

Shepherd of the Mountains

Lutheran Church (LC-MS)

2035 S. Penrod Lane, Pinetop, AZ 85935

Ph/fax: (928) 367-1183 E-mail: shepherdpt@frontiernet.net

www.shepherdofthemountains.com

Pastor: R. Wayne Morton

Officiating: The Elders

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

The Transfiguration of our Lord

February 11, 2018

“Unmasked”

Text: Mark 9:2, 4, 7)

“*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, . . . 4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. . . . And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’*”

“*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:2).

We don’t know why Pastor doesn’t use more *musical* references! A lot of pastors *do*, of course. A lot of pastors never preach a sermon *without* including a verses from at least *one* hymn! And our former Bishop - as some of you know, because you’ve *heard* him - likes not just to *read* those words in his sermons but actually to *sing* them.

Okay, so right there could be the reason Pastor doesn’t use more *musical* references - his *singing*. [Your] Life is hard enough, without having to be subjected to *that*! But he *could* still *use* the lyrics, even if he didn’t *sing* them to you.

After all, most of us *love* music. And not just *church* music; we like all *kinds* of music. So, okay, this morning, let’s turn over a new leaf; let’s resolve to use more *musical* references.

/ (pause) “You don’t tug on Superman’s cape. You don’t spit into the wind. You don’t pull the mask off that old Lone Ranger. And you don’t mess around with Jim.”

That was Jim *Croce*, wasn’t it? That was the Seventies. That was a warning to everyone within earshot not to mess around with that “pool-shooting- son-of-a-gun” - that [pool] shark - that pool hustler - “Big” Jim Walker.

The decade *before*, in the Sixties, that warning went out about a *set* of “Caped Crusaders” - Batman and Robin (the Boy Wonder). Pull the mask off? Oh, we *television* viewers always knew the true identities of Batman and Robin - millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne and his youthful ward, Dick Grayson - but the good citizens of Gotham City never did, did they? And not for not trying, for the villains - the Joker, the Penguin, Riddler, Catwoman, and all the rest - all continually tried to unmask the Dynamic Duo - only to no avail. And for good reason - that good might continue to triumph over evil, at least there in Gotham!

Back in the Thirties - and I don’t mean the 1930’s, I mean the *first* thirties, the first *century*, *A.D.* 30 and following - it wasn’t the Joker or Catwoman or Batman and Robin or Superman or the Lone Ranger wearing the mask; it was God himself. It was Jesus of Nazareth, “masking”- for the most part, at least; on most days; as our current class of confirmands, the “Deadly Duo,” will tell you how in His “humiliation” he did *not always* or *fully* use His divine powers - that He was, in fact, God.

Most days. But today isn’t *most* days. Today is *Transfiguration* Day. Today is a when our Lord Jesus gets *unmasked*. Today is a day when He does it to Himself. Today

is a day when the One we saw as the Boy Wonder in the Temple not four weeks ago pulls back His *own* mask - in order to reveal His true identity - His *divinity* - to Peter and James and John, and to all of us.

It's not the *first* time, of course, that there's talk of a "mask" in the Bible. A mask. A *veil*.

Well, a *veil* is a mask, right? Just ask any Muslim woman! A veil (*burqa*) is there to mask; it's there to hide. It's there so as not to *reveal*.

How interesting, then, that we find ourselves talking about a veil *this* morning, when we're deep in the *season of revealing*, where we're deep in the season of *Epiphany*. To tell the truth, when we're at the very *height* of Epiphany - when we're on the very last *Sunday* of Epiphany. And when we're still, frankly, trying to answer the big question of the *last* season - the big question of *Christmas*: "Who is this Jesus who was born in Bethlehem's manger?"

Who indeed!

And the truth is that the transfiguration gives us the most climactic answer - the most climatic answer *to date* I should say. Until *Lent*, that is. But *that's* a subject we'll be dancing around in a couple of minutes.

Pastor's son-in-law Ben - Jax's father - has a little dance he does. Oh, it's hardly, say, the Dance of the Seven Veils.

You know *that* one, don't you? It's the name traditionally given to the dance that Salome the Sensuous, the apple-doesn't-fall-far-from-the-tree daughter of Herodias the Hussy, did for Herod the tetrarch at his infamous birthday party. The one that cost John the Baptist his head. The one that - at the instigation of her dear old Mommy had Salome t (literally) served up John's head on a platter.

Ben's is nothing *like* that. It's quiet. It's private. Oh, it's intimate, all right - but only in the sense of that profound bond that exists between fathers and sons. Yes, Ben does

his little dance with his little Jackson. It's a father and son dance.

The steps aren't really "hard and fast" yet; the whole thing is a little "fluid." And so, frankly, is the *song, too* - also original - that goes *with* it. But there is *one* thing that *doesn't* change about it: forget about a veil; it's *unmasked!* It's *joy* unmasked - Ben's joy over his new little *bundle of joy*. It's *pride* unmasked - his pride at now having that little guy as a part of his family. It's *fatherhood* unmasked - as for just a moment or two, he pulls back the mask and makes marvelously obvious and explicit what most of the rest of the time is subtle and implicit: how profoundly this young man feels about being that little boy's daddy! And how that overwhelming feeling that now fills his heart is never going to go away!

Moses used to veil *his* face for the *opposite* reason! Paul tells us so in our Epistle lesson.

Do you remember the story? Moses was "doing a little dance" - he was spending face time, as we say - with *God!* Up on the mountain. Up on Mt. Sinai.

It all started up when the Lord gave him the old covenant. It all began when the Lord had His great prophet bring along a couple of stone tablets so he could write down all the words of the covenant, what we know as "the Ten Commandments" (Ex. 34:28b).

"*The Lord said to Moses, 'Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'* So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights. *He neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments*" (Ex. 34:27-28).

When Moses came down from that "high," His face was radiant! He was - in the word-of-the-day today - "*transfigured*"! He was shining - with the reflected glory of God!

The first time it happened, he didn't even notice. But

the people sure did:

“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 they were afraid to come near him” (Ex. 34:29-30).

So Moses took to wearing . . . a mask, a veil.

“And when Moses had finished speaking with [all the people of Israel] 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” (vs. 32-33).

And in our Epistle lesson this morning, St. Paul tells us why.

It isn't what you might at first think. It isn't just what God Himself had always warned His people:

“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20).

No, there was more than just “don't be staring into that divine glory” - even [into] that reflected glory.

Oh, sure, it has something to do with glory - the divine glory that was reflected in that divine covenant, those Ten Commandments. But we have to be sure we hear Paul carefully. For the apostle seems very clear that it's not the glory *per se*; it's that the glory - unlike that in which Pastor's son-in-law, with the birth of “the son,” now lives - *is passing away*! “Moses . . . would put a veil over his face,” Paul made clear to the Corinthians, “so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end” (2 Cor. 3:13).

Moses' veil was real, and it served a real purpose; but in a deeper sense, Paul tells us, it was really more a *symbol*. Moses' wearing a veil was a symbolic way of showing that the ministry of the *Old Covenant*, the ministry of the *Law*, as

glorious as it was (because it reflected the glory of the Law-giver, God Himself), was going to go away. I want to say, was *already* fading away - from the very first moment it was given! That it always was “temporary at best.” That it was always ever going to be only until that “something better” came along - that *New Covenant* that God would make - the one whose glory would *never* fade away. That, as we Lutherans like to make the distinction, the ministry of the *Law* was going to give way to the ministry of the *Gospel*, what St. Paul calls the ministry - the “covenant” - “of the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Said another way, that the covenant of *death* would give way to the covenant of *life*; for even at its best, the Law can't save us. It can only “kill us”; it can show us our sin.

The Law can only teach us that if we're ever going to be saved, we're going to need something *more*! The Law was only ever intended to be, Paul wrote to those new Christians at Galatia, our teacher, our tutor, until the day that that “something more” - that “*Someone* more” - would come along:

“So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (Gal 3:24).

By *faith*. Faith in *Christ*. The Christ of *Christmas*. The Christ of *Epiphany*. The Christ of *the Transfiguration*. The Christ of *Calvary*. The Christ of *God*!

The Transfiguration. Christ *unmasked*!

Most of you know the story. Peter and James and John - Jesus' “inner circle” of disciples. Jesus' going all “*radiant*” on them, with even his clothes more white than even Tide Plus Bleach could bleach them. Moses and Elijah - representing the Law, and the Prophets. The cloud - the mask, the veil - that obscures the disciples' view. The unmistakable voice *from* the cloud, the voice of God: “*This is my beloved Son; listen to him.*”

Aaah! Did you catch that little father-and-son “dance”?

That's right - Father and Son. The Father from heaven. The Son from there, as well. The *firstborn* Son - born in Bethlehem's manger, born for good reason, born that good might continue to triumph over evil, not just in Gotham, but across the whole wide world!

So did you catch it? It was *unmasked!* It was *joy* unmasked - the Father in Heaven's joy over His - if you will - little, once-wrapped-in-swaddling-clothes-but-now-all-grown-up-and-carrying-out-His-mission-to-save-the-world *bundle* of joy. It was *pride* unmasked - His pride at having that "little guy" in his happy family. It was *fatherhood* unmasked - as for just a moment or two, the Lord above pulled back the mask and made marvelously obvious and explicit what most of the rest of the time is subtle and implicit: how profoundly He feels about being that - again, if you will - "Little Boy's" Daddy! And how that over-whelming feeling that now fills his heart is here to stay, is never, ever going to go away!

Now I would never ever want to cut in on *that* "dance," but right after *that* is that "now you see them, now you don't" with Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets:

"And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only."

That's the "fading" - the "going away" - isn't it? All in one fell swoop!

Good bye, *Old* Covenant.

Hello, *New!*

Goodbye to the Law and the Prophets. Goodbye to *death*.

Hello to the Gospel - the Good News of everlasting life in Jesus, whose life and death and resurrection from the dead won forgiveness and salvation for all.

Jesus' . . . death.

I *told* you we'd get to Lent, didn't I? How could we *not*? Transfiguration is the great "bridge" between Epiphany

and Lent (which begins three days from now on Ash Wednesday)!

"Who is this Jesus who was born at Christmas in Bethlehem's manger?"

I said the transfiguration gives us the most climactic answer - until *Lent!* Until Calvary. Until Jesus' crucifixion, where we see the Lord of heaven and earth *unmasked!*

"Is *that* what was going on there at Calvary?"

It sure was. When Jesus was lifted up *on the cross*, the veil was being lifted. The Old Covenant was giving way to the New; it was being fulfilled, completed, "*It is finished.*"

When Jesus was lifted *in death*, that veil was torn in two from top to bottom (Mk. 15:38). And nobody saw it any better than the Roman centurion, who couldn't help declaring to no one in particular and anyone who would hear: "*Surely this man was the Son of God*" (Mt. 27:54).

Surely this man *is* - "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). So let's not just be "doin' the dance," as people today sometimes say. Just going through the motions, I mean. For you don't tug on Superman's cape, . . . you don't pull the mask off that ol' Lone Ranger, . . . and you don't mess around with . . . *Him!*

With Him - with God's One and Only Son, the Savior of the world. He's *not* just some moral *example*. You *can't* reduce Him to just some wonderful *teacher*. You have to acknowledge the evidence for Him as *God*. As C. S. Lewis famously has said, "You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to" (*Mere Christianity*).

He intended that we would believe in Him, live for Him, follow Him, be His disciples, be "fishers of men" - unmasked, wholeheartedly, with all the boldness Paul wrote about: *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. . . . For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. . . .* (2 Cor. 3).

May God grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.