

022722 First Pres. Champaign, Windsor Savoy "The Masks We Wear (This has nothing to do with Covid masks.) Rev. Dr. Rachel Matthews, Transfiguration Sunday, Lectionary Year C, 2 Cor. 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-36

Today's sermon is about masks. But, it has nothing to do with Covid masks. My mother has a collection of masks from many different cultures. Many of them represent larger masks worn by dancers, masks which represent gods of wind, fire and rain and gods of anger, happiness and prosperity. Some are brightly colored, some resemble animals, others are grotesquely disfigured.

My mother's masks represent different cultures and their gods. But, we all wear masks. They are how we act when we feel happy or sad, angry or amorous. They protect our vulnerable spots. They are who we want to be: the teacher, the politician, the business person, the caregiver, Sherlock Holmes or Marie Antoinette.

Masks help us to be who we want to be...
but they can hide who we truly are as well.

Paul tells the Corinthians about how Moses hid his face behind a veil. He hid his true and fullest identity. Paul refers to when Moses had gone up Mt. Sinai to receive God's commandments. There he had talked with God for forty days and forty nights, the tradition tells us. After coming down the mountain, the skin on his face shown so brightly, it scared the Israelites.

Being with God had changed him. He reflected God's glory. In order to lessen the Israelites discomfort, Moses limited the time they had to view his face to whenever he spoke God's commands to them. The rest of the time, he wore the veil. ¹

Paul in a common rabbinic style mixes allegory and fact when he uses Moses' veil to make a point regarding the differences between God's old covenant and God's new covenant in Christ. He implies that reading/hearing God's Word without Christ is like looking at God with a veil on. Paul's argument is that Moses' veil covered the temporary nature of the old covenant. And, because there were still people of Paul's day who insisted on hearing the old covenant when they heard scripture, there was a veil still present separating the people from God's glory. That veil was in the people's minds. Paul wants them to just turn to look at Christ, then they would see God's glory without the veil. They would hear God's word in a new way and their lives would be transformed.

A few years back, I found a series of prints in The Atlantic about masks. There were Halloween masks, elaborate and wild masks from other cultures like my mother's masks. There were masks of terror and war, gas masks and execution hoods. There were celebration masks. And there was a 2013 picture of a protest crowd of Indian children in a rally for better education. In the middle of this crowd is an older girl taller than the rest

¹ Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. 10, pp. 307-314

wearing a head mask that had the face of Malala Yousufzai. If you remember, Malala was, a 15-year-old girl who was shot at close range in the head by a Taliban gunman in Pakistan. The young Indian girl had taken on a mask of Malala as a guide, an inspiration, a way to transform her own struggles. <http://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2013/04/the-masks-we-wear/100486/>

Unlike the masks of destruction and war, and even the grotesque masks of Halloween, when we wear our heroes masks like this young woman did when she donned the face of Malala, it can help us do good in the world. I remember leading youth retreats long ago helping the young people see how Christ could be our hero and more. What masks of heroes would you wear today? God knows we need them. And, so in Ephesians Paul encourages us to put on the whole armor of God.

In Christ we can look straight at the glory of God, says Paul. When we look at Christ, our countenance is changed even as Moses' was when he stood face to face with God in all God's glory. Our lives are being transformed into Christ's own image! The masks we wear need no longer hide who we truly are because that self is now redeemed. There is no shame, nothing to hide.

That glory which we behold when we look at Christ can at times be a mountain top experience. Such moments leave us speechless and changed. Such might have been the experience of Peter, James and John as they

witnessed Christ's transfiguration. The text says they were praying, then they saw the glory of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, at which time they were terrified, then they heard a voice say, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." After the voice, they saw Jesus standing alone and they remained silent about the whole affair until after Christ's resurrection. Oh that our prayers would lead us to such transformation!

Edwin Muir wrote a poem about the transfiguration from the perspectives of Peter, James and John.² From Muir's perspective in that moment when the very clothes of Jesus shone white and glistening in his altered state and he stood next to Moses and Elijah in all their glory, the disciples experienced what it was like to have their own masks removed. They saw themselves with all their faults, they saw humanity with all its faults, and they saw how everything had been, or was to be at Jerusalem, transformed, transfigured, and redeemed. It is what we wish for today even as the disciples saw what could be and would be. I read to you Edwin Muir's, a Scottish poet, very beautiful description of what might have happened to Peter, James and John. (Can be found online at <https://www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk/the-transfiguration-edwin-muir>)

Edwin Muir's poem has the disciples experiencing Christ's glory in a temporary way, a moment in time, a foreshadowing of a permanent glory. Did the disciples have a vision or did they experience reality? Whether or not it was vision or reality at the transfiguration, it became a reality with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

² "The Transfiguration" by Edwin Muir in Chapters into Verse, pp.114-116.

The good news is that *“Christ’s agony”* has *cured its hurt* and *“grown into a tree in a green spring corner of young Eden,”* and Judas is in light *“beside his mother’s knee”* and *“the betrayal is undone and will never more be done.”* (Muir). As we stand before the Christ our masks do not have to burden us. They can fall from our eyes and be replaced with a veil that is like glass before God. And the hope is that as we follow Christ day by day our masks will be transformed in such a way that when people look at us, they see our true selves; that is, they see a reflection of God’s glory, a child of God, redeemed.

