

## **When the Veil is Lifted**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

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*Mark 9:2-9, II Corinthians 4:1-6*

Our first reading comes from the Gospel of Mark's account of the transfiguration of Jesus. Each of the first three gospels tells this story. In each, the account comes right after Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah - and Jesus in turn explains that as the Messiah he must undergo great suffering and rejection, and that not only Jesus but any who would be his followers should take up their cross and follow him in the way of self-surrendering love. For what will it profit someone to gain the whole world, and lose his or her life? It is with those words still hanging in the air that Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain apart to witness his transfiguration (the Greek word is metamorphosis, which means a change in form). In Mark's brief version of this story, listen especially for the way Jesus tells the disciples who have joined him to keep it a secret until after he has risen from the dead. *Read Mark here.*

Our second reading comes from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. Eugene Peterson, the Presbyterian pastor who wrote The Message, his rendering of the New Testament in modern language, sets the context for our passage in his introduction to II Corinthians. As Peterson describes the situation in Corinth, it makes me glad to be serving here at Immanuel rather than at the First Church of Corinth. Here is what he says.

“The provocation for Paul's second letter to the Christians at Corinth was an attack on his leadership. In his first letter, though he wrote most kindly and sympathetically, he didn't mince words. He wrote with the confident authority of a pastor who understands the ways God's salvation works and the kind of community that comes into being as a result. At least some of what he had to say was hard to hear and hard to take. So they bucked his authority - accused him of inconsistencies, impugned his motives, questioned his credentials. They didn't argue with what he had written, they simply denied his right to tell them what to do.”<sup>1</sup>

In the passage I am about to read, Paul is responding to the charge that he has veiled or somehow obscured the good news of the gospel. Listen for how he handles that challenge. *Read II Corinthians here.*

Sometimes it just feels like you are talking to a brick wall. Have you ever had that happen to you? You are trying to communicate something which is very important to you, something you see very clearly, and the person or people to whom you are talking just cannot seem to understand what you are saying. You can tell by the blank look in their eyes that they aren't getting it. I think my high school math teachers had that experience on more than one occasion. It happens sometimes when you are trying to explain to a young person in Anacostia, or McLean, or anywhere for that matter, that their decisions, the behaviors in which they are engaging are going to be destructive rather than constructive. And you

might as well be speaking in Japanese or Swahili for all the good it seems to be doing. They just can't hear you.

You have a friend who is drinking too much, a loved one who is heading down some other road to heartbreak, and you finally muster up the courage to say something to them, but they find some way out, some way to keep from embracing what you are trying to tell them, and you realize again the truth of the adage, "Denial is not just a river in Egypt." Who me? I don't have a problem. I don't need any help.

It can be frustrating indeed to try to communicate something and have it fall on deaf ears. Spouses, parents, children, friends, teachers, preachers, we all know what that's like. The Apostle Paul certainly did in writing to the Christians at Corinth. He had helped found the church, so he felt no small degree of investment in how their life together was proceeding. When Paul heard they were squabbling, that factions had developed, that some people thought they were better or somehow more spiritual than others, he responded with a first letter to them that encouraged them to regard love as the greatest gift. Faith, hope, and love abide these three, but the greatest of these is love. The way Paul responded to the Corinthians makes me think of a pastor friend of mine who has a plaque on his wall. "Keep the main thing the main thing," the plaque says.

For the Apostle Paul, the main thing was the gospel of God's love, a love expressed in Jesus, a love that tore down barriers between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, between male and female; a love that influences how we treat not just our friends, but also our enemies; love that leads us into disciplines like forgiving one another, reaching out to those in need, and being kind and generous and patient, among other things. Paul was pretty clear about that.

So when after his first letter, some people at Corinth accused Paul of veiling the gospel, somehow obscuring the good news of God's love expressed in Jesus, I can imagine his blood pressure going up. I can see him clenching his pen to write them back. "Even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing," Paul writes. Then he goes on to blame the devil for it - a convenient scapegoat. "In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." It's as if Paul is saying, "It is all so clear, when you look at what Jesus taught and how he lived, and died, and rose again, how we are to live our lives - and yet something keeps people from seeing it."

It is easy, when Paul speaks of the gospel being veiled to those who are perishing, to look for somebody out there, somebody out beyond ourselves, to whom or by whom it is veiled. It is easy to think, "I wonder what it is that keeps that snarky Christopher Hitchens from believing in God? I wonder what it is that drives Bill Maher to create a movie like *Religulous*?" The simple answer would be too many examples of Christians and people of other faiths being hypocritical, using their faith to exclude others or to justify hurting, or in the case of Wahabi Muslims, killing others. The gospel is veiled for many by people who check their brains at the door and don't think critically. The gospel is veiled by people, too many of them, who use their holy book as a weapon rather than a way into relationship.

It is easy to ask how the gospel is veiled to and by other people. The more interesting question is, "What is it that keeps you and me from seeing the light of the good news of the glory of Christ, who is the

image of God?” What is that keeps us from seeing in the vulnerable, forgiving, expansive love of Jesus the way that we should live?

We each have our own answers, I suppose. Too much time driving on the Beltway can veil the gospel. If there is one thing that drives me crazy, it is when I get over into the left lane as soon as the sign tells me to do so, and some yahoo drives all the way to where the traffic stops and then puts his blinker on to merge. I don't think about the good news of the glory of Christ when that happens. If you are one of those yahoos, I apologize!

Our Enlightenment emphasis on reason and what can be empirically verified can veil the gospel, too. There's nothing wrong with using our brains, with thinking critically, with accepting scientific explanations. We should. But faith in God and in the power of love to overcome sin, death, and evil is finally about embracing something that cannot be scientifically proven. It is about saying, with Shakespeare, “There are more things in heaven and on earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>ii</sup>

Our achievement oriented culture can veil the gospel. There is nothing wrong with achievement, of course. The other morning I was at Longfellow Middle School, along with several other Immanuel parents, for the All-A Assembly. Judith and I sat there, proud parents and proud pastors, as we watched Martha and a couple of other middle schoolers from this congregation receive certificates for their accomplishment. But I have to say that I was vaguely uncomfortable with the whole exercise as well, especially when one of the counselors read a poem about how these kids were “All-A Eagles soaring high above the rest, priming themselves for future success.” I understand the desire to affirm the kids for doing well, to reinforce that behavior. I get it. I want making good grades reinforced. But at the same time I'm glad that these young people have a church community that says, “The most important thing in life is not how you rise above the rest. The most important thing is how you love and serve God and the people God puts in your life.” We come here every Sunday to be drawn into encounter with a God who is constantly calling us outside of ourselves in compassion and service, a God who reminds us that a life lived in the Jesus way is a life of vulnerable love.

Perhaps this is why the gospel writers depict Jesus telling Peter, James, and John to not say anything about the transfiguration until after he has risen from the dead. When Jesus says, effectively, “Let's keep this on the ‘down-low’ for the time being,” it might just be his way of saying, “Nobody can properly understand what happened here from this side of the cross. It is only after I have died and risen that people can understand how I am the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. It is only after I have died and risen that people can understand that my glory is most fully seen in vulnerable love. It is only after I have died and risen that people can really understand God's glory. Before that happens, their understanding will be veiled.”

Along those lines, think about what happened in the Jerusalem temple right after the crucifixion. Do you remember what happened? Jesus died. He breathed his last. And then the veil in the temple, the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple, the curtain separating God from humanity, was torn in two. It was in the event of Embodied Love being willing to suffer the worst that

human beings could do and die with words of forgiveness and submission on his lips, that God's glory was fully seen.

It is hard for us to wrap our minds around that. There is at least a part of each of us that would prefer to have a God who prevents all suffering, who never calls us to a love that might cause us pain, who never challenges us to forgive those who have wronged us and to pray for those who would hurt us. But that's not the sort of God we have, and no amount of intellectualizing will finally help us avoid it.

I titled this sermon "When the Veil is Lifted," but I'm thinking I should have titled it "*When the Veil is Torn*," because that's so often the way God's glory gets revealed to us. Something happens that rips or tears open our minds and hearts so that we see the truth of the good news of God's love clearly.

†Our confirmands go down to the city, as they did yesterday, and while they are there, they spend some time at the Fulton House for Women. Sitting there with the women, they realize that those women are not really different than any of the rest of us. We have a common humanity that we share, and they have found something in the God we know in Jesus Christ that is helping them overcome addiction and get off of the streets. *And the veil is torn.*

†You are on a plane, seated next to a service man. The serviceman tells you that he is heading home on emergency leave because his wife is about to deliver a stillborn child. Your heart breaks for him and for her. And you think to yourself, "I'm glad we have a prayer shawl ministry at Immanuel. I'm going to send that family a prayer shawl." *And the veil is torn.*

Some of you know that I love to quote Tom Long, who is one of my favorite preachers. He tells a marvelous story about when he moved to Princeton to become the professor of preaching there. He started attending Nassau Presbyterian Church (which is the church that Dan Thomas' mother attended in her later years.) The thing about Nassau Presbyterian Church is that it is the most intellectual Presbyterian church, perhaps, in the entire Northeast. It is filled with academics and seminary professors. Tom, of course, was drawn to that church.

Tom went to a church night supper once, and he was seated next to a man he didn't know. The man said, "How long have you been a part of this church?" Tom said, "Not long, we just moved to Princeton, but we really like this church and we think we are going to join it. How about you? How long have you been a member here?" The man said, "Oh, my Lord. I've been a member of this church my whole life. In fact, I'm the last non-intellectual left in this congregation." Tom said, "You're kidding, right?" The man replied, "No, I'm not. I haven't understood a sermon that's been preached here in the last twenty-five years!"

Then he said, "But I'd never leave this congregation." Tom asked why. The man told him that every Monday night he and a few other church members take the church van up the road to Somerville, New Jersey, to the Youth Correctional Institute there. He said, "Sometimes we have Bible study, sometimes we just play ping-pong with the young people. You know, I started doing that because I thought it was just the sort of thing that a Christian ought to do. But now I wouldn't miss a Monday night, because I have found that Jesus Christ is already there, waiting on us, and it nourishes my soul."

Then the man told Tom, “I have found that you cannot prove in advance any of the promises of God, but if you put one foot in front of the other and live them, you will find that they are true, every one.”<sup>iii</sup> *And the veil was torn.*

In Jesus’ name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2094)

<sup>ii</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act I, Scene 5, lines 166-167).

<sup>iii</sup> I have heard Tom Long use this illustration on at least two occasions. Once was in a sermon or a lecture at the Festival of Homiletics, I believe in 2007. The second time was in a sermon he preached for Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston’s installation as pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The audio version of that fine sermon, “Of This Gospel” can be found at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church website. <http://www.fapc.org/index.php/component/eventlist/details/136-long-of-this-gospel>