

GLOW

SHERARD EDINGTON

Exodus 34:29-35

When my wife was pregnant, she glowed. I remember it vividly. It was beautiful and a little disturbing. Her visage changed. She was radiant. I almost didn't recognize her. Women glowing during pregnancy is common. We like to imagine that they are luminous with the life growing inside of them. And they truly are. However, the medical explanation for this natal incandescence is that during pregnancy a mother's blood volume increases by about 50%. Their capillaries widen and the blood becomes more visible at the skin. This increased blood volume can also make the face and lips appear fuller. Also, during pregnancy, women experience an increase in certain hormones which cause facial oil glands to produce more oil, giving the facial skin more shine. In other words, expectant mothers glow.

Our reading today from the book of Exodus tells of a man, who while very not pregnant, did experience a certain glow. The man was Moses, and the glow was a side effect of Moses being in close proximity to the Lord.

Moses had led the Hebrews out of Egypt. Before they reached their destination in Canaan, they spent many years journeying through the wilderness. The time in the wilderness became a time for the people to get to know God. They had mostly forgotten about God in the 300 years that their people had lived in Egypt. But now, cohabitating in the wilderness with the Lord, they needed to get re-acquainted. One thing God does is to give the people the Law—God's guidance on how they shall live together. The pinnacle of God's Law is the Ten Commandments—God's expectations on how the people are to live with God and with one another. We know these: worship God and God alone, don't murder, don't steal, honor your elders, don't lie, and so on.

God delivered this law to the people through their leader Moses. As the Hebrews camped at the base of Mount Sinai, God called Moses up the mountain and spoke with him for 40 days, teaching him the Law. While on the mountain, Moses asks if he might see God's "glory"—to look God in the face. God informs him that no one can look at God in the face and live. It would be like standing on the surface of the sun. Instead, Moses is to place himself in a cleft in a rock and God will pass by. But God will cover Moses with God's hand to protect the fragile human. Then, once God has passed by, the hand will be removed and Moses can watch God depart seeing only God's back. But that will be enough.

Then, as we read today, Moses descends Mt. Sinai carrying the two tablets in his hand. (As a side note for you young people, these are stone tablets, not iPad tablets.) As Moses nears the people, he is completely unaware that his face is shining. It is shining because he has been in the presence of the Lord.

As Moses approaches the people waiting for him at the base of the mountain, they can see something that makes them afraid. They are not sure that it is Moses coming towards them. Moses didn't glow like the harvest moon when they last saw him. But Moses calls out, and they recognize his voice. They realize that this is their leader, and so they approach him. Moses conveys to them God's commandments.

When he is done, Moses covers his face. Our Bible says that he covers his face with a veil. But to be honest, scholars are not exactly sure what the Hebrew word describes. It could be a veil, or a hood, or some other face covering. It might have even been an N95 COVID mask, you know, one left over from the Ten Plagues.

From that point onward, Moses kept his face covered except when he was called to speak to the Lord, or when he was addressing the people telling them what God had spoken. Moses' face would shine like this for the rest of his life.

Have you ever known someone holy? I don't mean a priest or a pastor. I don't even mean someone who is super religious, who can pray the longest and quote scriptures with every breath. I mean someone in whom you recognize an undeniable holiness by their actions, their demeanor, their priorities, their way of living their purpose. It is obvious that they are in tune with the divine.

If you have ever encountered such a person, I am sure you felt comforted in their presence, like God was near. But did you also feel a little unsettled? Was their pureness disconcerting? Did you feel like you were walking down the beach and you pass someone who is super fit and they just make you feel flabby?

That is the case with Moses. He had been with God. He had observed God as closely as was possible. And that experience changed him. The glow was just a manifestation of his encounter with the divine. It was a reminder of his unique relationship with the Lord. It was also a sign of his crucial role as intermediary between God and the people.

Moses' shining face was both a source of comfort as well as of fear. It offered comfort to the Israelites because it was a reminder that God was with them—even out in the wilderness between their old home and their new home, between the dark bondage of the past and the promise of hope and freedom to come. In this time of chaos, God is with them. They can see it.

Moses' face was also a source of discomfort. And for the very same reason. In Moses' face the people witnessed God's pureness—a pureness that magnifies their own faults and sins. It is like you are driving down the highway and you come around the curve and there is a state trooper sitting there. You immediately check your speedometer. But you are not speeding. You never were speeding. Your intension was always to obey the limit. But the sight of law enforcement reminds you of your own potential to lawlessness, even if it is the possibility that you could

speed if you wanted to. As a theater spotlight is used to highlight the action of the stage, Moses' face illuminates the sins of the people.

Today, on the church calendar, is Transfiguration Sunday. It marks the end of the Season of Epiphany. Epiphany begins on the twelfth day of Christmas with the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. The Magi are the first outsiders to acknowledge Jesus as King of the Jews. They observe his holiness in the shining light of the stars.

The word 'epiphany' is from the Greek word 'reveal.' For Christians, Epiphany is Christ being revealed to a world that does not know him. The time of Epiphany concludes with the Transfiguration—that moment when Jesus ascends a mountain to pray and is transfigured.

The Transfiguration story, as we find it in the gospels, tells of Jesus leaving the crowds behind and retreating up a mountain. He takes with him Peter, James, and John. At the top of the mountain, Jesus is transfigured—his face shines like the sun, his clothes dazzle. Then, suddenly, appearing next to him are two heroes of the faith—Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the Law, Elijah the prophets. Seeing these three, Peter proposes making three dwellings—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah—so that they may lock this moment in time. But before he can finish his proposal, a voice from a cloud commands, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him*. The disciples fall to the ground in fear, but Jesus reassures them, and when they look up, they are once again alone with Jesus.

Like Moses on Mount Sinai with God in the cloud, Jesus is on a mountain in prayer. But Jesus doesn't glow because he was with God; he glows because he is God. He is "God with us," the reminder that even though we might feel lost in this wilderness between darkness and light, we are not alone. Back down the mountain, Jesus did not glow, but God's glory was still with him. And yes, even in Christ's presence we should feel inadequate. When we come into this holy place, we begin our worship with an acknowledgement of our sins. We humble ourselves so that we may stand in the presence of the divine.

Friends, as a church, we acknowledge our sins and our faults. We confess that too often we stray from God's path, we don't obey God's law. But still God claims us. By acknowledging our sins, we pull back the veil covering our faces so that others may witness the spark of the divine that is within us.

As a people, we are presently stranded a wilderness of war, pestilence, and division. But these times are not unique. These things will always be with us. But we have been given the power to be a light in the darkness, to be the calm within the storm, to radiate a new reality to a broken world. Let us do so in the name of our Christ, God's beloved. Let us listen to him. Amen.