“Re-veil-ation" A Sermon based on Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; and Luke 9:28-36 delivered on Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young.

When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, “the skin of his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him," (Exodus 34:30) . . . “Jesus . . . went up onto the mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning." (Luke 9:29) What is going on here, we ask? What is the common denominator in these experiences of Moses and Jesus? The late Rev. Walter Wangerin Jr. sheds some light on the answer to this question. In an address to newly graduating Seminary students he relates the following experience:

My face burned when I was ordained. This is historical truth, no

image, no metaphor. My face became bright red and burned.

I suppose the people might have said, “Walt’s excited. Look at him blush." . . . But I knew even then that the excitement of the ceremony was not cause enough for the fire in my face. This was more than mere blush. . . Rather, the burning came of this: for once in my long and vigorous struggle with the Lord Jesus Christ, the struggle itself had ceased. For the moment, the relationship had reached a certain purity. . . My faith, you see, was the flame in my face. (from Ragman and Other Cries of Faith pp. 56-57)

What Moses knew in those ancient times on Mt. Sinai and what Jesus knew almost 2000 years ago in his own “mountaintop" experience, was exactly what Rev. Wangerin in the last century experienced at his ordination. What all three of these men knew for a fact is that when God is encountered with such clarity as to be experienced as being “face to face," revelation happens. Faith happens. God’s presence in these holy moments does not just elicit imperceptible changes in a person. No, this kind of encounter causes dramatic changes in a person, and sometimes those changes can be physically palpable. Sometimes these changes can be seen and touched. Sometimes they can be experienced as bedazzling shining light and burning flame.

Former seminary professor, Mary Luti, who taught at Andover-Newton when I was there, speaks eloquently about this in a UCC Still-speaking daily devotional entitled “Beaming” that she wrote recently. She writes:

Scripture says that God’s face can kill you. “No one,” God declares, “can see my face and live.” That’s why God tucked Moses in a crevice before passing by, showing him only the divine back. And the few times Moses did see God’s face, his own face lit up so intensely that he terrified people and had to wear a veil.

Yet the same Bible that says, “Beware God’s face!” also urges us to seek it. The psalms especially beg God to shine the divine face on us so that we might be saved. How can the divine face both kill and save? Wreck and restore?  It’s a contradiction.

Or not.

When my mother was dying, she couldn’t speak. I couldn’t either, at a loss for words at the prospect of her death. One night as I was leaving her room, I felt an urge to ask her forgiveness for … I don’t know … so much. And to say I loved her, that I always had. I turned back and managed to choke it out. I wasn’t sure she’d heard. But then, with effort, she lifted her hand to her heart, tapped twice, and beamed at me.

I was stricken. In real pain. Her radiant face was killing me. I was happier than I can say.

If anyone’s ever beamed at you like that, with love so terrifying, so beautiful, so resolute and generous that it kills you, kills the old you, kills every sorrow of a regret-laden past and fills you with the joy of Eden’s first morning, you know what I mean when I say it’s no contradiction at all. God’s face will slay you. Turned toward you, beaming, it will save. (Daily Devotional UCC Jan 4 2025)

What Paul is reminding us in our Epistle Lesson this morning, at the same time that he is admonishing that difficult church in Corinth, is much the same thing—that these beaming and burning moments of revelation from God are not to be covered up. They are not to be “veiled," so to speak. What Paul argues is that Moses had to cover his face with a veil so that the people could look upon his face, shining with God’s presence, and not be afraid. But Paul goes on to argue something else, too. He also says that the veil works both ways. The veil not only shielded the people from their own fear of being in such close proximity to the divine, but it also served to cover up the very Glory of God. The veil protected them from fear, sure, but the pay-off for the protection was the loss of Gods revelation to them ("But their minds were made dull. . . the same veil remains. . . but whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." 2 Cor. 3:14-16).

This is true, because the bottom line is this: with Moses' face veiled there was no way for the people to tell whether it was glowing or not! The Israelites could not be aware of when the shining on Moses" face had disappeared, and so they also were not aware of when God’s presence had left them!

Paul wants us to know that we must look on the face of God with unveiled faces, Seeing the glory of the Lord, as though reflected in a mirror, . . ." (2 Cor. 3:18) however painful that reflection might be to us. Rev. Wangerin is saying much the same thing when he goes on to explain to those graduating seminarians about what caused his face to burn at his ordination:

And the burning came from this: I sat in the midst of a people with whom I had learned and laughed talked, failed, and cried; a people against whom I had sinned, from whom had experienced forgiveness, among whom had roared, lived and loved. And in that instant our fellowship had reached a certain purity, a quiescence of joy. . . My face burned, you see with the vital love of the people around me." (from Ragman p. 57)

Mary Luti concludes much the same thing when she says: “If anyone’s ever beamed at you like that, with love so terrifying, so beautiful, so resolute and generous that it kills you, kills the old you, kills every sorrow of a regret-laden past and fills you with the joy of Eden’s first morning, you know what I mean . . .”

Paul says we must look in a mirror to see the “unveiled" reflection of God’s glory and Walter Wangerin and Mary Luti explain to us that they saw Gods unveiled glory reflected in the vital love of the people, her mother in Mary’s case, around them. What all of these “unveiled" moments have in common is the fact that the people involved have experienced true “revelation." They can no longer be in denial because they see God and God’s faithful people and, more importantly, themselves, for what they really are. They have seen the “unveiled" truth and are able to resist hiding their faces from the dazzling brightness and the hot heat of it.

What the people of Israel, at that time in their history, could not bear to look upon in Moses' shining face was their unfaithfulness, their turning against Gods law at almost every turn in their wilderness journey after being rescued by God from slavery in Egypt. What Israel felt it needed to do in the face of their unfaithfulness was to coverup, to deny, to veil the truth in any way that they could. The veiling of Moses' shining face, a reflection of the divine presence, was a metaphor for that denial.

Denial is a strong force in the human condition. When the truth is veiled in any way there is a sense in which we are being dishonest both with ourselves and with our God. One of the clearest areas in our society where denial is present is in those who suffer from addictions of all kinds. In his book about addition called, A Time to Heal, Dr. Timmen Cermak explains it this way:

A commitment to honesty cleanses your mind of the denial that contaminates your relationship with the world. It is an article of faith for me that real healing does not begin until your mind is focused on the realities affecting your life. You cannot expect real healing to occur while you remain identified with your false self. . .A commitment to receive your feelings that is, to make room for them revitalizes the mind, the heart, and the soul. (p. 164)

When Moses put on that veil for the ancient people of Israel it may have been necessary for a time in order for them to survive the searing light of Gods truth, but it needed to be removed after a while. Once the needful coping and surviving had happened, they needed to drop the falseness of that identity and work toward a truer one. In short, they needed to give up their denial of their unfaithfulness.

What Paul is saying is that we have in Jesus Christ our true identity the once and for all “unveiled" truth of God the “not-to-be-denied" truth. Very literally, in Jesus what we have is the “re-veil-ation" of God--the removal of the veil—that is the awesome power of the incarnation! But we see that, even when Peter and James and John had the opportunity to see this in the glorified presence of Jesus and Moses and Elijah up there on that mountaintop, they missed the point! Their veils were still very much in place. They missed the point in a big way, as Luke reminds us with a parenthetical editorial comment (He did not know what he was saying) and goes on to relate that Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master it is good for us to be here; let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’" (2 Corinthians 3:33) One can almost feel what must have been the impatience of Jesus as Peter said this. Here Peter was in the presence of the Son of God and two of Gods greatest prophets and all that he could think about was Real Estate options!

As we all remember from our “Yellow Brick Road” process of revitalization planning, the Great and Powerful Oz, veiled behind that curtain in the corner of the Emerald Palace, could boom out his frightening voice and make the characters recoil and cringe and bow down to him, but, in reality, when he was “unveiled" he was just a small man, who had been practicing a false identity based in denial of his real self all of his life. Ironically, it is from this very ordinary little man that Dorothy and Toto, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion finally learn the real truth and find their way.

“It is,” as Dr. Chermak goes on to say in his book, A Time to Heal, from which I previously quoted, “faith in your true self that makes the difference: A second article of faith . . . is that the mind heals itself best when the realities of our feelings are not only acknowledged intellectually but are also experienced. . .When your feelings are permitted to move freely within and through you, they take on different qualities and it becomes clearer that they have your best interests at heart. The false self imposes a master-servant relationship on feelings. This relationship can be relinquished in favor of a partnership, in which the natural healing forces of the mind can work most effectively.” (p. 165)

How different it would have been up on that mountaintop, if Peter, and James and John along with him, had realized their feelings about being caught in the awesome dazzling light of truth emanating from those three powerful prophetic presences and had responded accordingly! It would have been a life-changing event for them. Instead, the Gospel tells us that, “they kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen." (Luke 9:36) What an opportunity for evangelism and ministry was lost in that moment of silence and denial!

Yes, we are all of us “veiled" at times. We are all in denial at times. But if we truly trust in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ; if we truly believe in the pure unadulterated “unveiled" truth that we can find reflected in the model of Christs life and work and to which we confess as Christians, then we have a chance. We have a chance to walk along hand in hand with Jesus in the freedom of our true and actualized selves. We have a chance, finally, to truly live. As Paul concludes: “Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” (2 Cor. 4:1-2) Here we stand, he says— “unveiled” and “revealed”—he says, shining with the radiant light of Christ’s truth! Amen.

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