

Knowing God: Moses and Jesus' Transfiguration

Transfiguration Sunday – February 2022

Exodus 34:29-35

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.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

12 Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, 13 not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. 14 But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. 15 Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; 16 but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. 4:1 Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

Luke 9:28-36

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 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. 33 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. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36 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.

Introduction

Lectionary selection is very strong this week.

The Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel line up and build so we heard all three today.

Let's trace what they bring.

Knowing God as God

Let's start by asking, where you may remember having met God? What was the geography or setting? A mountain, a valley, a plain, the coast or a Cathedral?

Text

Exodus 34:29-35



Moses had been up the mountain again to meet God.

- When he came back down he glowed – his facial skin shone with divine glory. He was 'irradiated'.
 - *Today people might suspect a moisturizer or cosmetic wonder product?*
- This holy facial shine made people afraid, even his own brother. cf v 34.

It seems many people are spooked by the reality of God coming close on others and themselves. It can be both attractive and unnerving. The inner conflict and anxiety can be coped with by putting things in place that don't require the reality of God - a substitute or screen. It need not be a denial or rejection of God but just a fudging. It may involve a God-lite religion focused on poetic words, prayers, rituals and candles *etc.* along with folk festivals around faith themes. Talking about religions and various ethical positions might be OK but actually engaging the reality of the living God might be a bit intimidating so best not go there.

Moses was shining because of his meeting with God but at the same time he was carrying two stone tablets of notes from God. He encouraged the people to receive these words and take them to heart as commands from the Lord God.

The drama of this story was not the stone tablets and what was written on them. The drama was Moses' glowing in a way that unnerved people because he brought God close.

Here we meet the problem:

Words can be deconstructed, relativized, ignored and lost in translation but prophets like Moses are those who seek and speak from direct encounter with God and embody that reality which is precisely what most people are afraid of.

A first solution to God's disturbing glory here is a veil for Moses.

A veil allows for some indirectness and distance. *RC confessional experience?*

It's like a lampshade to dim the brightness and glare.

A second solution that followed over time was to focus on the words on the tablets over the reality of God meeting Moses. Those two tablets were subsequently made to be very, very important as the *Torah* or 'Law', even more important than God!

Some strands of Christianity can do this by overfocusing on the Words of the LORD while ignoring the LORD of the Words.

God can be made so distant and so obscured without being denied. Over time this emphasis on the things-of-God over God's interpersonal reality breeds management and administration so complicated that the veil is no longer really necessary. Religion can do this!

Q Does this sound familiar in any way?

A If it makes you tired it's more likely to be religion than the living God!

'Religion' is where we are actually not confronted by anything beyond or bigger than ourselves. (*Typical Synod?*)

Yet, and yet, some still seek the living God in his majestic and awesome glory. Like moths drawn to the flame some -or many- seek the reality of God in personal encounter that could get hot and be way out of our control.

Illustration

A simple human illustration is perhaps eye-contact where the eye is the window to the soul. Some seek it, others avoid it.

In this situation the veil provides insulation while people are together, sort of?

Sunglasses can be a form of veil to hide behind and remain invisible or cut off at the personal level.

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Paul relates to this account of Moses and the Jewish people.

- They talked about things they could not see because of the veils Judaism had developed.
 - ¹⁵ Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds;
- He saw them as having a veil over their vision preventing them from seeing God in Christ despite hearing the words Moses received from God.
- Paul laments this.

But there is good news and cause for hope:

¹⁶ but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom

Q2 Do you hear the shift?

A2 When you turn to the LORD in heart to heart, person to person one on one spirit to spirit interface – because the veils get lifted.

Connecting with Jesus brings God’s true light and lifts the veils of ignorance and deception both willful and accidental. When we turn to Jesus the Spirit of God shines through even if the words are shrouded and covered.

A first reflection:

God is real and his glory reveals his reality in ways that amaze and impact us to our core. Still, God up close can be frightening, yet many of us are still drawn.

Light can be like that too. We want it but it may be too bright and too revealing for us to handle.

Luke 9:28-36 Now back to a mountain:

Somewhere up another mountain, Peter, James and John saw the glory of Jesus as he really was.

A veil was lifted from their eyes as they saw Jesus glorious with Elijah and Moses.



While Jesus prayed and entered the presence of God he began to glow, even his clothes dazzled.

Peter, James and John were not afraid of this. They may have built enough trust and love of Jesus to handle this.

Perhaps Peter was too relaxed about this as he put his size 12 sandals into it in an attempt to save the moment or at least push the pause button to savour the moment.

³³ 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.

Then we read:

³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

Peter went from seeing an opportunity to capture something of the moment in little boxes to being terrified.

Q: What happened to cause this?

A: God arrived.

The glory of Jesus with Moses and Elijah was something Peter could handle and happily live with but the personal presence of God was something else and absolutely terrifying! This was so real he was shattered.

³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

Q3 Where you go during holy terror?

A3 That’s where Peter, James and John needed to be.

It seemed to end as suddenly as it had begun, perhaps lasting a few seconds as if time could be measured?

³⁶ 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.

These are stories about people meeting God in ways so real that everything changed for them. We could add the account of Paul on the Damascus Road meeting the risen Lord.

It’s as if every map of reality, who we are and what is what gets torn up and we have to start again.

Here’s my point: When the reality of God is personally encountered, everything changes. We so need this and sort of want it but may be fearful of what it may bring.

Consequently, there is an industry in making veils and building booths in memorial to where God was last seen yesterday because meeting him today might be a bit wild?

Testimony: (Just my story cos it’s the only one I have – not a template.)

At age 17, on a Friday evening in July 1978, at 17 Thorington Road in Christchurch, in the teenage language of the day. I was ‘zapped’ by the power of God.

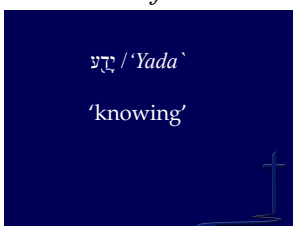
God’s presence came over me with such impact that I fell forward and flooded was with light and an inner presence I can only relate to heat and electricity.

In those days people referred to this as being ‘baptized in the Holy Spirit’.

This was my first conscious encounter with God as really real in a time and manner of his choosing. I was not terrified but I was changed. For the first time ever, God was undeniably real and I knew it. I had been moved from considering the things of God to considering the reality of God. There is a world of difference.

(Just my story cos it’s the only one I have – not a template. Many people are slow warmed or strangely convinced and not zapped.)

A second reflection



There is a Hebrew idiom that relates to this: יָדָע / ‘Yada’

- In English it’s translated as ‘knowing’.
- We may first hear it in - (Genesis 4.1):

Now Adam ‘knew’ Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain ...

The Hebrew model for knowing anything or anyone involves engagement or some mode of personal contact. This is how we get to know another. This applies to knowing God. You have to tangle with God Almighty to know him. Once you have been touched by God you may speak of knowing God – at least in part.

Anything that does not involve touching or being personally touched in some way is not true knowledge of another. Objectivity -just looking without engaging- does not provide *yada*-knowledge. You have to get in close and personal to *yada*-know.

This *yada*-knowledge of God was the dream of Israel's Prophets

Habakkuk 2:14

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

That is what it takes to save the world – oceans full of the *yada*-knowledge of God.

Jeremiah 31:31,34.

³¹“Look, the time is coming,” says the Lord,

³⁴ People will no longer have to teach their neighbors and relatives to know the Lord.

This is because all people will know me, from the least to the most important,” says the Lord.

There is a health-warning to knowing God. Think of the hot coffee warning on a McD's coffee. God is very hot, the closer he is the hotter it can be.

Moses glowed after meeting God so a veil was applied to overcome the collective anxiety of the people at God's effect on him.

The manifest presence of the reality of God instantly terrified Peter, James and John into years of silence.

At age 17 I was so impacted by the presence of God I could not stand and it redirected my life.

Application:

- Knowing God can only be through personal encounter.
 - It can be awesomely awful.
 - Fearsomely terrifying - as Isaiah said: “Woe is me I am a man of unclean lips!”
- Only God can make himself known to us.
 - It must be primary - God has children but not grandchildren.
 - Reading God's words alone does not do it, an encounter and engagement must happen.
 - Talking about, even preaching about it is not enough - but can help.
 - *Yada*-knowing involves person connection
- What we can do is let go of the veils and stop our attempts to hide - both from God and each other.

I have never forgotten being overwhelmed by the presence and power of God as if flooded with power and light. I may still not understand it all but I can never forget it.

Conclusion:

Let's get applied now.

None of us can bring people into *yada*-knowledge of God.

God does that as God chooses to.

I can perhaps move people to desire to want to *yada*-know God but the Holy Spirit does it.

I am trying to say there is more.

- I want to see veils dropped.
 - All those false screens of distance erected and maintained to prevent real contact both between people and between people and God
- I want to pray for God's patient and faithful perseverance to break out in personal revelation that brings *yada*-knowledge.

BUT understand, once God breaks into our lives -however that happens- change follows, whether first time or *nth* time.

What we need to do in hunger and thirst.

Psalm 63:1

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
 my soul thirsts for you;
 my flesh faints for you,
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 42:1-2

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
 so my soul longs for you, O God.
²My soul thirsts for God,
 for the living God.
 When shall I come and behold
 the face of God?

Let's pray: