

Sermon Notes for 2/7/16 (Transfiguration)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 9:28-36

Theme: WHAT SHINING FACES CAN TELL US

The Point: Christ's shining face brings us into the sphere of God's kingdom grace, and our shining faces open the door for others to join that joyful throng.

Introduction: Faces are windows into the soul. The eyes in particular have that ability to let others know what is going on inside. I have glasses that darken in the sunlight – my family hates those, because often they cannot see my eyes. Then they can't know whether I am sleeping or looking at them. Faces that are glowing and radiant bespeak a peace and joy that issues from the depths of one's soul. And once in a great while, faces that glow and shine communicate something of the divine to you and me.

It is said that Abraham Lincoln, when he was President of the U.S., was advised to include a certain man in his cabinet. When he refused he was asked why he would not accept him. "I don't like his face," the President replied. "But the poor man isn't responsible for his face," responded his advocate. "Every man over forty is responsible for his face" countered Lincoln. (*Resource*, July/August, 1990) What does your face show? Does it gleam with hope and patience? Or is it shadowed with despair and gloom? Is your face one that suggests to people around you that there is a God of life and renewal – or does it insist that God has died? That was the corrective that Katie Luther used on her sometimes irascible husband Martin. If he was in a depressed mood, she would ask him, "Did God die?" Luther's response was usually one that brought a renewed and positive look to his face.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday set aside each year (the Sunday before Lent begins, with Ash Wednesday) to think about shining faces. Each of today's readings focuses on shining faces.

The story of these shining faces begins with Moses, 'way back at the time of the Exodus. Following the escape from Egypt, Moses led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai, where he met with God. He went up the mountain by himself and fellowshiped with Yahweh. When he came down, we are told, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." It was so bright that the Israelites were afraid to talk with him or to deal with him until he put a veil over his face. Then their eyes could take in his presence. Moses' face was shining because he had spoken directly with God, and the glory of God was reflected on his face.

Moses' shining face told the Israelites that he had been in God's presence – and that God's presence was something amazing, otherworldly, glorious. They were afraid because of this. That should not surprise us too much. When the blazing bush began to speak to Moses in the desert (we are told), "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." Later on, the Israelites said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." God's presence is awesome – not just in the sense of *The Lego Movie* song, "Everything Is Awesome." (Too bad, the way that cheapens the term – someone has suggested that we reserve the word "awesome" for speaking of God and Him alone.) God's presence is awe-inspiring, it is awe-full, something that makes our jaws drop to the floor. His face is more than we can take in, especially knowing the burden of sin and shame that we carry with us.

We are told in Scripture (Ex. 33:11), "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." But we also find in the same chapter, after Moses' request to see God's glory, God's word to Moses, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; . . . But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Moses' face reflected God's glory, but even Moses could not see the face of God unveiled.

I suspect that people who were around Jesus had to be impressed by His face. On that face there shone the light of God's peace, God's presence, God's compassion, God's forgiveness. But there was one particular incident in which Jesus' face showed even more than His typical appearance. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the face and the clothing of Jesus became dazzling white. His shining face says something far more than the face of Moses had told the Israelites.

In fact, there on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus speaks face-to-face with Moses and Elijah. These two individuals had been through some amazing experiences. We are told that they were speaking with Jesus about His "departure." In the Greek, the term is "Exodus." Jesus' exodus lay ahead of Him at this point yet. Moses had experienced the first Exodus, the "departure" of Israel from Egypt, some 1400 years earlier. Then his own "departure" had been rather strange. He went up on Mount Nebo, where God showed him the extent of the Promised Land, though Moses would not be allowed to set foot in it. Then we are told that Moses died, and God buried him in a valley there around Nebo. The Israelites never located the burial place of Moses.

Elijah had experienced an "awesome" departure. You remember how he and Elisha were walking along, and suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. Elijah was taken to heaven in the whirlwind. After the sons of the prophets had bothered and bewildered Elisha long enough, Elisha gave them permission to hunt for Elijah, knowing they would not find him. And they did not find him, though 50 strong men spent three days carefully examining the countryside.

But these departures of Moses and Elijah, remarkable though they may have been, could not hold a candle to the "departure", the "exodus" of Jesus that He was about to undergo. He was about to depart through a path of intense suffering, of ultimate rejection, of gruesome and bloody death – not because of His own sin, but because He bore your sins and mine, along with those of Moses and Elijah, all the way to Calvary. There He paid the final and complete price demanded because of your sin.

The face of Jesus dripped bloody sweat as He agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane over His upcoming death. His face reflected His love even as Peter's words of denial and the crowing of the rooster resounded in the air. The face of Jesus ran red with blood as the soldiers jammed the crown of thorns onto His head and ridiculed Him as the "King of the Jews." His face shone with compassion even as He carried the cross through Jerusalem's streets, assuring the sorrowing women, "Do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and your children." Jesus' face spoke of God's measureless mercy as He prayed for those who crucified Him and as He welcomed a condemned thief and murderer into His eternal kingdom.

Nothing that He experienced could wipe away from Jesus' face the marks of God's undying love. Jesus' face shows the Father's grace. Let's say that together. "Jesus' face shows the Father's grace." If you don't remember anything from today's message, this will be sufficient for you to ponder for the next week – or the next lifetime! Jesus' face shows the Father's grace. "The law was given through Moses – grace and truth came through Jesus Christ!"

And because Jesus' face shows God's grace in full measure, we can be comforted and assured for our lives of trial and suffering. Paul says it this way in today's Epistle: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." We do not lose heart because we behold God's glory in the face of Jesus, not just because Jesus is an amazing and awesome Savior. We also are amazed that this is the transformation that God is seeking to work in our lives as well. We are being changed into the image of Christ day by day. That truth gives us reason to live

with joy and hope and purpose in our lives each day.

Stephen Hawking was diagnosed at the age of 21 with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease, motor neuron disease in the UK). He was given two years to live. He is now 74, has more scientific awards and recognitions than you can shake a stick at, and is still contributing mightily to the study of science, mathematics, and nuclear physics, even though he is so limited that he can move hardly any part of his body on his own. (Perhaps you have seen the screenplay *The Theory of Everything*, based on his life.) He has been married (and divorced) twice and has three children. His life is testimony to how vital engagement with life may be more important than medical prognoses. He is not known to be a Christian, but some of the same principles can be seen in the lives of many of Christ's followers.

T. Hansel: "Most of the Psalms were born in difficulty. Most of the Epistles were written in prisons. Most of the greatest thoughts of the greatest thinkers of all time had to pass through the fire. Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* from jail. Florence Nightingale, too ill to move from her bed, reorganized the hospitals of England. Semi-paralyzed and under the constant menace of apoplexy, Pasteur was tireless in his attack on disease. During the greater part of his life, American historian Francis Parkman suffered so acutely that he could not work for more than five minutes at a time. His eyesight was so wretched that he could scrawl only a few gigantic words on a manuscript, yet he contrived to write twenty magnificent volumes of history. Sometimes it seems that when God is about to make preeminent use of a man, he puts him through the fire." (*You Gotta Keep Dancin'*, David C. Cook, 1985, p. 87)

Maybe it is that fire that illuminates the face of the believer and makes his or her face shine. When you think of those who have modeled the Christian life for you, don't you see people who have gone through significant times of setback, trouble, and distress. It may be physical problems, emotional setbacks, financial reverses, spiritual battles – whatever the conflict, God can make use of it to make us shine with the light of Christ. I have noticed in preparing this sermon that there is just one little keystroke, made by the same finger, that separates "whine" from "shine". It is just the one "little difference" that makes all the difference in the world about our life stance and our worldview. Is Jesus Lord, or is He just a religious example?

From the cloud on the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples heard clearly the word of Yahweh, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!" This had to bring back echoes of Deuteronomy 18:15, in which Moses told the Israelites, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him." A prophet like Moses – and yet more than Moses! He is the One to whom you must listen. He is the One whom you must obey. He is the very Son of God, come to this earth to fulfill all of God's will for our salvation. To Him we bow in praise and thanksgiving!

Conclusion: During a sermon, a pastor asked the congregation reflectively, "And what is a saint?" One little boy, who had been peering intently at the stained glass windows in the sanctuary, windows that depicted the twelve apostles, blurted out, "A saint is a person who lets the light shine through." That little boy had some insight, didn't he? Saints, God's chosen people, are those who let the light of Christ shine through them to the world around. Christ's shining face brings us into the sphere of God's kingdom grace, and our shining faces open the door for others to join that joyful throng. Let your light shine – also through your shining face this day, that others may see the glory of God shining in and through you and be led to glorify the God who makes you shine with the light of Christ! AMEN!