

Exodus 34:29-35

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

Today is the last Sunday of our liturgical season of Epiphany – a season characterized by **light**. And the readings from both the Gospel and Exodus are full of images of light and transfiguration –change.

The story of Moses' transfiguration in Exodus is where I'd like us to focus. As Moses came down from the mountain carrying the tablets of the 10 commandments, ***Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.*** Moses' face is shining because he has been talking to God.

Moses and God do a lot of talking to each other. In fact, most of Exodus is a running dialogue between God and Moses. They are on close and intimate terms. They talk to one another, as two friends talk, directly, without any pretenses. In fact, in an earlier chapter, Moses is bold enough to tell God of his desire to see God's glory. This is a bold request *because it was an ancient belief that no one could look directly on God and live. But, God responds to Moses' desire with mercy.* He places him in the hollow of a rock and shields Moses with his hand as his glory passes by. In this way Moses is protected from seeing God's face. Moses sees God's **back** as God's glory passes by him. God knows Moses' desire to see God's glory and God gives that experience to Moses.

The Israelites were all too glad for Moses to be the one who spoke to God and then told them what God said. They were very willing to stay back at a distance, and let Moses approach God on their behalf. They had said: *“You speak to us Moses, and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die.”* And so, Moses has this routine when he goes up and talks to God, comes back and tells the community what God commands. And he covers his face after speaking, so that God's glory won't hurt the people. *Getting too close to God will cause death.*

Moses desires closeness to God, and the Israelites resist direct contact with God. These two ways of relating to God sound like opposites, but I think they are both

about how we come to God. **I think that we all long for God's presence, but we want it on our own terms, and that means keeping our distance from God.**

Where did this idea of keeping ourselves distanced from God come from? It is an ancient notion goes right back to the Biblical story of creation and the fall. It goes back to the original relationship between God and Adam and Eve. God and God's creatures were close to one another. God would visit with Adam and Eve – and go walking in the garden with them in the cool of the evening. They would talk about things. Maybe they'd talk about what kind of day they had each had. What plants they saw, what animals they encountered. This was an easy and intimate relationship. And, the sense of it is that Adam and Eve held back *nothing* when they talked to God. *They were comfortable in showing themselves to God.*

But, then along came the serpent that tempted the humans to disobey God. And the next evening when God comes walking in the garden, Adam and Eve are hiding. **They are afraid.** They now see themselves as naked, and they are afraid of their vulnerability. *And they are afraid of God. Their fear and mistrust creates a block, a distance between themselves and God.*

That same emotion of fear is what keeps the Israelites from coming close to God and initially to Moses as he returns to the camp.

How many of us have ever had the kind of mountain top experience that Moses had? Probably not many. Perhaps you have had a powerful feeling and experience of God's presence in your life. But you and I might wonder, *why don't I have the kind of easy, free conversation with God that Moses had?* Why is it that when I go to talk to God, go to prayer, there just isn't the sense that God is there, listening to me, much less answering my prayers.

How would you describe your prayer life? Does it seem like you do all the talking to God, but God doesn't answer back? Are we sometimes more like Adam and Eve, hiding ourselves from God - hold things back from God? The things we are uncomfortable, embarrassed about? Do we feel too vulnerable and exposed to talk about those things in our prayer life? Or, what difference does it matter that I tell God those things? Are we afraid that if we get too close to God and reveal our deepest, most honest feelings, *that God will ask us to change.* Perhaps we *fear God's power to change us.* *And so we find ways to keep God at arms length.*

Unconsciously, we want God to be God on our terms. For if we let God be God, ***God might ask something of us we don't want to face.***

What if God wants me to face something about myself I have been unwilling to look at honestly? What if God tells me I am powerless over an addiction, and that I need to get help? Or, what if God tells me that the argument I had with my brother all these years has really been about ***my unwillingness*** to forgive, not his.

Listening to God can be dangerous. It can open us to God's invitation and call. And when we do respond to God's call, we might act differently, or look different. Perhaps our faces will shine? And when we begin making efforts to change old, destructive habits and take on new ways of living. How will our family and friends respond? We might hear: *"Don't go and do anything drastic. Don't jump off the deep end, now!"*

Our friends can be afraid of our changing and warn us under the guise of protecting us, but other times these **voices of caution and resistance can be denying the very thing that God is desiring for us and what we desire for ourselves.**

God will not ask us to do something that is against our deepest desires. God loves us so much as to know what it is that we really, deeply long for, and God wants us to have that desire fulfilled. We must trust that talking and listening to God will create in us change for the good.

So, if we are really listening to God, we will have to come close to God. We will need to surrender what ever it is that keeps us from listening – whether it's our fears, or our ways of trying to make God be the God we want.

As we move from the season of Epiphany into the season of Lent, perhaps we can avail ourselves to listen more closely to God. Perhaps these 40 days that are ahead of us can be time to be silently dwell before the mystery of God's glory, and letting God initiate the conversation calling us to reflect God's glory in the world. Amen.