

“Veils”

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3-3-19

Based upon Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Cor. 3:12-4:2

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous short story, “*The Minister’s Black Veil*,” the main character, Parson Hooper, shocks his congregation one day by showing up to lead worship wearing a black veil over his face, which hides everything but his mouth.¹ “Has the pastor gone mad, or was this some kind of performance to teach them a lesson?” the people initially wonder. When he steps into the pulpit and preaches about the “secret sins” that human beings all hide from the world, they assumed it was the latter, and found that the veil actually made his sermon all the more convicting and powerful. But when he persists in wearing the veil day in and day out, not just for Sunday worship and funerals, but also for weddings and walking around town, they began to reconsider whether he had lost his mind. His fiancée begs him to lose the veil, or at least lift it when he is with her, and when he refuses, she leaves him. The children in town grow scared of him, while the adults gossip behind his back. Only those who are tormented by their own sins feel comfortable seeking him out for pastoral care. But Parson Hooper remains unmoved. He dies as he lived, with the black veil on, and his motives for wearing it, entirely unknown.

Imagine if I showed up in worship veiled that way? I suspect that people here would wonder the same things that Hooper’s congregation wondered. Yet in today’s Old Testament lesson from *Exodus*, the people receive Moses’ veil with gratitude and relief, or so I always thought. The story I had in my head, in part because so many commentators interpret it this way, is that after Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive a second set of the Ten Commandments, to replace the set he destroyed in a fit after he came down the mountain and found the people worshipping a golden calf, Moses’ face shone in an unnatural, divinely radiant sort of way. In those days people believed that God was surrounded by a radiant luminosity, sometimes called a “fearsome radiance” in the literature of the day,² because they assumed that if you saw God face to face in all God’s brilliance you would die. Moses, according to *Exodus*, was allowed to see only God’s back for that very reason. But still, it was enough to make his face glow almost radioactively. So, when he came down the mountain, and the people were afraid of him, he put on a veil. In that way they were able to learn from him and live with him once more.

This scene has been depicted in all kinds of artwork throughout the centuries because it’s pretty hard to resist depicting a scene which calls for a glow-in-the-dark Moses. **[Slides of paintings shown.]** Unfortunately, in some of the art work, most famously in Michelangelo’s sculpture of Moses, he is depicted not just glowing, but also having horns after he came down the mountain. This is because in Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible, called the Vulgate, which was the only translation people knew for many centuries, he mistranslated the word for “radiant” as “horned.” He might have done this to make a metaphorical point that Moses had become a

¹ Hawthorne’s *Short Stories*, Newtown Arvin Ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1946), 9-23.

² See *Exodus* 35, note 29-35, *The Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler Eds., (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 191.

divine stand-in to replace the horned golden calf, or simply because in the Hebrew, the words “radiant” and “horn” share a root. Since Hebrew doesn’t include vowels, and since the vowels make all the difference in which word the root spells, it could have been an honest misjudgment during translation. But whatever Jerome’s reasons, his mistake nevertheless birthed centuries of anti-Semitism, allowing anti-Semites to perpetuate the cruel myth that Jews are horned like the Devil, and to persecute them as evil.

Recognizing this, we need to be very careful not to allow misinterpretation to lead us into anti-Semitism because both of today’s texts are notorious for their translation issues. I’ll get to the problems in Paul’s text in a minute. But as far as the *Exodus* story goes, know that Moses wasn’t horned and wasn’t the Devil, and neither are the Jewish people, our brothers and sisters of the Covenant. Moses’ radiance was proof to the Israelites that he had been with their invisible God, Yahweh, and would be God’s stand-in on earth. His radiance was also the reason why they were afraid of him. Moses didn’t look like himself anymore; he looked divine. When he wore the veil, however, they knew that his presence would not destroy them. At least that’s the way the story is always told – that Moses put on the veil at the people’s request to ease their fears. But as an elder astutely pointed out to me on Monday when we considered this text in *Faith 5* practice before our Session meeting, the text doesn’t say that Moses put on the veil in order to enable the people to hear and approach him. It actually says that he came down shining. The people freaked out; he reassured them, gave them the Commandments, *and then* put on the veil. It says that after that, Moses did not wear the veil when he met with God, or when he was conveying God’s word with the people. He wore the veil only *after* that sharing time was over.

After having the veil of years of misunderstanding removed from my eyes, I was filled with questions just like the congregants in Mr. Hooper’s church. Why would he wear the veil afterwards? It made no sense. Yet when I turned to Jewish Midrash for answers, I was disappointed to discover that although lots has been written on the horn controversy, very little has been written attempting to explain Moses’ motives. One of the only theories I could find which felt even vaguely consistent with the text was in a rabbinic commentary which argued that Moses was trying to make a clear distinction between the holy and unholy parts of his life.³ His shininess was a sign that he was God’s holy representative; therefore, it would have been inappropriate for him to be glowing while he was eating dinner or chatting with friends, or sleeping. So, he veiled to separate the sacred from the ordinary, the clean from the unclean. He veiled to be able to re-embrace his humanity and dwell with the people. When he took the veil off, people knew that God was speaking through him, and when he put the veil on, they knew he was just being Moses. It was a helpful way for the people to know when he was “open for business” as God’s representative, so to speak.

I know many clergy people who would appreciate this interpretation who struggle with their congregants’ expectations that they must be holy representatives of God all the time. A pastor friend of mine told me he would never put on his car the kind of clergy sticker that

³ Israel, Rav. Alex, “*The Face of Moses*”, VBM The Israel Koschitsky Virtual Beit Midrash, retrieved Mar. 26, 2019 from <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/face-moses>

hospitals give out to guarantee parking for clergy responding to emergencies, because then he would feel as though he could never speed or drive badly. He liked being ecclesiastically incognito in his car. Fortunately, I haven't felt the same pressures to be an otherworldly saint 24/7 that some of my friends have felt. But during my first call, I was confronted by a congregant in Home Depot one day, who was shocked that I would be there. "What on earth are you doing here?" she asked, as if ministers live only in sanctuaries and hospital rooms, or as if Home Depot was a den of iniquity. "Buying light bulbs," I answered, not meaning, at the time, to suggest that my holy glow had burned out, only that my living room was a bit dark.

Ironically, this sort of holy-light-burn-out is what Paul was suggesting was the issue with Moses, when Paul wrote his own Midrash of the *Exodus* story in his second letter to the Corinthians. He said that the reason Moses put the veil on after he delivered the Law is that he knew that his divine glow would fade out. Like the glow-in-the-dark stars which light up many a child's ceiling, Moses' face, according to Paul, was lit up right after being exposed to God's radiance. But because Moses was not God himself, the radiance wouldn't last. So, Moses put on the veil so that the Israelites would not be able to see his normal face return, and conclude from its lack of glow either that God, or that God's promises were impermanent. Moses did not want his fading skin tone to cause their faith to fade as well.

Paul's point in interpreting the text this way was to suggest that now that we have Christ, God's light will never fade because God's glory in Christ is eternal. He also wanted to affirm that since we can know Christ, we, like Moses, can now reflect God's light to the world. But this message gets a bit lost in the way he tried to use the veil story to compare the Law of the Mosaic covenant with Christ's New Covenant, a way which, I'm sorry to say, has also been used to justify anti-Semitism. Based upon his blinding Damascus Road experience, Paul felt that the light of Christ was both metaphorically and actually so much more brilliant than the illuminating light of God's Law that the Law paled by comparison. But we know from his letter to the Roman Christians that he did not believe that God had stopped caring for the Jews or that God's promises to them had faded. In all his veil talk, he wasn't making a supersessionist argument that we can abandon the Old Testament in favor of the New. He was simply responding to a messy problem in Corinth, which was grounded in their rejection of him as their apostle because he kept focusing more on Christ than on legal compliance with the Law. All of Paul's letters were very context-dependent. This is why we have to be careful that we don't draw global conclusions from case-specific responses. The point of this text is for us to recognize that the love and promises of Christ never fade because Christ's glory isn't reflected glory, it's God's glory. We can know God in Christ, we can bathe in God's brilliant light, and when we do, metaphorically speaking, our faces will shine just as much as Moses' did.

Both the rabbinic commentary's interpretation of Moses' reason for veiling, and Paul's interpretation are just that, interpretations. The text doesn't explain Moses' actions, so we can only speculate. But these interpretations still leave us plenty to think about when it comes to the veils in our own lives. What veils do we put on to hide our light from others? Presbyterians are notoriously uncomfortable with evangelism. We like to help others without making a fuss. We like to go to church, but are uneasy with the idea of people thinking of us as "religious" because

these days that word tends to be thought of negatively. But if we take off our veils here because this is the place where we feel we encounter God most, and then put them back on when we hit the parking lot, we are not fulfilling our calling to be the body of Christ in the world, or to share the good news. To be sure, it's not good to be holier than thou either, for like Moses, we are called to be one with the people, not claim to be superior to them. But as we dwell in the midst of them, it still should be clear that we are lit by the love of Christ. So, if you tend to veil your glow, ask yourself why. Are you embarrassed by your faith, or by your sins? Are you yearning to be off-duty so you can do things without judgment, or make bad choices, or because the demands of the faith are too hard? Whatever your reasons, if your veil is an attempt to hide from God or others, or an attempt to ditch your discipleship, it may be time to leave it at home.

Perhaps the greater challenge to your faith these days, however, is that you have seen the reflected light of Christ in people you once admired, or in the Church, fade. Human beings and the Church are imperfect. Consequently, it is not uncommon for Christians who are drawn to the light in a person or a church to experience disillusionment when an event or action removes the veil to reveal their compelling holiness fading. The abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, the recent decision in the Methodist Church to reject full inclusivity, these kinds of circumstances are a great challenge to faith, and no denomination or individual is immune to fading. So, Paul may have been right. If the Israelites had watched Moses' radiance fade like a flashlight with dying batteries, they may not have had the strength and conviction to survive their years in the wilderness. We all want the constant assurance of God's presence and truth. We want supernatural evidence of the reality of invisible saving grace. But if a veil merely masks the truth of our brokenness, isn't it little more than a lie? Isn't it better to celebrate the redeeming power of God's light, than to pretend that ours never fades?

That is why we need to remember what Paul pointed out, that the glow of God in Christ never fades because Christ's promises are eternal. Our faith, our discipleship, our hope is supposed to be grounded in him, not in the perceived holiness of our church friends, pastors, or denominations. In Christ we know that God is with us. Through Christ we know that God desires to save us. With Christ, we have the power to make our way through the wilderness, to sin less, and, if we spend enough time learning from and following him, to radiate the love of God in an imperfect, but still transforming way. We don't need a veil to hide who we really are because our claim to glory is not our own to flaunt or hide or lose. Our imperfect radiance is but a reflection of God's perfect glory, which never fades.

Today on Transfiguration Sunday, we recognize the day when a few chosen disciples got to feel like Moses on the mountain top, when Jesus, the guy they thought they knew by sight and sound and smell as a wise Galilean rabbi, glowed with the brilliance of God. They knew in that moment that he was not like them in power or holiness. He was their Savior, their God. But then Jesus did something extraordinary. After almost blinding them with his brilliance, he then turned his light off to return with them to join the rest of the disciples at the base of the mountain. Did he veil his light, seeming to contradict everything I've just said? Kind of, at least until after his Resurrection. But it wasn't so that he could be off-duty, and it wasn't because he didn't want us to see it fade. It couldn't fade. Jesus dimmed his glory because he came so that we could see God

face to face. He didn't need to glow like a night light to prove that he was God with us. He proved that with his life and love. May we spend so much time with him, following in his way, that our faith becomes strong enough to recognize this, and so that even in our imperfection, we won't be able to hide the truth of who he was and is, because his love will be reflected in us. Amen.