

February 14, 2010: A LITTLE TOO BRIGHT
Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36, Psalm 99
Springwater Presbyterian Church -- Eileen Parfrey

[wearing veil] Veils used to be a religious statement, but these days they are more political than God-directed. Set aside concerns about whether and how Muslim women should be allowed to wear veils in Western culture; let's try to examine their religious significance. For instance, what's up with Moses? In today's epistle reading (which I have chosen not to read), the apostle Paul claims Moses wore his veil to hide the fact that his face lost the shining when he wasn't actually talking to God. The axe Paul is grinding is about Christians having direct access to God and revealing God's glory. But I've got a few "I wonder" questions before I can be as definitive as Paul about Moses' veil.

For instance, I wonder if Moses' veil was disobedient—if he was supposed to *let* Israel see how disfiguring it is to be their mediator. I wonder if his veil was a dramatic gesture, sort of like the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, when the pitiful "wizard" says, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain." I wonder if Moses' veil was an accommodation for those who fear to see and know. I wonder if his veil reflected a respect for the sacred, an effort to carve out space for mystery and awe, if it was an act of reverence. I wonder if the veil was scrupulosity about disabilities and disfigurement. I wonder if the veil was a natural consequence or recognition of the potential for maiming when humans have contact with the holy. I wonder if being maimed by that contact changes one's relationships. For instance, what's it like for you that your pastor is wearing a black veil while she preaches? [walk out into the congregation and process this]

[remove the veil] Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a story about a minister who wore a black veil and its affect on his congregation. The minister puts on the veil the Sunday he preaches on secret sin, and never takes it off again, even on his deathbed. That veil causes his fiancée to leave him, his congregation to fear him, and he becomes isolated. But secret sin was not Moses' purpose in putting on the veil. Maybe his veil is the consequence of Israel's rejection of direct discourse with God at Mt Sinai. Just a few chapters previously God spoke directly with the people just delivered out of Egyptian slavery, and their collective liver was scared right out of them, with the upshot that Moses was put in charge of talking with God. Maybe the thing that happens to Moses' face—the horns or shining or whatever—is the symbol of a theological reality, his veil a badge of office. Maybe the veil is a way of shielding the people from the concrete, visible reality of their own lack of courage and the grace of someone willing to defend them, even knowing such dark truths about them. Immediately after refusing God's offer of direct conversation, Israel again loses courage after Moses spends too much time up on the mountain doing what they asked him to do—talk with God. Israel creates a more reliable, less changeable mediator, the Golden Calf, and God offers to blast them to another galaxy for their fickleness. Moses intervenes, but it's clear that God's people need a mediator. They get one, and it's one who is willing to

be maimed, one who *embodies* God's presence at personal cost.¹ Remind you of any other stories about God's love and a mediator willing to be maimed?

What are we gonna do with this story about Moses? I'm told that for many Muslim women who *voluntarily* put on the veil, it is a religious statement. The reality in some Muslim cultures is that the veil is a symbol of oppression—of men controlling women's access to the world and education, independence, economic autonomy, even whom they will marry. In some Muslim cultures, men require women to wear the veil as a means of protecting their honor—the men's honor—and controlling the safety and sexuality of “their” women. But I am also told that some Muslim women put on the veil to reflect their surrender to the glory of God. That sounds like Moses. We are changed by our contact with God. The question is, whether we are changed to go back and communicate God's love to others or whether we are going to keep it just for ourselves.

The story of Jesus on the mountaintop has always appealed to Christians more than the story of Moses getting horns or shining or whatever it is that happens to him. What happens to Jesus on the mountaintop is often interpreted as meaning encouragement to sustain us during our “non-mountaintop” times. I don't know about you, but there are a whole lot of us who never actually experience the mountaintop. For most of us, it's less a matter of covering up the fading of transcendent moments than it is a matter of not actually having them. Most of us need, not so much help making it between moments of transcendence, as we need encouragement for the living of extremely ordinary lives. It is for us that Richard Rohr's theory makes sense. Like the rest of the disciples left at the bottom of the mountain, like the whole nation of Israel awaiting Moses' return, these stories aren't about *what* they saw but are about *how* they saw it. Please understand, I am not suggesting we go out and accomplish mountaintop experiences. They are only gift, not for us to grab. The most important thing we can learn about God becoming human in the person of Jesus is that God meets us in the concrete, ordinary reality of everyday life. Jesus, as far as we know, only had one experience of transfiguration, and he was the Son of God, for pete's sake. He might have been able to bear it! What we can learn *from the rest of Jesus' life* is that God yearns to be present to us in the ordinary, sacred, holy *right now*. Bidden or not, God is always present to us. It is we who are not quite so present to God. It's a practice, this presence of God. This is not about accomplishing God's presence but practicing it. Showing up day after day, and only later realizing you've been changed. The Church calls this “contemplative practices.” It is the simple experience of making yourself available to God—by clearing the decks, setting aside the agendas and things-I-gotta-do-today. Just show up, receive the gift of God's love. And then, don't cover it up. Carry it with you in the rest of your life. Share it with everyone you meet.

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¹ Terrence Fretheim, Interpretation: Exodus, pp 311-312