystical encounter that Moses covers his face, not while it is going on.

This story of Moses is unique and unlike any other. In our culture we like to tell stories of heroes who wear masks, heroes like Batman, Spiderman, Zorro, or the Lone Ranger. In these stories these heroes try to keep their true identity secret so that they will not be seen as normal human beings. Part of the ongoing drama centers around these heroes protecting their identities, and people are always trying to get a peek behind the mask. It is just the opposite with Moses. He has encountered God and as a result everyone wants him to cover up his face, so that he will appear like everyone else, like a normal human being. Moses wears his mask because his face shines with goodness, beauty and the glory of God. It is brightness, not darkness that is so intimidating to the people.

When I read this story from Exodus, it reminded me of our opening hymn. “Immortal, Invisible, God only wise, In light inaccessible hid from our eyes...” It is light, not darkness, that keeps us from seeing God. God is too bright, too good, too beautiful, too powerful, too glorious to be experienced by any of our senses. God has to “tone it down” to somehow dim the divine glory for us to have any perception of who God is. Like Moses, God comes to us with a veil, hiding behind a curtain, wearing a mask, otherwise we shrink back and God cannot get close to us.

Our New Testament lesson is also a story about the brightness of God overwhelming mere mortals. Jesus took Peter, James and John up to a high mountain to pray. While they were there, Jesus changed. The Greek word that is used to describe this change is literally “metamorphosis.” We use that word to describe the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly, so this transformation, this transfiguration, was a complete shift in his appearance. Luke says that his clothes were dazzling white and the Greek word is “lightening” white. His clothes were like lightening. You know how bright lightening can seem, especially at night. It only lasts for a fraction of a second and yet it is overwhelming and frightening. Imagine if it was continuous. You could not look at it. You would be covering your face and looking away. In the middle of all this glory, the disciples perceived two great figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. These two faithful servants of God appeared to Jesus and the three spoke together.

It is a fantastic wonderful story. Human beings simply cannot perceive and comprehend the glory of God, so God must dim the brightness. God must stay behind the curtain. God must wear a mask. Jesus is that mask. His human flesh veils the power and greatness of God so we can understand and not be afraid. For a brief moment up on this mountain, three human beings were given a peek behind the curtain. Peter, James and John were given a glimpse of the true face of Jesus. They were able to see Jesus for who he really was. Our season of Lent begins this coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. Traditionally the Sunday before Lent is Transfiguration Sunday, and this story is read from the gospels. That is because in Luke 9:51, just a few verses after this story, it says that Jesus “set his face towards Jerusalem.” From here on in the gospels and over the next six weeks, we are heading towards Jerusalem. We are heading towards betrayal, the cross, the tomb and the final glory of the resurrection.

Jesus pulled aside his mask so his disciples would see who he truly was, then set it firmly in place, even though that meant suffering and death. This leaves us wanting more. Like the Israelites, we have seen the radiance of God. It frightens us, but fascinates us at the same time. Like the disciples we are knocked off our feet by the dazzling light, yet we want to know more, to understand, to see clearly. The season of Lent is our conscious deliberate attempt to pull back the curtain. It is a time of driving away darkness, ugliness, and weakness. It is a time of being open to God’s light, beauty, strength and glory.

I would like to end this morning by telling you a story of two people who were able to pull back the curtain. I don't know for certain who wrote it, for different versions have been circulating around the Internet for quite a few years. I think it might have even been made into a short movie. You may have heard it before, but it bears repeating.

There was once a young boy who decided he wanted to find God. He knew it probably would be a long trip, so decided to pack a lunch, four packs of Twinkies and two cans of root beer. He set out on his journey and went a few blocks until he came to a park. An old woman sat on a bench, looking at the pigeons.

So the boy sat beside her and he watched the pigeons, too. After a while he grew hungry so he pulled out some Twinkies. As he ate, he noticed the woman watching him. So he offered her a Twinkie. She gratefully accepted and smiled at him. There was something about her smile that fascinated the boy. He thought it was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen, and he wanted to see it again. So he brought out the cans of root beer, opened one and offered her the other. Once again she smiled that beautiful smile.

For a long time, the two sat on that park bench, eating Twinkies, drinking root beer and smiling at each other. But neither said a word. Finally, the boy realized that it was getting late and that it was time to go home. He started to leave, took a few steps, then turned back and gave the woman a big hug. Her smile was brighter than ever.

When he arrived back home, his mother noticed that he was happy, yet somehow strangely quiet. "What did you do today?" she asked, trying to figure out what was going on. "Oh, I had lunch in the park with God," he said. Before his mother could reply he added, "You know she has the most beautiful smile I have ever seen." Meanwhile, the woman had left the park and returned to her home. Her son noticed something different about her. "What did you do today, Mom?" he asked. "Oh, I ate Twinkies and drank root beer in the park with God," she said. And before her son could say anything she added, "You know he is a lot younger than I had imagined."

My friends, during this Lenten season, if you want to be able to look behind the curtain, if you want to get a glimpse of the overwhelming glory of God, you probably won't find it up on top of a mountain, or in a cloud, or by staring into the sun. You can look behind the curtain by looking into the eyes of children. You can look behind the curtain by looking into the face of the elderly, the sick, the lonely, the grieving. You may even be able to see behind the curtain in the faces of the ones who are sitting beside you right now. It might be intimidating, even frightening. It might even be more than you can handle. But I assure you, it is worth it. So pay attention. Take a look at the God behind the curtain and hear what he has to say, "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him!" Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.