

**LOOKING LIKE YOUR PHOTO ID**  
**Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; Luke 9:28-36**  
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**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
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When you have your picture taken, are you nervous about the results? They say "the camera doesn't lie," but you and I know better, don't we? A woman said to the photographer, "I hope your camera will do me justice." He said, "Ma'am, you don't need justice, you need mercy."

The title of this sermon comes from an old aphorism, "If you look like your passport picture, you need the trip." When I renewed my North Carolina driver's license, I got one of those new ones with my picture on it. So I thought in fairness, in writing this sermon, I ought to take it out and look at it, which produced another saying, "If you look like the picture on your driver's license, you shouldn't be driving."

Here's more serious wisdom. The life experiences you've been through will shape your appearance. I know people who have been through some ordeal, some period of sorrow, a time of testing, a period of stress, and you can tell just by looking at them. Their faces are drawn, their shoulders stooped. They seem to be distracted.

Then, I can see them sometime later, and I'm amazed at what has happened to them. I say to them, "You look like a different person." They say, "Well I am. A wonderful thing has happened to me. I'm a different person now." The experiences you've been through will shape your appearance.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the author of *The Little Prince*, also wrote stories about flying. He himself was one of the pioneer professional pilots. He flew the mail in North Africa before the days of the first World War. He wrote a marvelous book about flight, entitled, *Wind, Sand and Stars*. In it he drew an analogy between flying and the human spirit. He said, that's what we're born for. Our spirits should fly, be free, soar, take risks, and achieve great heights. That's what we're born for.

He said he experienced that kind of spiritual exhilaration as he flew, especially at night, over the deserts of Africa. When he came back to France, he took a train up to Paris, and sat opposite an old peasant couple in one of the compartments. He said he was shocked at what he saw. Their appearance: old, defeated and tired.

As he watched them, he imagined what they might have looked like when they were young. He pictured them falling in love, the man bringing gifts of love to his beloved, flowers and candy. She being coquettish.

They getting married and looking forward to a wonderful future together. He looks at them now, seated across from him, and muses how they're now like lumps of clay. He writes, "Into what terrible mold were they forced? What marked them like this? What machine has stamped them? What is it that corrupts this wonderful clay from which we are created?" He could see in their outward appearance that the inner spirit had died. It showed. Our experiences will shape our appearance.

Our lessons for this morning illustrate this in a wonderful way. We begin with the Old Testament lesson in Exodus. It's that scene where Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of stone, The Ten Commandments, one in each arm. He comes down to the people at the foot of the mountain. But the people don't notice the tablets. All they can see is Moses' face. They stare at his face. They know something has happened to Moses up there on the mountain. They can see it in his face. He's a different man now.

The text contains this wonderful line. It says, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." Experiences that you have will shape your appearance. The people knew that Moses had been with God. They could see it on his face.

The text goes on to say that Moses had to wear a veil over his face because the people, looking at the glory of God shining in the face of Moses, were afraid, because you weren't supposed to look upon God. The "glory" is all you can see of God. "Glory" is biblical shorthand for, "the presence of God." God is light, like the brightness of the sun. When you look at the sun, all you can see is light. You can't see the sun itself. You can't even look at the light for very long. That's the way they believed God was. When you see "glory," you're seeing the presence of God.

Now look to the Epistle lesson for this morning, from II Corinthians. Paul takes this Old Testament story about the veil of Moses, and he uses it as an analogy to talk about the Christian life. He points out, at first Moses came down from the mountain with two tablets of stone. The Law was written on stone, but we Christians, Paul says, have the Law "written on our hearts." Secondly, he points out, Moses had a veil over his face. But we don't have veils. He writes: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another."

He's saying, just as the Hebrews looking at Moses' face knew that he'd been talking to God, so people ought to see in you and I the evidence that we've been with Jesus. You and I should be changing into his

likeness, from one degree of glory to another. In the same passage he says that you are a "letter of recommendation" from God. People looking at you ought to be able to see that you've been with Jesus, and see some quality in your life that makes you attractive and makes them want to find out, what is it about you? What has happened to you? Why are you different?

Friedrich Nietzsche, a critic of Christianity, said, "Christians ought to look more redeemed." Nietzsche was a preacher's son. He grew up in the Church. He saw what goes on in a church as only a preacher's kid can see it. Was his devaluation of Christianity based on his empirical observation that Christians don't seem to be able to assimilate what the Gospel is all about? They don't **look** redeemed - they don't **act** redeemed. Your experiences are reflected in your appearance.

Now go to the Gospel lesson for this morning. It's the event called the Transfiguration. This is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the season of Lent. This is the end of the season of Epiphany, which began the first Sunday in January. In this season we celebrated the way that God's glory has been manifested in the life of Jesus. The season began with his baptism in the River Jordan. In that text it says, "The heavens were opened and a voice said, 'This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.'" The season ends today, where once again the heavens open and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son. My Chosen." Then it adds this line, "Listen to him!"

That, of course, is addressed to the disciples. There are three of them on the mountain with Jesus: Peter, James and John - the inner circle, so to speak. They've accompanied Jesus up the mountain where Jesus prays. While he's praying, his face is transfigured. There's a bright light. The appearance of his face has changed. That can only mean one thing. He was talking to God, just like Moses on Sinai has his face changed by talking to God. That's what happens when you get close to God. Your appearance changes.

Peter, James and John are there. They see this. In fact, it's for their benefit that the transfiguration happens. They see more. They see Moses standing on one side of Jesus, and on the other side, Elijah. And, just as quickly as they saw the vision, it disappears. And there's Jesus, praying, alone. That's what they see.

To understand it, you probably had to have been there. So I'm going to take you there. Actually I'm going to take you to an event a week before this happened - to a meeting with the disciples and Jesus, at a place called Caesarea Philippi. This is one of the most important meetings of the disciples with Jesus. It's next in

importance to the Last Supper, because here, a week before the Transfiguration, Jesus announces to them that they're going to Jerusalem, and there he will be killed. Peter immediately protests, "No, I won't let it happen! How can you do such a thing! Everything's going so well here in Galilee. Everything that you accomplished is going to be lost!" Jesus interrupts him, shouting at him, actually, "Get behind me, Satan!"

And that's the way that meeting ended. Can you imagine what the next seven days must have been like. It must have been terrible. Their relationships, cool and distant. They're a religious community, so they ate together. You can imagine how it was. They probably weren't even talking to one another at the meals. Then the eighth day, Jesus tells Peter, James and John, "Come with me while I pray." There the epiphany occurs. It was for the disciples.

I suggest that the form it took was determined by the event that happened eight days before. I think it happened this way. Peter must have been dreaming. Luke says he was half-asleep. But we know that when Jesus went off to pray, he took Peter with him to stand watch. Remember the famous scene in the Garden of Gethsemane - three times he asked Peter to stand watch. Peter says, "I will." Three times Jesus comes back and Peter is asleep. Peter couldn't stay up late at night. He's always falling asleep while Jesus is praying. He's asleep now.

Luke says he was half-awake when this happened. Matthew says that it was a vision. Maybe it's what the psychologists call a "liminal state." I don't know, and it really doesn't matter how it happened. What matters is that he experienced something up there that changed his life. He saw Moses and Elijah, just for a moment, standing on either side of Jesus. Moses is the giver of the Law. Elijah is the first prophet. So the two together constitute "The Law and the Prophets," which is all the authority a Jew needs. There they are, their arms around Jesus. Then a voice comes from a cloud, "This is my Son. My Chosen. Listen to him!"

So if Peter had any doubts about Jesus, whether he was Messiah or not, or if he had any questions about whether or not he should have given his life to Jesus, they were dispelled in that moment. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, that's all it was, an epiphany, and the shattered pieces of Peter's life came back together, and he found new direction, new purpose and new power for his life.

Now what I want to happen next in the text is for the three disciples to go down the mountain with Jesus with their faces aglow, looking like they've been skiing up there all day. But instead, as they come down, Jesus

says, "Don't tell anybody about this." Then they head for Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it must have been one of those transforming experiences. The kind that can change your appearance, and cause people to ask, "What's happened to you? You're different."

This story has all the marks of a genuine "Peter" story. Later on in his life Peter will go around to the churches and tell the story of his life, what it was like to be with Jesus. All the apostles did that. That's how we got the stories that are in the New Testament. The apostles told what it was like to be with Jesus, and the Church wrote the stories down and eventually they became the gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell this story, and each gospel puts it in the same place. That kind of agreement in detail about chronologies is rare. They all say that it happened just before they left for Jerusalem, testifying to the importance of this story in the life of Peter, and in the life of the Church.

Like all great stories, the Transfiguration has multiple layers of meaning. But I want to suggest that one reason that it was so important for the Church, was because they expected to have similar experiences. They got discouraged. They went astray. They made mistakes. They did things they weren't proud of. They said things that they wished they could take back. They felt terrible about it, and they hoped they could have some experience like Peter's experience. Peter, they said, is like us. We, too, can have some epiphany, something that will reorder our lives and bring us back together, and give us purpose and meaning and power in our lives. They said, if that can happen to Peter, then it can happen to us. And we can say, if it happened to the early Church, then it can happen to us.

I don't know what form it would take in your life. Probably you won't see anything as spectacular as what Peter saw on the mountain, the Transfiguration. But on the other hand, you never know.

But don't count on it. That's the way we've been trained, not to count on this kind of thing. That's the difference between us and the first century Church. We don't expect to see these things. We've been trained that seeing is a physiological phenomenon only, a function of light impacting sensory organs. We're also suspicious of anybody who claims to have seen something that's not easily visible to everyone else. We say, "That person's been seeing things." By which we mean, they're seeing things that aren't real. It's illusion - it's fantasy. That's our way of seeing.

But the Bible has a different understanding of sight. In the Bible there isn't only "seeing," there's also

"vision." "Vision" in the Bible means, seeing what **God** gives us the gift to see. The vision is the **gift**. We look **through** the eye, not **with** it. The eye won't see what it doesn't know what to look for. Every child who's played that picture puzzle game, looking for the animals and objects in the tree, knows that. You have to know what to look for, or you won't see it. The eye is just an instrument. The vision is the gift from God.

That's the source of this biblical wisdom. You won't see what's really there if your soul is barren. You won't see what's really there if your mind is closed. You won't see what's really there if your heart is hardened. One doesn't see **with** the eye, one sees **through** the eye. The eye is just an instrument. The vision is the gift from God. So don't rule out seeing things.

Annie Dillard in her beautiful book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, pictures herself, not as Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, but as Moses on Mt. Sinai. She remembers the scene where Moses says to God, "Show me your glory, I pray." And God says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Annie Dillard said that, like Moses, she spends her days in the mountains, hidden in the cleft of a rock, looking for glory. She said, "You wait, and you wait, patiently. Then occasionally, in an instant, the mountains part, or the tree with the lights appears, or the mockingbird falls, and in those fleeting shreds I see the back parts. The back parts are a gift, and an abundance."

Anyone whose life has been changed by a vision will tell you, it's just a glimpse, just the fraction of a second. That's all that anyone's allowed. But it's "a gift, and an abundance."

TO GOD BE THE GLORY! AMEN.