

Last Sunday after the Epiphany — The Transfiguration of Our Lord

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Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Exodus 34:29-35 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. **30** When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. **31** But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. **32** Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai.

33 When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. **34** But whenever he entered the Lord's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, **35** they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.

"Bask in the Brilliance"

Context is key. Without the context of following Major League Baseball, spring training makes no sense. Why are teams from all different parts of the country all congregating in Arizona or Florida to play games before the real season begins? And why are lots of players you've never heard of playing more innings than the guys who just signed contracts for \$300 million? Context is key. Context is key when you get a phone call from your child's school. Is he sick or in trouble? What exactly happened before he got in trouble? What are the ground rules the teacher has for the classroom? What did the other kid do first? Context is key when the new superhero movie comes out. Is this the latest installment in the Marvel or DC franchise? Is it based on one of the comic books or more of a back story to develop the character or maybe a mash up of different comics bringing a bunch of heroes together to battle one super villain? Context is key to understanding and appreciating what is going on.

Context is key for Moses and the Israelites. When we drop in on the Israelites in Exodus chapter 34 we get this surprise reaction: **"When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him."** (Exodus 34:30) But it helps to understand why Moses is radiating this brilliance: **"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord."** (Exodus 34:29) But a little more context will be helpful.

The very fact that Moses had been up on that mountain with God is a real sign of progress in the first place. Because the last time Moses spent considerable time with God, the first time Moses received two stone tablets directly from God's hands, things didn't go so well. The Israelites got impatient with Moses' absence. So they made their own god and started to worship that golden calf. Moses saw their wickedness and smashed the tablets of the law.

God punished the people for their rebellion with a plague and punishment and threatened to wipe them out completely.

So now Moses has the opportunity to go back up Mt Sinai after this horrible incident of unfaithfulness from God's people. This time God restores his relationship with his people. God reestablishes his covenant. God even reveals his presence and his name to Moses so he has a deeper appreciation for who God is. So now Moses has a different context for coming down the mountain than the Israelites did when he left to go back up the mountain. Context could have prevented the unfortunate reaction of the Israelites when Moses came down the mountain. See, God wants his people to know him. God wants his people to experience blessings from their relationship with him. God actually wants his people to bask in the brilliance of his glory.

But that's not how the people understood what they were seeing. God's people recoiled at the glory of God reflected by Moses. There is a logical explanation for that. God's holiness even when it's not full force is overbearing in its brilliance. The words used here in Exodus chapter 34 are kind of unusual. But they let us know Moses was giving a peak into God's presence and God's power.

Context is key to appreciating the brilliance of God's glory. You know that from experience. People react to the brilliance of God's power and God's glory the way vampires react to sunlight. You know that in the different way you look at coming to church compared to the reasons people who don't go to church stay away from church. You know people who go out of their way to stay away from Christians and Christian leaders and those they think of as God's messengers. You know people who withdraw from the fellowship of believers without any explanation. But eventually you learn that they do it because of personal struggles and personal failures they don't want discovered. You know people who exclude themselves from groups of Christians because of shame over divorce or major character flaws or something especially shameful in their family. Just like you have a tendency to stay away from particularly painful passages of Scripture. You have a tendency to grow stale and listless in your prayer life because of your own personal shortcomings.

Fear of God's glory is actually a very natural instinctive reaction. If we page back a few chapters in Exodus we see how God commands people not to come too close to his holy mountain without invitation. And even as God is bringing Moses into a deeper appreciation for who he is, he warns Moses: **"you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."** (Exodus 33:20) God is holy. Flaws inside of us cause human beings to withdraw from his presence.

Maybe we all need to have a better understanding of God's glory. We experience glory when we are acknowledged for accomplishments at awards banquets. When someone retires we give them attention for everything they have achieved. Exposure and attention are things we crave on social media and among our friends. But God's glory reveals and exposes even the hidden and secret things in our hearts. God exposes even the most shameful things we can't bring ourselves to talk about. God's brilliant glory brings awareness of how miserably we've carried out God's demands. This is the attention and exposure we want to avoid.

It's a lot more like what happened in my childhood when I turned on a light in a dark room. Where I grew up there were always bugs. Sometimes there were more than other times. But there were always bugs. And so if you walked into a room at night and suddenly flipped on a light switch, you could see all sorts of bugs scampering away to find cover. They instinctively knew they would be stomped if they stayed in that light for too long.

Avoiding the brilliance of God's glory is natural for sinful human beings. But it has profound consequences. When we withdraw, we keep ourselves away from God's grace and forgiveness. When we isolate ourselves from God's glory we also rob ourselves of his guidance. Instead, by turning to ourselves and ungodly influences, we suffer from increased impurities, more shame, and a greater accumulation of guilt.

Context is key to understanding the brilliance of God's glory. At the Transfiguration Jesus shows off greater glory than Moses. Jesus has a changed appearance. But he doesn't have to radiate the brilliance of anyone else. He just gives a true glimpse of his true identity as the God-Man. Jesus undergoes not a makeover, but a metamorphosis of his actual self. He is changed as he discusses with Moses and Elijah his path forward in the coming days and months. It's a peak into his real self as he is about to bring to completion God's perfect plan in Jerusalem.

Have you ever been to a perfect vacation spot? You were busy enjoying a fabulous trip into the mountains when you just paused for a minute and thought to yourself, I wonder what it would be like to stay here forever. You join with family members together with an overabundance of food and wish it could be this way all the time. You discover some secluded spot on a warm, sunny beach and dream of making that your permanent home. But it can't. Unfortunately, it doesn't last. You live in the real world. You can't bask in that vacation brilliance forever.

That's the way Jesus treated his own transfiguration. And this is where the context of the rest of Jesus' life key to understanding the true glory of Jesus. Throughout his life, Jesus radiated with the brilliance of perfect obedience to his Father. Jesus was constantly and unswervingly drawn closer to God and led to do God's will. But he knew there was even greater glory in coming down from the mountain. Jesus knew his greater glory would come from going up Mount Calvary. On the cross Jesus would look so completely shamed and humiliated that people would withdraw and keep away from him. But it was on that mountain and on that cross that the Father would withdraw from Jesus because all the guilt and all the shame of every sinner was piled onto Him. Jesus was exposed to God's punishment because of our impurities. Jesus got the attention of God's wrath for all our secret and public shame. Context is key. Because without Holy Week suffering and the Good Friday crucifixion, the glory of the Transfiguration would lose its ultimate impact.

Context is key. All of Scripture is key to understanding difficult teachings. 2 Corinthians, our second Bible lesson for today, explains that the veil Moses used to keep the glory of God from fading away is only taken away in Jesus. In the cross of Jesus, something that looked weak and hideous is the permanent glory for all believers. There is now no veil necessary

for God's people when we bask in the brilliance of Jesus' perfection. Instead of recoiling, we bask in the brilliance of God who gives and forgives. 2 Corinthians also explains that the brilliance of what Jesus did on our behalf is transformative: **"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."** (2 Corinthians 3:17,18) Jesus sends us the brilliance his Holy Spirit. Jesus gives us the glory of his perfect life as a gift. Jesus shines in us to give us new life.

One of my favorite things about New Mexico weather is that we don't go without sun for very long. So when we have had a few cloudy days in a row, it starts to get to me. I need to see that sun and feel its warmth again. Christ's brilliance calls us to stay in his presence for his blessings instead of pushing us away from his holiness. Christ's glorious perfection fills us with light and warmth and guidance. Christ draws us closer to bask in that brilliance. His good news keeps pulling us closer. Jesus shines the light on the mount of Transfiguration and the mount of crucifixion to show us what he has done. Jesus gives us warmth of his good news in worship. Jesus gives us guidance from constant exposure to his word.

Context is key for Christian living. We can't get stuck on Transfiguration. We live under present struggles and current challenges. And yet, the brilliant radiating glory of Jesus is with us. When people in your life avoid contact with God, you can be the way they learn about the inviting and welcoming glory of Jesus Christ. When fellow sinners draw back from God, the good news of Jesus radiates through you. When people you know feel the full force of their guilt and shame over past sins, the gift of forgiveness beams from you. When your loved ones feel overwhelmed by their struggles, freedom from Jesus is yours to share. It's yours now. But the brilliant radiating glory of Jesus will be ours in full force for eternity. You will bask in his brilliance forever. Amen.