

## **“Veiling Your Alleluia”**

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36;— Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we learn to praise you in ways that bring glory to you and the light of hope to your people. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Do you remember a few weeks ago when Jesus helped Peter catch a bunch of fish, and his immediate reaction was to tell Jesus to leave him alone because he was a sinful man? That's what came into my mind when I read this passage about Aaron and the other Israelites being terrified when they saw Moses' face shining when he came down the mountain from talking with God. The minister version of this is when you meet a new person and then as soon as it comes up that you're a pastor, they immediately apologize for any cuss words they might have said, as if my ears were too pure and holy for such things. But maybe it's happened to you too. Have you ever had someone react dramatically when they find out you go to church? Maybe it's just a look of horror and surprise that passes quickly over their face. Or maybe they start giving you the list of excuses why they don't go to church. Or maybe they make that time-worn joke about lightning striking the building if they were to come in.

It's enough to make you want to wear a veil like Moses did. Okay, maybe not a veil, but something. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, which we always celebrate the Sunday before Lent begins, reading this story of how Jesus was transformed by

dazzling light on the mountaintop, as he conversed with Moses and Elijah. I want us to sing our hallelujahs loud and clear today. I want us to celebrate the Light of the World and re-commit ourselves to bearing that light to all who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Reading this story in combination with the story about Moses and his shiny face helps us place the Transfiguration in its proper cultural context. The glory of God appearing like this is a clear sign that we need to prepare to listen carefully. But perhaps we also need to see the connection between the veil Moses ended up wearing and the line at the end of the story in Luke that tells us that Peter and James and John didn't tell anyone what happened up on that mountain for quite some time. You could even wonder if Peter's impulse to contain that glory in "three dwellings" is related to how challenging it was to look that glory in the face.

What is that about? As followers of Jesus, who really have experienced how church has made our lives better and more meaningful, we need to figure this out, so that we can help people see the light of Christ as illumination and hope, instead of the glare of an interrogation spotlight. To put it another way, I want you to proclaim your hallelujahs and hosannas with great jubilation, but that's not the same as shouting it in somebody's face.

If we think about this carefully, we realize that there are two different kinds of reasons that people turn away blinded from the light of Christ. The first is like what happened with Peter. Because of whatever combination of unfortunate circumstances

their personal history includes, they have been convinced that holiness, righteousness, a life of faith isn't for them. Or worse, that they don't qualify. The saddest part about this is that many of those folks have come to that conclusion because someone in a church told them it was the case. They were told, whether in words or actions, that they weren't good enough, and they took it to heart and believed it. They may long for the solace and fellowship of true Christian community, even if they might not have put words to that desire. But they've cut themselves off from seeking it because they've been convinced they're not welcome.

The other reason people turn away from the light of Christ is because they've seen the damage some people have inflicted with it. The light of Christ is neither a blowtorch nor a flamethrower, but too often Christians throughout the centuries have used it as a weapon. The light of Christ is also not an interrogation lamp, but too many people have been approached by the church as if it is.

You can see how these two problems are related. The hypocritical use of the light of Christ twists people's experience of God so that the true light of Christ is just as off-putting. So what is a would-be faithful follower of Jesus to do? Shall we put our lights under a bushel? No! That can't possibly be the solution. Jesus explicitly said not to do that. But what about a veil? Not a real veil, obviously, but what are some of the metaphorical veils we can employ to ensure the light of Christ doesn't burn anyone's eyes and keep them from seeing the love of God? And just as importantly, how do we use those veils as intentionally and sparingly as possible, so

that they don't end up dampening our light to the point that we're just another group of nice people, without anything special holding us together?

Our scripture lessons today offer us a few ideas. What did the voice from cloud say? "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Listening is a great place to start. Listening to Jesus helps us stay on the path, rather than letting other priorities or agendas overtake our intentions. But listening to those who need God's love is also an important way to implement this kind of veil. Many people aren't looking for answers; they're just looking for someone who will listen to their questions.

On the other hand, the story of Moses shows us that clarity and truthfulness are also vital. When Moses was teaching the Israelites, that was when he removed the veil and let them see the full glory of God reflected in his face. For too long, Disciples churches have basically mumbled something about "you can believe whatever you want," rather than being clear about the gospel imperative for love and justice and mercy and generosity. The "kids" these days are fond of reminding us that "clear is kind," which means that we need to just claim who we are and make it plain, so people don't waste their time trying to figure out if they can trust us. It's funny to think of clarity as a veil, because you might think it's the opposite. But when the church has engaged in fuzzy platitudes and worked so hard for so long to never say anything that might offend anyone, simply telling the truth can help someone embrace the light we share quicker than beating around the bush. Churches have developed a reputation for being full of hypocrites, so when we're honest about both our

aspirations and our failures to live up to them, it is, as a recent email called us “a breath of fresh air.”

This, of course, brings us to another important veil, one that I would describe as a combination of humility and confession. As we enter into Lent next Sunday, we will spend some time with this. What would it mean to withhold our hallelujah until we are fully prepared to offer it wholeheartedly? What do we need to lay aside so that we can do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God? Lent invites us into a practice of humility that helps us polish our hearts so that we can better reflect the light of Christ.

There are other effective veils, of course, to keep us from blinding the eyes of people God loves. The fruits of the Spirit certainly qualify, if we can practice them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Faith, hope, and love, which always abide, as Paul reminds us. The thing to remember about a veil, you see, is that it's not opaque. A veil is translucent; the light of Christ can still shine through it. It's just a way of making sure our practice of our faith isn't hurting anyone or re-traumatizing someone who had the light of Christ used upon them as a weapon. A hallelujah shouted in anyone's face does not bring glory to God. So this day, let us proclaim our hallelujahs joyfully and loudly. But then, let us embark on a journey of discerning how to share that joy in ways that the people of God can receive and embrace. Hallelujah and Amen.