

Last Sunday After Epiphany
Exodus 34: 29-35
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February 27, 2022
Luke 9:28-36

The arms of Moses are filled
With a second set of heavy stone tablets
As he descends for the 2nd time back to the camp of the Israelite's
After 40 days and nights on the mountain.

These tablets again contain God's words of commandment and covenant,
Yet our text takes very little note of them.

Instead,
the story, first told orally long before it was written down,
Focuses on the face of Moses.

Something happened to Moses
Up on Mount Sinai.
The people could see it in his face.
Something happened so unusual
That even his brother was afraid
Of his strange, new appearance.

Among Biblical scholars,
There is controversy about what the text
Is trying to tell us
And the controversy revolves around one little word,
An extremely rare Hebrew verb,
Qaran --- q a r a n

In most modern bible translations,
The verb is interpreted to mean "shown"
As in our reading this morning:
"Moses did not know that the skin of his face shown
Because he had been talking with God."

But there are other interpretations of the word,
Especially since the verb, qaran, is derived from a noun which means "horn."
Our phrase has also been translated as:
The skin of Moses' face "grew horns" or "was horned."
That would really help explain why everyone was so frightened, wouldn't it?

The Septuagint,
The earliest known translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek,
Interprets qaran as "glory",
With most scholars agreeing that after seeing the glory of God,
The face of Moses took on its own radiant shine.

Our questionable passage has a couple of other interesting interpretations;
One associating horns with halos,
Another suggesting that Moses' face
Grew hardened, leathery, toughened like horns
As a protection in the presence of the divine.

The attention and controversy to this one little word is even played out in the arts.

Michelangelo, depending upon Jerome's translation,
Portrayed Moses with horns growing out of his head.

Marc Chagall, a 20th century Jewish-Russian painter,
Was apparently a bit undecided over the most accurate translation,
So in his several portraits of Moses
He depicts Moses with mysterious spiky protrusions
That are just indistinct enough to be horns
Or radiant streams of glory.

So, why am I making such a fuss about the face of Moses?

Moses was intimately close to God up on that mountain
Braced between a cleft in the rocks,
Talking with, hearing, feeling, seeing God
(although, just the back of God).

Moses confessed to God on behalf of the people.
He told God about their weakness, their sinfulness,
And their needs.
AND, he heard and received God's response.

Which evidently was something like:
I will not abandon you or them, Moses.
Let's try this again.
Return to the people.

Moses was not the same after this extraordinary experience.
I don't imagine any of us would be.
And the people could see the difference in his face.
I imagine they also heard it in his voice
And saw it in the way he walked.

Moses experienced first hand
God's justice, forgiveness, compassion,
God's love and faithfulness to God's people.

Moses went up the mountain with fear and trembling
To intercede for the people. They had turned away from God,
Those rebellious, arrogant, stiff-necked people that God loved so much.

Moses came down from the heights with more than replacements for the first broken tablets.

However Moses' face was changed;
Horns, halos, leathery, shining,
For the Hebrew people that radiant face was a sign of a fresh start.
A sign that God wanted to remain in covenant with them.
His glorious return gave them a renewed sense of obedience,
Renewed faith,
Renewed hope in the middle of a difficult, seemingly endless journey.

Fast forward 12 to 15 centuries to another mountain top experience.
This time its Peter and John and James and Jesus
Who, when Jesus takes them up to pray with him,
experience not only the presence of Moses and Elijah with Jesus
But also the presence and voice of God

For brief moments,
Peter and John and James see the glory of God ablaze in Jesus
And they hear God's declaration and command.
This is my son, my chosen, listen to him.

Only eight days previously,
Peter had acknowledged Jesus
As The Christ of God
And now: WHAT AN EXPERIENCE!
UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL!
Peter's confession is confirmed by God!

They see the power of God
Alive in Christ.
Hear God's voice in their own ears
And naturally run off and proclaim to anyone who will listen
What has happened to them.

But, that's now what our text says, is it.
We're told that they kept silence
And told no one in those days.

Yes, ok, they were silent.
But I have to wonder,
What did their faces show of this encounter?
Their bodies?
How were they changed?

Their encounter with God

Had to have made a difference in how they perceived and approached
What was happening to them and to Jesus in those last difficult days.

And I imagine that the other disciples and followers

Saw and experienced that difference in them also.
How could they not help not to...

We've all experienced body language at work.

I know when someone is angry at me

Even if they don't say a word.
Don't you?

Their body is stiffer,

They may not look at you.
If they do,

Its with knotted eyebrows, straight lips.

I, probably you also, can FEEL that something is amiss.

And if someone has good news

Can't we tell that also
Before they even open their mouths?

Its bursting out of them

In the sparkle of their eyes,
The lift in their walk,
Even in the way they breathe.

Knowing that, I am moved to imagine

that not only were Peter and James and John
powerfully changed, effected
by their witnessing of God manifest in the body of Jesus
and hearing the voice of God in that mysterious shroud of fog,
but the other disciples and followers were also
as they encountered the three afterwards.

How else were they able to keep hope alive...

Albeit sputtering dimly, but never snuffed completely out?

How else were they able to continue on after those horrific

Dark, dark hours of fear, despair, doubt, disbelief, utter confusion
As Jesus was arrested, crucified, and died.

How else was there enough hope still alive

So that there were at least a few sparks
Ready to be rekindled

Rekindled into a vibrant, blazing church....

The Christ of God alive in the world still today.

After his encounter with God,
The face of Moses was a sign of hope
A sign of God's always patient love and forgiveness
to a weary, weary people
On a long, seemingly endless journey.

I believe that Peter and James and John
Carried that same message down the mountain
On their faces, in their demeanor, in the ways they stood and moved;
And too, became harbingers of God's never-ending
Steadfast love, forgiveness, and power to always bring forth new life from death.

And I can't help but leave us with the question:
Do our faces radiate the love of God that we have experienced?
What do our faces show to those we encounter.

Aloofness?
Anger?
Pride?
Bitterness?
Self-pity?
Or compassion?
Patience?
Joy?
Love?
Hope?

For isn't that what God showed to Moses
And Moses reflected to his people?
Isn't that what God showed the world
Through the life and death of Jesus
And what we are called to reflect today?
To manifest?
To shine forth?
To Be epiphanies of Faith, Hope, Love?

As we swiftly move from the last Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany
Into the season of Lent,
It is good to remember
That our baptismal covenant calls us to be
Signs of Christ present in the world
Signs of Faith
Signs of Hope
Signs of Love.

And it is especially good to ask ourselves:
What does my face show of the love of God that I have experienced?
Amen.