

Divergence on the Lectionary - Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C

First Reading

Exodus 34:29–35

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 9:28–43a

Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. And behold, a man from the crowd cried out, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. And behold, a spirit seizes him, and he suddenly cries out. It convulses him so that he foams at the mouth, and shatters him, and will hardly leave him. And I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” While he was coming, the demon threw him to the ground and convulsed him. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astonished at the majesty of God.

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

When I first wrote a Divergence on these three lessons three years ago, I kind of mashed all three readings together to look at the overall emphasis on Last Pentecost for Years A, B, and C. But this year, I feel like I need to deal with the lessons individually. I’ve done some reading, especially on the Exodus passage, and I’d like to share it. I’ll do more reading on the other two, I promise, before I write on them as well.

As I began my studies for Last Pentecost, I encountered a really interesting study of the social/religious function of Moses’ glowing face and the veil he put on over it. This is a passage that has engendered a *lot* of speculation and study, I discovered. Even the

translation is awkward. Apparently the description of the shining of Moses' face is ambiguous enough that it could be read that his face "had horns." Over time, the translation that reads "has rays of light" became favored, but not before a number of Western painters depicted him with horns, going back to the 11th century.

Leaving that peculiarity aside, why is this pericope in Exodus at all? It stands alone, disconnected from what came before and what comes after. Why was it inserted here? And what do the images of his shining face and veiled face have to do with it? That's where this (relatively) recent study I found comes in.

I won't try to summarize it all. There is too much. As a result I may get some of it a bit wrong, but I'll do my best to highlight the things I think are important. (I'll also link the whole article, but I can't honestly recommend wading through it all. It was a slog.)

Here is what I came away with.

In ancient cultures masks played important cultic/religious roles. Moses' two faces, his shining one and his veiled one, both can be viewed as "masks" in that ancient sense. Though the shining of his skin doesn't sound like a mask, it *functions* like one, socially, religiously. There were two kinds of masks in ancient religion, masks of concretion and masks of concealment.

A mask of concretion is caused by something outside the person, changing them visibly, but it's origin is from the divine, not from within. It conveys authority in one way, because it is an indicator of the person's intimacy with the divine.

Masks of concealment, on the other hand, occur from within. They *conceal* the real identity of the person, setting them apart, granting a different sort of authority.

Moses's shining face functions as a "mask of concretion." The veil he puts over his face is a mask of concealment. By having Moses wear one mask or the other from the time of Mount Sinai on, the human Moses is pretty much removed from the story. He functions instead as a singular conduit for the will of God. (I had never noticed that Moses only puts the veil back on *after* he tells everyone what God has said, not as soon as he emerges. Did anyone else overlook that?)

So Moses emerges with his shining face and speaks to the people, still glowing, still bearing the authority of having seen God face to face. Then he covers his face and conceals his humanity from everyone. Rather than reducing Moses' authority, it preserves, enhances it, as he remains forever set apart as the sole revealer of God's will.

The article goes on to suggest that the two masks suggest pre- and post-priestly periods in Israel's history. That might be interesting, but that's where my eyes started to glaze over.

Should you be interested in reading the article in the whole, [here is the link](#).

Second Reading

Maybe, three years from now when this reading comes around again, I'll find some academic paper to better illuminate it. But for this year I want to focus on my own interpretation and application of this part of 2 Corinthians 3. This is because this text is central to my whole biblical hermeneutic. In other Divergences I have cited this text, so this may not be new to all my readers, but it's just too important not to reiterate here.

Paul is explaining why we read the Hebrew Scriptures, the "old covenant" differently than our Jewish siblings. He isn't casting aspersions, or blaming anyone, just explaining. Moses covered his face to conceal the shining that I discussed above. This is because, as Paul sees it, the "mask of concretion" he wore was representative of something that was passing away. So the people only saw the "mask of concealment" which kept them from seeing the true nature of what illuminated Moses' face.

To this day, when they read the Scriptures, they see only that "mask of concealment." They cannot see the new covenant whose foundation is the Cross. It is only in Christ that this veil, this mask is taken away, and we can truly see.

What this means for us is that Jesus, who lifts that veil, must be the lens through which we read the entire Bible, not just the New Testament. What does not conform to the cruciform shape of the Gospel in Jesus is not of the New Covenant, and not of God. Jesus is like a glare filter on your glasses, helping you to see clearly and filter out the artifact. (I'll get to the artifact in a moment.)

What's more, we, like Moses, are transformed when we look on the glory of the Lord revealed in Jesus, are changed, from glory to glory. Like Moses, we emerge from the encounter bearing the "mask of concretion" that comes from outside ourselves, but changes our appearance. We become bearers of that glory in the world, and others will see it.

Now, about that "artifact" that Jesus filters out. I believe that every word of the Bible is inspired, so I can't just throw the "artifact" away like something worthless. Instead I am compelled to seek out God's purpose for it. Here is what I believe about those texts that don't conform to the image of Jesus on the Cross:

Revelation in Scripture operates on two levels. In one level God reveals Himself to us. We see God's glory in all its beauty. On the other level, God reveals us to ourselves. When the image of God in the text (Hebrew Scriptures or New Testament) doesn't conform to Jesus, God is showing us how we have recreated God in our own image, how we have distorted God, either because of the inadequacy of the revelation we have experienced, or just because we want God to be different from how God really is. Sometimes it's self-serving, sometimes it's just ignorance. But when any text doesn't fit with Jesus, it's distorted, and God keeps that in Scripture to us as a form of instruction. It is inspired, even when it's not accurate.

I have written elsewhere about the other Scriptures that contribute to this way I have of reading them, but I won't go into them here. I want to stay focused on 2 Corinthians. And there's plenty here to chew on.

Gospel Text

In one Divergence recently I mentioned that something I'd discovered in my studies for that week had given me "goosebumps." This week, as I searched for a reason that Luke might have changed the "six days after" introduction to the Transfiguration to eight days, I found something that brought me to tears.

There is so much to write about with the Transfiguration, but I'm going to leave a lot of that discussion (at least for the time being) to the other occurrence in the Lectionary. After all, it is the only story that I know of that occurs twice in every year, on the Feast of the Transfiguration in August and the Last Sunday of the Epiphany. (No matter how long or short Epiphany is in a given year, this is the last set of readings.) So I have at least three other opportunities to write about other things in the Transfiguration accounts.

One thing that has long confounded me though is Luke's very intentional shift to the Transfiguration coming eight days after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. Both Matthew and Mark have six days. Why eight?

When I went looking for the significance of this number I first stumbled upon a lot of attempts by Christians to read their own version of supersessionism into the text. The eighth day as the day of Jesus' Resurrection, of the "new" creation that comes after the Seventh Day of Creation, that sort of thing. These accounts smelled of the kind of biblical interpretation that is superimposed on the text to suit one's theology, not a theology that grows out of the text itself. So I kept looking.

My go-to source for biblical scholarship let me down. I could find nothing on JSTOR.org that would help me understand Luke's choice, so I went to Academia.edu. There I found the paper that made my eyes leak. It's by a Jewish scholar at the University of Jerusalem named Israel Knohl. Dr. Knohl argues, rather convincingly, that the original Creation account in Genesis 1 was an eight day account, not seven, and that this was later edited by the "H" source (the Holiness editor, working during the Babylonian Captivity) to reflect a later emphasis on the number seven.

But he doesn't only explain that the Creation narrative first included eight days, he also explains why the number eight would have been so important to the P author. The full weight of that explanation exceeds what I can put into this Divergence, but I'll try to give a few hints. (And yes, I'll link the paper below. Well worth reading.)

In the Hebrew Scriptures one festival after another is eight days long, seven days with a climactic eighth day. In those same Scriptures, rites for purification are repeatedly seven days long with an eighth day of completion. Circumcision occurs on the eighth day. So periods of eight days pepper the Torah.

But why eight? Here he goes into the possibility, no, likelihood that the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton, the holy Name of God, was also eight. This revolves around the different ways that deities' names were numerically represented in the ancient world, and I won't go into that in too much detail, but one way of valuing the Name of God comes out to 17. A one and a seven. And there was a practice of adding the two numerals, one and seven, to arrive at a deity's numerical name. Eight.

Dr. Knohl goes on to show how this numerical value worked itself out in Temple Worship. On the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest enters to the Holy of Holies to make sacrifice for the sins of the people, he is silent. But he sprinkles blood twice on the altar. Eight sprinkles of the blood of a bull, eight of a goat's blood. Eight, eight. YHWH, YHWH. Now read Exodus 34:6-7.

YHWH passed before him and proclaimed, "YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

And all this happens on the mountain top.

The High Priest says nothing, but still, with two sets of eight sprinkles, calls on the Name of God twice, echoing God's declaration of mercy and forgiveness from Exodus.

Most commentaries on Luke will emphasize Luke's Gentile leanings. I have argued in other Divergences that the evangelist's primary desire is to root what is becoming a Gentile church in its Jewish origins. To bind together Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. This tiny shift from six to eight days, evoking the power and holiness of that number for Jewish believers, echoing God's proclamation of mercy from the mountain top at Sinai, this tiny shift argues more eloquently than anything I have ever found to date.

Oh, and [here's the link](#) to that paper at Academia.