

**February 18, 2007**  
**Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-35**  
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**“With Unveiled Faces”**

Several weeks ago, I heard a celebrity being interviewed on a television program. She said that she was “really into spirituality.” I wondered what she meant. We know that the word “spirituality” may be used to describe a host of things - from practicing traditional religions to sitting on a rock and contemplating daisies. Some folks pursue spirituality like a hobby. They collect interesting religious insights, objects and experiences like you or I might collect baseball cards, antiques dolls or rare stamps. They fill the houses of their minds with these things but are not really transformed by them. It is easy to remain a “religious dabbler,” dipping into this tradition or that practice without really practicing or sustaining a disciplined spiritual life. The spiritual is not just one dimension of life; it is not something we add to our lives the way we might add a room to our house; it is a way of understanding all of human life. The spiritual encompasses every aspect of human existence. We are created with the desire to know God, to be molded by God and to live in God’s presence.

In his book, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Dr. Eugene Peterson writes, “All men and women hunger for God. The hunger is masked and misinterpreted in so many ways, but it is always there. Everyone is on the verge of crying out, ‘My Lord and my God!’ but the cry is drowned out by doubts or defiance, muffled by the dull ache of their routines, masked by their cozy accommodations with mediocrity. Then something happens - a word, an event, a dream - and there is a push toward awareness of incredible Grace, a dazzling Desire, a defiant Hope, a courageous Faithfulness.” (p. 87)

In our scripture readings today, we have two dazzling encounters with God’s transforming presence. In the book of Exodus, we hear the story of Moses’ receiving the Ten Commandments. The children of Israel are in the wilderness at Mount Sinai. Moses has gone up the mountain to commune with God. The Lord comes to Moses shrouded in a great cloud. This is not the first time that Moses has been on the mountain with God. If you recall the first story, Moses went up on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments. He was gone so long that the people became restless, anxious and afraid. They felt abandoned in the wilderness. So they demanded that Aaron make the golden calf. They wanted something tangible to worship and to express their spirituality. When Moses came down from the mountain, he was so angry with the faithlessness and idolatry of the people that he smashed the two tablets of the law.

This time, when Moses descends the mountain with the two tablets of the law, his face shines with the reflected glory of the Lord. The people are struck with awe. Moses covers his face with a veil because the reflected glory of God is more than the people can bear. Moses teaches the law to the people. Bit by bit, generation by generation, in wilderness and in Promised Land, in Israel and in exile, this law shapes them into a covenant community. An undisciplined group of runaway slaves becomes the children of God. The law becomes the foundation of their spiritual life and their communal life. To this very day, the Jews are known as the people of the law. This encounter with God not only transforms Moses, but it changes the people forever.

In a similar way, Peter, James and John follow Jesus to a high mountain where they see Jesus transfigured before them. They see his transformed glory. In one moment in the present, they see the future glory of God’s kingdom where God’s dreams are fulfilled and the faithful are gathered together. They see Jesus communing with Moses and Elijah, two figures who represent the law and the prophets. This, too, is a moment of “incredible Grace, dazzling Desire, defiant Hope, and courageous Faithfulness.” In the presence of the transfigured Christ, the disciples are almost overcome with a mysterious and heavy sleepiness. Perhaps their sleepiness suggests how our earthbound natures struggle against these moments of transformation. I do not know. I do know that Luke says they manage to stay awake. They do not let this encounter with divine glory, as Eugene Peterson suggests, “be drowned out” or “muffled by the dull ache of their routines.” By staying in the moment, they see what is happening and are filled with awe. Peter wants to build shelters so that they can stay on the

mountain forever. They cannot stay on the mountain. Jesus and the disciples have Jerusalem to face. In Jerusalem they will walk through “the valley of the shadow of death.” It will be a long time before they taste again such a moment of glory or even understand its meaning. Even though they cannot fully grasp what they have seen, the experience changes them. God has given them a vision that will sustain them on the way.

These stories lead me to think about how God changes us. God uses our experiences and our relationships to transform our lives. God comes into our lives and gives us the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, to draw us closer, to give hope and make us more like Jesus Christ. Our spiritual growth is a gift of God’s grace. In our tradition, we call this sanctification. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. We cannot make it happen; but we can make the effort to open ourselves to the work of God. Moses was willing to climb a mountain for a second time to meet God. His willingness to go a second time brought blessing and life, not just to himself but to his people. In the same way, Peter, James and John stayed with Jesus at critical moments in his ministry. Of all the disciples, they alone were with him on the Mount of Transfiguration; they alone were with him in the house when he raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead and they alone were close enough to him in the Garden of Gethsemane to taste his agony.

Sometimes, we want to run from the hard places of life. We are afraid of the unfamiliar; we avoid struggle; we hide from suffering. Like a family crouches in a storm cellar to survive a tornado, we think that by running and hiding we will survive. By running we do not grow. Recently, a hospice nurse told me how she has seen family and friends receive spiritual blessings as they care for their loved ones who are dying. A therapist said that when you descend into hell, you rise with a blessing. Being with family, friends and even strangers in times of crisis has changed my own spiritual life. In such times, my superficial beliefs have been challenged, my cheap words of comfort have been exposed, and my fearful heart has been broken. Yet, God has also given me a deeper faith, a quieter trust, a better hope, a greater strength and a new heart.

The theologian, John Leith, was fond of saying that you cannot force or control the work of the Holy Spirit; but there are things you can do to be open to receive God’s Spirit. In the church are the means of grace - worship, prayer, scripture, sacraments, fellowship, and service. God’s Spirit works through these gifts to instill faith in us and to nurture our spiritual life. If we do not associate with believers, if we do not participate in the life of the church, then it is hard to be open to the transforming power of God’s Spirit. I hear people say that they do not feel comfortable coming to a Bible study, Sunday school or a special class because they are not sure what, if anything, they believe. We come in order to question, to grow and to understand. Through our experiences in worship, on mission trips, in small groups, in community service and in youth groups, God stretches us, challenges us and changes us. When we plow the fallow ground of our hearts by participating in challenging and sometimes unfamiliar opportunities, God comes to plant and tend the seed of faith.

Spiritual growth is a gift, but it seems to come to those who give their time and attention to God. In her book, “Dakota: a Spiritual Geography,” Kathleen Norris tells about an article she read that was written by a man in search of spiritual transformation. This man admitted that he had a kind of romantic and idealistic notion of monasticism. He was dissatisfied with his modern, middle class America and longed for a more contemplative life. Hoping to find what he wanted, he went to a retreat at the ecumenical community of Taize, France. He said that he wanted spiritual “fireworks” and felt “nothing -no sign; no vision; no still, small voice calling me forth.” Several years later he was still searching. His search led him to the gates of a Catholic monastery in Colorado. Fear kept him from entering the monastery gates. He wrote that he waited for something to happen. “I wanted to call - to hear a monk’s voice; to request a retreat; to become a postulant; to find the answers to all the questions I had in my life and soul. I wanted to call for help, to say that I was ready to offer my life unconditionally to God. But I stopped there, stoically waiting and resting against the fender of my Porsche.” (From *The Christian Century*, quoted in *Dakota*, pp. 194-5.) Sometimes we cannot seem to let go long enough of all the things and all the demands that crowd our lives to give our attention to God.

Spiritual growth is a gift but it demands attentiveness to God. Without help, it is hard to read to the signs. Rev. Eugene Peterson tells a story about growing up in a valley in Montana near the northern Rockies. When he was five years old, he would watch across the meadow as his neighbor, Leonard Storm, plowed his fields. Mr. Storm was a huge Norwegian farmer who plowed with a John Deere tractor. Young Eugene wanted to ride on that tractor more than anything else. One day, Brother Storm saw Eugene at a distance, stopped the tractor and made big waving gestures at Eugene. To the little boy, the huge man looked angry and threatening. He even yelled at Eugene, but Eugene couldn’t make out what he

was saying. Thinking he was being fussed at for being somewhere he wasn't supposed to be, Eugene ran home. At church that Sunday, Brother Storm crouched down and asked Eugene why he didn't come and ride the tractor with him when he called. Eugene confessed that he thought the big man was angry and was chasing him away. (pp. 159-60)

Sometimes we have a hard time listening to God. Unless we listen really closely we are likely to not hear God at all.

“Sounded like thunder to me...”

“I don't know why my wife won't get off my back...”

“You're crazy if you think I'm going to forgive him...”

In the midst of all the things that are happening around us, we have a tendency to blame God for everything bad that happens or use God to prop up our petty ideas.

“What did Mama do to deserve this...”

“If God really cared, he would get me out of this mess...”

“God will see that those double-crossers get what they deserve...”

How can we listen for God if we do not give God our attention? How can we understand who God is if we do not know the character of God found in Scripture? How can we grasp what God is doing if we do not know what God has done in Jesus Christ?

Spiritual growth is a gift, but it commands a high price. Like anything worthwhile, spiritual growth takes time and attention. We cannot sit at the piano and instantly play a Mozart concerto; we cannot put on a Colt's uniform and throw a pass like Peyton Manning. Why do we think that spiritual growth just happens? When we give our time and attention to God, God changes us.

In II Corinthians 3:18, Paul writes, “All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” Paul understands how God changes us. He knows that when we pay attention to these experiences of God's presence, we grow in faith. When we keep our eyes on the glory of God revealed in Jesus, God changes us. You and I are called to follow Jesus, to see him with our faces unveiled. There is no place more important to be than being where we can hear the Holy Spirit speak. There is nothing more important to do than giving God our time and attention.