

The First Reading of Scripture is Psalm 19:7-10

7 The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;
8 the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
9 the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
10 ***More to be desired*** are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

The Second Readings are from Exodus 40:34-38 and Exodus 34:29-35

^{40:34} Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.
³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁶ Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷ but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸ ***For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.***

^{34:29} Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, **Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.** ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The Message is entitled *Wilderness Glory*

What causes you to notice the glory of the Lord? Last Sunday afternoon I took a walk through the Crafton Hills and God's glory was in full bloom, from the roadside hills covered with brilliant yellow and orange wildflowers to the tall green grass rolling like waves in a gentle

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breeze. The sky was crystal blue with scattered puffy white clouds. The expansive hills were greener than green as my faithful four legged companion and I walked along the trail. As Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, “If we only listen [or look] for God in the church, we will miss half the message.” If we only listen or look or expect God in this sanctuary and as we gather as a faith community, we will miss more than half and I suggest even more of the glory of God visible around us day in and day out. God’s glory is among us; yet can we perceive it?

Now just like the Israelites, it might be apparent to you this morning that we are not taking a straight path through the wilderness that we are exploring known as the book of Exodus this Lent. Our wilderness journey through Exodus has moved us from chapter three to chapter sixteen in the first two weeks and today we leaped to portions of the final chapter of and then retraced our steps back to chapter 34. The wilderness is never a straight path; just ask anyone who has found themselves in one. It is so easy to lose one’s orientation given the vast and unfamiliar landscape that lacks known signposts. In the wilderness, it can feel as if you are walking in circles, never arriving anywhere. That is why it is so important to keep your eyes, your ears, and your heart attentive to the glory of God in the midst of the journey. God is with us; yet will we perceive God’s glory in our midst?

At our regional gathering (called the Presbytery) yesterday, we had table discussions that began with sharing our answer to this statement: “I noticed God’s beauty this morning by...” One could easily substitute the word glory for beauty, saying how did you notice God’s glory this morning? Yesterday, I shared at table that I had experienced God’s glory in a phone call, for a simple call seeking a recipe led to a litany of gratitude for both the individual I had called and for me. As the call concluded, my heart was so overfull that tears of joy had spilled from my eyes. God’s glory was present for me in our deep and abiding relationship that was initially forged over 16 years ago. This morning something completely different made God’s glory visible to me; it was the silence of this sanctuary space as I entered to pray for my ministry among you and for everyone who would enter this space today.

So, turn to your neighbor and share your thoughts... How did you notice God’s glory this morning, or maybe why you didn’t?

“A cloud descended on the tent of meetings in the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” The glory of the Lord fills this very tabernacle too; yet are we attentive to this reality? God’s glory is present in us, in the miracle and marvel of each of our lives, for we are God’s beloved children. The miracle and marvel of this faith community bears witness to God’s glory as we collectively share the good news we have experienced with others through our words and deeds. God’s glory surrounds us in our community every time a person sees the beauty of another person, one of God’s creatures or creation itself. When kindness and compassion take center stage, God’s glory is visible among us.

In the wilderness journey recorded in Exodus, God’s glory was a cloud by day and a fire infused cloud by night. What in your daily walk makes God’s glory visible for you? Listen to Thomas Merton’s famous revelation of God’s glory in downtown Louisville, which he describes in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton writes, “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness...”

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This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this... that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

"When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him." Merton had just the opposite experience. The crowd didn't notice his face shining. Merton noticed that all others were walking around shining like the sun. Aaron and all the people were afraid of Moses' radiance, while the radiance of others awakened Merton from a dream of separateness, of isolation. Fear wasn't Merton's emotion; it was love, overwhelming love. Doesn't scripture say to us that perfect love casts out all fear?

Could it be that Moses experienced his belovedness in the presence of God's glory, for as he came down from Mount Sinai his countenance was changed. I dare say he was changed from the inside out, for that is what makes us shine like the sun. What if we are supposed to shine like the sun, just like Moses? What if we are to notice that each of us, that is, everyone one of us on the planet is to shine like the sun as Merton experienced? Would the world be a different place if we saw each other this way? Would our separateness and isolation be no more? Could we be one human family, God's beloved family of humanity?

Yet, fear takes root in us as boundaries and divisions are defined. Fears even begin to overwhelm us and so we hide or even deny the sun like radiance innate in each other, as God's beloved children. We put on veils to protect ourselves from each other and even from God. Fear, not love soon guides our daily ways.

So, listen again to the psalmist's description of the way of radiance offered by God through Eugene Peterson's translation:

"The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together."

Notice that God's ways don't incite fear. Notice that God's ways realized in and through us will end our separateness and isolation, for God offers us wholeness, pulling our lives together not apart. God's ways help us see the glory of God in each other; help us see the sun shining forth as Merton experienced.

Now the psalmist continues, saying:

"The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road. The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy. The directions of God are plain and easy on the eyes.

God's reputation is twenty-four-carat gold, with a lifetime guarantee. The decisions of God are accurate down to the nth degree. God's Word is better than a diamond, better than a diamond set between emeralds. You'll like it better than strawberries in spring, better than red, ripe strawberries."

Whether you are drawn to the metaphor of deliciously sweet red strawberries, a brilliant diamond or the traditional sweet drippings of a honeycomb, God's ways for our lives truly are meant to bring us joy, causing us to shine like the sun, radiating God's glory with our very lives. God's ways enlighten our eyes, cause our hearts to rejoice and revives our souls.

So, what holds us back? Let me share some insights I heard on Thursday morning at Sunrise. If we look at the movement of Moses and the people in this wilderness passage, we might learn something about ourselves. Here is the movement: came down, afraid to come near, put on a veil, came near. Although these movements are about Moses and the people,

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the twist on Thursday that was shared is that these movements sound like our relationship with the mystery we call God.

God came down... or as we say in our reformed tradition God initiates the relationship with us, or as John's first letter states, "We love, because God first loved us." In the wilderness, God came down in a cloud by day and an infused cloud of fire by night. God came down as the heavens were torn open and Jesus was born among us. God comes down to us again and again, often in the glory that is all around us. Yet, instead of welcoming God's presence, we are afraid. Maybe God's radiance is just too much for us. Maybe we are afraid because God's brilliance exposes darkness in us. Maybe we are afraid because we don't feel worthy. Maybe we are afraid because to be loved so fully and completely may transform us from the inside out.

So, we put on veils and pretend we have it all together before God and especially each other. We say we are just fine when we are not, for we don't feel comfortable being vulnerable with our feelings, especially if we are sad or overwhelmed, angry or mad. So, we hold back and doubt that God or others for that matter could really love us as we are.

Mose came down shining like the sun and the people were afraid. Yet, Moses called out to them. Notice that at first only Aaron and the leaders came forth, probably all with their knees knocking. What happened to Moses? Why is his countenance so radiant? What will happen to us? Only after Aaron and leaders survived their encounter with Moses, did the people dare to come near.

What will it take for us to come near? Who are the ones who have survived coming near to God? Will you follow their lead? Will you trust that God wants what is best for you, even if, even if it transforms you?

I want to share with you about a ministry I heard about yesterday at our Presbytery Gathering. It is called Front Porch and it is adjacent to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. It is a coffee shop as well as a place where students can gather to study or just hang out. Joel Drenckpohl shared that Front Porch is ministry of radical hospitality and radical acceptance. Their ministry is based on biblical shalom. Front Porch believes that every person matters and every moment matters and they both demand our love and attention because the Divine is present within them. Front Porch sees what Merton saw in every student that walks through their doors, and that is plenty... for Front Porch sees more than 1,500 students engaging over cups of coffee, studying, making meals, and relaxing throughout each day. Front Porch staff loves the students without an agenda, believing that every person has something significant to contribute to the Front Porch community. Front Porch also knows that God is actively at work around them, so they look for creative ways of joining in God's work.

What would the ministries of the First Presbyterian Church of Redlands look like if we, like the Front Porch ministry, believed that every person we encountered mattered and every moment with them mattered, demanding our love and attention because the divine is present within them?

Front Porch staff models the way of Jesus, the way of God that the psalmist said enlightens the eyes, causes the heart to rejoice and revives the soul. We, too, can model this way with our very lives, because God's glory is among us now and always will be, regardless of the landscape we traverse. The divine presence has been within us since the beginning, for each of us is created in the image of God. We are all vessels of God's glory. We all were created to shine like the sun.

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The questions for us today from our texts are these for the week that lies ahead: Will we remove our veils and come near to God? Will we dare to be transformed by fully accepting our belovedness, the glory of God within us? And will we see the divine presence shining like the sun in others, realizing that every person and every moment is infused with the divine?

God is waiting for us, let's not be afraid to come near. Yes, God's glory is present even in the wilderness! Amen.