

THE VEIL HAS BEEN REMOVED

Hear now a very literal translation of the Word of the Lord to His Church chosen for proclamation on this Feast of the Transfiguration:

And when he came out and worded to (the) sons of Israel that which he was commanded, and they saw, the sons of Israel, the face of Moses, thus radiated (the) skin of Moses' face, and he would put, Moses, the veil upon his face until he went in to word with Him."¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Today's readings, particularly the narrative of Jesus radiant transfiguration and Moses' reflection of God's glory, is one that describes what many not close to the Church in her public worship expect of God. The texts reveal God's power and might in light shining forth in glorious rays. These are descriptions of the kind of meetings with the divine that can really excite people.

Yet, for you who are close to the Word of God in His services, these readings describe the reactions to the Presence of God's glory that you know are experienced by anyone who comes into contact with the unveiled Word of God. The pure holiness of God, when it is faced by those who are even the least bit unholy – sinners like you and me – brings forth fear, flight, and a desire to return to that from which man was first formed – the dust of the earth. That is why God, for the benefit of humans who by conception are far from His glory, veils Himself under earthly means.

Believers are reminded to take comfort in the truth that the Word of God is the power of God. Hearing that Word is the true emphasis for this Transfiguration week.

¹ Exodus 34:34b-35.

God's proclaimed Word grants salvation to all who will not harden their hearts to that Word. It is the glory of God's Word that declares unholy humans holy in God's sight. It is the Word that declares the fading glory of the Law – the ministry that brings death. It is the Word that proclaims the enduring glory of the Gospel – the power of God that continues to conquer death in the death of Jesus.

It is the Word, veiled yet revealed under preaching and the administration of the Sacraments that empowers us, you, to approach and remain in the Real Presence of the living God. It is that Word which allows you who continue to repent of your sins and receive Christ's cross-won forgiveness. It is the Word that will cause you to reflect His glory forever in the Kingdom of glory that will never end.

This day, the Hebrew we translate, "word," in the short text read for our Old Covenant proclamation, shows up seven times. That means, while this day's readings speak quite a bit about God's glory being reflected by His messengers, and shining forth from His Son, this day's hearers are really being called to focus on the Word of God in all its forms. We heard of the word engraved in the stone tablets. We heard of the word commanded to Moses for God's people. We heard of the word of eyewitness testimony, and a declaration of the certainty of the prophetic word. Those words led us to hear, in the Voice from Heaven, the declaration that opened the Epiphany season at the Baptism of our Lord. It is the Word that closes the season with the divine call to, "Hear Him."

It is the word of Jesus that calls those made aware of their sins through the ministry of death into the ministry of life that comes through the proclamation of His

Way of the cross. In Him is forgiveness for sinners, life for the dead, and the divine declaration that pronounces one right with the eternal Father! It is the Word of God that, this week, moves its hearers from this: *thus radiated (the) skin of Moses' face, and Moses would put the veil upon his face until he went in to word with [God]... to this... "All of you must have been raised, and not all of you may continue to fear."*²

Words, when used correctly, are spoken to mean things. Therefore, how a translator renders a particular word from the biblical languages can influence how non-speakers may hear that word in their own language. Care should be taken in translation so that those who hear God's word may have some certainty that the words they are hearing convey the original meanings of the divine Word. That most scripture-believing interpreters strive to do. Consider this text with that in mind:

*And it was, in Moses coming down from Mount Sinai, and (the) two tablets of the covenant (were) in Moses hand in his coming down from the mount, and Moses did not know that thus radiated the skin of His face (from) his wording with [God].*³

That is a literal rendering, which does not ring very well into English-attuned ears. It has a Hebrew doubling – used for emphasis. It uses “wording,” rather than “speaking” to illuminate the original text’s use of “word.” To make it more palatable to our ears, it is further smoothed in the translation used in our bulletins, which still remains faithful to the text. Even so, the different translation was spoken to drive you to be more attentive to that which you hear in the Church, to ask the question, “now, why was that different?” Such is done to call you into the Word, that the Word might

² Exodus 34:35b and Matthew 17:7b.

³ Exodus 34:29.

continue to work in you, that the veil of sin might be lifted from you, that you might behold the Light of the Word of God's grace.

On rare occasions, even a skilled linguist can provide a translation that the Church universal might say, "missed it by this much!" The human propensity to error – effected in all of us on account of Adam's fall, and the sins we add to it – when recognized, that calls us all to be attentive to the Word of God which we may hear, read, or otherwise contact. That is one reason why, in our Adult Instruction and Refreshment classes, we spend the first four class hours establishing the authority of God's Word, and how multiple translations can be useful for developing a deeper understanding of that Word.

Such have not always been available to congregations and individuals. In a somewhat simpler era of the Church, long past the death of the last of the Twelve Apostles, there was one language predominantly used in the public services of the Lord's Church in the West. That was Latin. The Word read in the churches of the western empire was drawn from a translation done by a brilliant pastor-teacher of the Church, Jerome. His rendition of the Scriptures was publicly read, across the world, for over a millennium. That is how they attempted to remain faithful to hearing God's commands through the fading glory of the Law, and hearing God's encouragements through the enduring glory of the Gospel.

It was not until the occasion remembered this 500th anniversary year that Latin began to be officially, and widely, displaced. The Reformers emphasized getting

the biblical languages into those spoken by the various peoples in the lands in which the Reformers teaching held sway. Even so, the then ancient Latin translation of God's Word continued to be read in the Church of Rome for another 450 years. (It is still being advocated by those who want to hold onto the old Latin Mass as the only God-pleasing translation of God's Word).

It is Latin wording, used so long in the Church, which produced a translation of today's text concerning Moses' radiating face that can be perplexing. Now, you are not all called to be linguists, but to be right hearers of the word. So, if you heard this day's word concerning Moses' face whenever he left the Presence of God rendered like this, translated from the Latin translation, would you not be left a little befuddled?

*And when he came out and spoke to (the) sons of Israel that which he was commanded, and the sons of Israel saw the face of Moses, thus (the) skin of Moses' face was horned, and Moses would put the veil upon his face until he went in to speak with Him."*⁴

Jerome, a millennium and a half ago rendered one three-letter Hebrew word according to its root meaning, with the Latin *cornuta erat*. He took that which the text meant to convey, the radiance of Moses' face which faded from him each time he left the Real Presence of God, and went all the way back to its base meaning. That translation of Moses, then rendered, "horned" inspired one famous sculptor. A fellow by the name of Michelangelo, depicted a seated Moses holding the tablets of the Law under his arm, with two small horns growing out from the center part of his forehead, just behind the hairline. God bless that sculptor who was simply trying to stay true to the translation he

⁴ Exodus 34:34b-35.

heard so regularly in the Church of his era. Now that you are all drifting off with that image....

The Hebrew word that declares God's reflected glory in this text is also used to describe the horns of the Old Covenant Altar. It is also used to represent might or strength. That we could understand as God's divine power represented as being displayed in the face of His messenger, His word-bearer for His people. So a horned Moses could present the fading glory, might, and strength of the Law, the ministry of death.

Even so, the Word actually declares that Moses' face was radiating with God's glory. In today's text, it is best literally rendered, "send out rays," as in, *thus radiated (the) skin of Moses' face*. It may help to think that the brilliance of his face was coming forth the way *Kellogg's Raisin Bran* pictures the sun. Or in images children often use to depict the sun's light – a glowing center with spikes of light radiating out around the edges.

Such images might help us make sense of the people's reaction when they first beheld Moses after he came down from the mountain with the tablets of the Covenant. Moses did not know that his face was radiating God's glory – so he had received more than a simple sunburn from being in God's Presence. He would have surely felt that pain – as those of us who have had a "Blue Light" face treatment can testify. Our text gives the leaders' reaction upon seeing the divine reflected in Moses' face when it declares:

Then he saw, Aaron, and all (the) sons of Israel, Moses, and behold, it shone, (the) skin of his face, and they feared to come near to him.⁵

This was something new to them. They would have known what a bad sunburn looked like. They had these facts. Moses had been gone. They knew he had been in God's Presence. They saw his face was radiating light.

What happens to them is a foreshadowing of that which would be completed at the time of Jesus' glorious transfiguration before the men he chose to be the leaders of His New Covenant Church. They were overcome with fear. Moses calls out to them. Just as Jesus would later call out to the three on the Mount of Transfiguration, we have his words.

Whatever Moses said to Aaron and the leaders of Israel is not recorded in this text. Yet, we hear that the leaders of the people returned to him. We learned they came back to hear all that God had given Moses to word to them. What was that?

It was a ministry of death, one that was engraved on stones. It was so glorious that the people could not look on the face of the messenger – for its glory was even then fading. It is a glory reflected in words under the cross in this chancel. It is a glory that declares that you are, in yourself, unable to keep every engraved word perfectly all the days of your life. (Which Word, also, you are still free to try to uphold to put down your old Adam each day). Our text declares of those words,

And then, afterward, they came near, all the sons of Israel, and he commanded to them all things that YHWH had worded with him in Mount Sinai.⁶

⁵ Exodus 34:30.

⁶ Exodus 34:32.

Later, when the whole of the Law was declared, the tablets of the ministry of death were placed in the Ark of the Covenant. There they were veiled from even the sight of the High Priest. Now, they are lost in the mists of antiquity, their power still veiled for the benefit of those to whom they declare their sins.

That ministry has been replaced by God with the ministry of life. That Good News is so glorious it was also veiled – for a time, under human flesh – revealed once on a mountain top. Since then it has been veiled, though proclaimed with clear understanding through simple means – preaching, teaching, and the administration of the visible Word.

In this place, we display the eternal glory of the Word of grace over the fading glory of the Word that convicts, condemns, and kills. Above the glory of Word engraved in cold, lifeless stone, hangs an image of the glory of God that far surpasses it. There, the One to Whom all believers are called to hear, is represented the price He paid to open our ears, hearts and minds to grace. Such images depict the love of God for those who transgress His ministry that brings condemnation, and gives comfort to those who will to turn from their sins.

That is the kind of ministry that excites the faithful. It is the service of God in glory, hanging upon the cross, shedding His blood to forgive sinners, to forgive you!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Transfiguration Feast (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)
Psalm 2; Exodus 34:29-35; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
February 5, 2017 ~Pastor Michael A. Morehouse ~ **Soli Deo Gloria**