

(Exodus 34:29-35 NRSV)

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ 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, ³⁵ 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.

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So Bright It Hurts the Eyes

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Massachusetts

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Text: Exodus 34:29-35

I want you to take a few moments to look at our stained glass windows this morning. Look at subjects.

There is the anchor and the ark. They actually come from two different parts of the Bible, but they have become thought of together for good reason. Hebrews says that hope is our anchor, a “sure and fast anchor of the soul,” is what it says exactly (Heb. 6:19). The ark, of course, is hope, too, for in it God saved the creatures of creation (Gen:6:14-8:19).

There is the rose of Sharon and the lily of the valley, which the bride in the Song of Solomon uses to describe her love: “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valley,” she speaks to her beloved (Song of Solomon 2:1).

There are the Alpha and the Omega, which refer to words Christ spoke as nearly the last words in all the Bible. There in the Book of Revelation he makes the bold claim, “I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:13)

There are many more things in our windows, too. And, like much art in western Christianity, the stained glass windows in our church are meant as teaching tools. In former times, when the greatest portion of the population in Europe was illiterate, art captured the stories and movement of the Biblical story. Art was, in a sense, a visual Bible study. Even as the populations became more lettered, art remained as a beautiful means of religious education. Now, rather than tell the whole story, the themes in our windows are visual reminders of the stories we can read and study. When I first became the minister of this church I was told of one of my predecessors who had preached a series of sermons on our stained glass windows. He preached about the windows to call attention to the stories within them, and thereby to teach. Maybe one day I will do the same. It might be great fun. But that is for another day.

However, today I do want to continue for a moment to talk with you about art, but also to speak of another art form. In western Christianity art was a teaching tool, and its subjects represented characters or figures or symbols in the Christian stories – the anchor and the ark, the lily of the valley, or in the Sistine

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Chapel pretty close to the whole Bible. The art was meant to instruct or later to remind those who looked upon it.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church there developed another art form, equally beautiful, and of which we have all probably seen at least a few examples. I am speaking, of course, of icons. I have brought with me a copy of an icon of the prophet Moses, so that you can all take a look at it. I would like you to pass it around as I preach, so everyone gets a chance to see it. I want you to look into it and sense the presence of God.

If this icon were western church art, it would be meant to represent Moses, to be a picture of Moses. It might be meant to teach us about Moses, or the ten commandments, or to remind us of the story.

But in the Eastern Orthodox understanding of icons, this icon of Moses is meant actually to be a reflection of Moses, as if Moses himself were standing in front of the mirror. So, it is meant to much more than a picture of Moses. It is meant in a real sense to be the reality of Moses, a glimpse of Moses, the actual presence of Moses. Moses is in the icon.

In Eastern Orthodox churches icons are venerated. But it is important to see that it is not the art itself, or the picture which is venerated. That would be the worshiping of idols, which our Protestant forbears so much objected to. Instead in an Eastern Orthodox understanding of icons, it is Moses who is venerated, through an icon that actually reflects his presence. As you look at the print, see if you can imagine its power to convey the actual presence of Moses there before you.

There is another layer of meaning, too. Western Christianity has tended to focus on original sin and the utterly corrupt nature of human beings. This has been especially true in our own Protestant traditions, where human corruptness, and therefore God's grace, have loomed large as the primary theological categories. We are such sinners that only by the undeserved grace of God are we saved, has been the western Christian thinking. But Eastern Orthodox Christianity has focused more on the image of God present in humanity. Orthodox Christians take great heart in the verse in Genesis which says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27) The Eastern Orthodox celebrate the image of God that we are each created in, the presence of God which abides deep within each of us. I have to say it is a much for joyous theme than that left by dour Calvinism.

The image of God is reflected in each of us, and it is reflected greatly in the saints, the prophets, Mary, Jesus and other subjects of Orthodox icons. So when you look at the icon of Moses, you are in some real way looking upon Moses, and in some real way, you are looking upon God, too. So, as you look at the icon of Moses, you are looking upon the face of Moses and upon the face of God, too. It is in this mind, then, that Orthodox Christians talk of the veneration of icons. For it is a

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powerful thing to look upon the face of Moses, and an even more powerful one to look upon the face of God.

*** The way in which icons work in the Eastern Orthodox understanding helps us to understand this morning's passage. The setting is this. The people Israel has already been wandering a long time in the wilderness. Always they have been a handful. Their faith is weak. Their impatience is strong. They whine at Moses constantly. God calls them a stiff-necked people. And when Moses goes up onto the mountain and gets the commandments from God, what do the people do? Remember? Moses was gone for a long time, the people grew fearful, and they talk Aaron into building them the golden calf, for they were sure this idol would serve them better than God who had them wandering around lost in the wilderness. Into this faithlessness and idolatry Moses comes down from the mountain. He is furious, and he smashes the two tablets containing the commandments into a million pieces. And he melts the golden calf, also.

Of course, God is pretty angry with the people, too. And it takes awhile to get to where they are at this morning's passage. More wandering, more impatience, more lostness. But finally God and Moses are ready to give it another try. Moses goes up the mountain once again, and under God's instruction he carves two more tablets, like the first two which he has destroyed. This time the people are ready to receive the commandments. So Moses comes down from the mountain carrying the two tablets, and presents them to the people. But something is different about him. When the people look upon the face of Moses, they are afraid, afraid for his face gleams from his contact with God. In a real sense, God's face has been imprinted on Moses' face. When the people look upon the face of Moses, they look, also upon the face of God. In the Eastern Orthodox sense, Moses has become an icon; the reflection of God is in his face; the image of God emanates from him. When the people look upon Moses, they also look upon God, and it scares them to death.

This Sunday is called Transfiguration Sunday. This story of Moses coming down from the mountain is the root of the story in the Gospels of the Transfiguration of Jesus. In Matthew it reads this way, "And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." (Matthew 17:2) It is impossible to make sense out of the Transfiguration story without knowing that it refers back to the story of Moses. But when we realize that it does, it all comes clear. In the same way that the image of God was found in Moses' face when Moses came down from the mountain with the tablets, so too was the image of God found in Jesus' face at the Transfiguration. If there is any doubt, God makes it clear. According to Matthew, "While [Peter] was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)

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In both stories this is the moment of full revelation of God. The image of God comes clear. And the implications of God come clear, too, which is why in both cases the people are afraid and want to shield their eyes. The glory of God, of the image of God, is bright, so bright it hurts the eyes. And the full revelation of God spells something new and different, and not at all what the people wanted. In the Exodus the people Israel wanted the comforts of home, but they got instead a set of commandments that required them to live honestly and honorably before God. They wanted to return to Egypt, but God made them forge on, through the wilderness, to a land which, as Hugh reminded us a couple of weeks ago, was already occupied by a powerful people. So, also, the disciples want to end up in glory sitting next to Jesus. James and John want recognition. Peter wants an unambiguous Messiah. But it is at this moment of revelation that Jesus tells them the deepest and truest of truths – that he will be betrayed, that he will suffer, and that he will die before there is anything like glory, and that his path through sorrow is the only and inescapable path.

From the time of Moses, and probably before, God's people have been a strong-headed bunch. We have most often thought we know the best way. We have had plans and ideas that we have given birth to, and nurtured and grown them into ideologies sometimes. The people in the desert wanted to return to Egypt. Jesus' own disciples wanted him to give them recognition in this life and in the next. The trouble is, these things God's people have concocted forever don't hold water very often. There was nothing good about returning to Egypt. Pharaoh wouldn't have received them with open arms to begin with, but even if he had, they would have been returning to bondage. As much as anything else, Jesus was trying to teach the disciples that searching for standing in life was the problem, not the solution. Constantly he tells them that is the problem with the scribes and the Pharisees.

So, when God's people actually see the face of God, when they actually catch a glimpse of what God really wants, it most often does fill them with anxiety and fear. The light shining in the darkness is so bright as to hurt the eyes and send them running. God's way is most often so different from their own that they recoil from it. O God, if I look upon you, God, if I follow what I see you are saying to me, O God, O God, my whole life will have to change. And, of course, what God said to Moses and the Israelites and to Jesus' followers, too, was, Yes, the change is inevitable. The only question is when will you recognize it? The God of Moses asks, Will you wander lost for a long time? The God of Jesus asks, Will you deny me and hide when they come to arrest me? God every day asks, Will you keep pretending for a long time that your impossible ways are true rather than seeing the mind-boggling possibilities there truly are in God?

So often we would rather go our own way, even when it is no way at all. And then, when we see God, we are shocked and afraid, for we have been going in an

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opposite direction. But I want you to look at the icon of Moses again. What if we were to look for the face of God wherever it is contained every day? What if we were to look for the image of God in icons such as this one of Moses, or in the face of your neighbor, or in your own face in the mirror, or in the snowflake, or the tree branch? What if we were to every day see the image of God reflected in every piece of God's creation?

I think the Orthodox have it right. Were we to look on the face of God every day, we would see the bright shining truth that was in Moses' face and that was in Jesus' face. We would become deeply acquainted with the image of God. And my guess is that because we would go less off course, we would be less afraid of what we would see. For the image of God would have been our guide day by day. We would reclaim our own birthright. Even in us the image of God would shine brightly. Amen.

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