



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Transmogrified”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Luke 9: 28-36; Exodus 34: 29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

It seems almost daily, now, that I come across some article, story or personal conversation that delves, in some way or another, into the broad and overwhelming impact that social media has had on our culture, our communities, and our individual lives. It's been just over 20 years since Mark Zuckerberg first developed “The Facebook” in his Harvard dorm room, just over 18 years since Facebook opened up for wide-spectrum public usage, and not yet 18 years since the launch of the first iPhone on June 29, 2007. In that span of two decades, we have long since departed from those years of, ‘Boy is it nice to stay connected to my college friends around the country,’ and have instead descended into this abyss of divisiveness, isolation and social angst that has enveloped the mental health of a huge swath of our population. And nowhere, of course, is that impact more severe than it is with the younger generations of our country.

Now, I could spend hours simply riffing on the litany of mental health dilemmas that are created by this still burgeoning reality of our societal construct. With three kids in high school and college, Sharon and I are painfully aware of everything that comes with it. There's the fear of missing out (‘FOMO’) that stems from being constantly aware of what everyone else is doing. There's the perpetual state of comparison in which we are looking at the lives of others and judging ours on their standard. The list is lengthy, and nearly endless, but the one that I found myself thinking about in the context of this Transfiguration Sunday is the sheer fallacy that is so much of we see on social media.

I had a friend of more than 25 years – a respected colleague with whom I've partnered in programs and ministries in the past – who posted on Facebook earlier this week that Pope Francis had died. He, of course, had not. Then, later that same night, I came across an article talking about the manipulation of images for social media – particular of ‘selfies’ and other pictures of the people who are doing the posting. Included in this article were a series of side-by-side comparatives of the ‘real’ photo versus the one that was posted, and it was remarkable to see. But those two back-to-back experiences got me thinking.

Despite my colleague's moment of errant judgment in repeating a false claim, I think that many of us are reasonably dubious about what we read online. Many of us are keenly aware of the fact that much of that which we read online cannot be assumed to be true. I'm not sure that we've yet come to terms, however, with the clarity that we need to be equally, if not even more, suspicious of what we see online. Through social media filters, photographic manipulation available on our phones, and now the progression of artificial intelligence, there are estimates out

there that at least 50-60%, and in some estimates as much as 80-90%, of the pictures we see online aren't true to the native form they reflect. We spend enormous amounts of time in our society looking at a 'reality' that doesn't, in fact, exist. That's a problem. The problem that really concerns me, however, is the inverse of that truth. With each moment we spend looking at a 'reality' that doesn't exist, we are that much more compelled to try to portray, to the world, a false reality of our own, and that's where our readings come in from this morning.

This is, in the liturgical calendar of the church, Transfiguration Sunday. This last Sunday before Lent, each year, is the Sunday on which the calendar points us to that moment with which we opened our service this morning. Luke's gospel sets up this scene with Jesus feeding the 5,000, Peter proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, and then Jesus foretelling the death and resurrection that is to come. Then, eight days later, Luke tells us that Jesus takes Peter, James and John up to the top the mountain to pray, where they see Jesus transfigured into this awesome and terrifying glowing form, talking with Moses and Elijah. There's a lot that happens in this brief story that is worth examining, but it's that glowing transfiguration that I want us to focus on this morning, because it's happened before.

That reading from Exodus depicts the same experience, at least to an extent, with Moses. Remember, with Moses, that this is the second time he had come down from the mountain with those stone tablets. The first descent was a few chapters earlier when he descended to find the people forming the golden calf, at which point he threw the stones in anger and they broke. He went back up the mountain, God forgave the Israelites, and he came back down a second time. This time, however, with his face glowing with the glory of God in such a way that he needed a veil over it so that the people could stand to look at him. And that is the event that Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 3.

Paul's discourse on this moment of the Exodus story with Moses actually starts a few verses before the reading we've identified for today. In verse 7, Paul writes,

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

Paul, of course, was no fan of the Law. A recurrent theme of the Pauline letters is the manner in which the Law highlighted and judged sin and thus was a tool of spiritual death and not life. So that, without mincing many words, is what Paul's talking about here. He's talking about the glory shining on Moses' face when he came down the mountain with those tablets. He goes on,

⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹ And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

All of this is Paul's way of saying that the wonder and glory of the Gospel diminishes any sense of glory that might have been perceived in the Law, and to make his point he speaks specifically of that moment of Moses descending from Mt. Sinai. Picking now with our printed reading in verse 12, Paul writes,

¹² Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³ We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away. ¹⁴ But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.

Now, for those of us who don't speak whatever convoluted dialect it is that Paul speaks, Paul is pointing to that veil covering the glory of God on Moses' face and highlighting the fact that the presence of that veil shielded the people from seeing the true glory of God that was there to be seen.

¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, Paul continues, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

'We don't wear a veil.' Paul proclaims. 'We don't hide ourselves from the world.' He says. 'We are being transformed into his image, renouncing our secret and shameful ways, and setting ourselves out as the glowing image of God to the world around us.'

As I first read these words from Paul in some of our long-range planning a couple months ago, the notion that came to my mind was 'transmogrification.' For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the term, transmogrification is literary tool in which a character is physically transformed into something else, often to some extent of absurdity, in what is being depicted. It might be some fairytale or fantastical setting in which a prince becomes a frog or a wizard becomes an owl. Or, it could be psychological delusion in which one imagines that their friend becomes a bucket of popcorn. It can be humorous, metaphorical, grotesque... but the two inherent characteristics of this notion of transmogrification in storytelling seems to be that 1) there is a substantial transformation that takes place and 2) the transformation is of a physical nature. When the prince becomes the frog, or the friend becomes the bucket of popcorn, the inherent character of that individual doesn't change, it is simply the physical form that has been transformed. And that, my friends, is the part that, after this long and winding journey, brings us back to where we began.

In a world in which so much of what we see isn't true to the reality that it reflects, we are increasingly tempted to try to portray to the world an image that isn't true to the reality that it reflects. In other words, we are increasingly more concerned with a transmogrification that changes how we are perceived by the world than we are by a transfiguration that reflects the true light of God's presence within us. There are all sorts of things that we could talk about from that story of the Transfiguration in Luke and that of Moses in Exodus, but the underlying experience of both moments was that their mountaintop encounter with God was such that God's presence and glory in their lives couldn't help but shine through the physical forms they embodied. In both moments, there was a change in physical form that was awe-striking to those who saw it, but

that form was a reflection of a deeper love and glory that the body simply could not hide – and that's the piece we lose sight of.

Just consider...

- How often do we try to show the world our strength and fortitude, instead of allowing them to see the Spirit of God at work in our weakness and strife?
- How often do we try to show the world our purity of moral character, instead of allowing the world to see the grace and mercy of God that shines into the darkness of our brokenness?
- How often do we try to show the world our certitude of faith and understanding, instead of allowing them to see the whispers of God beckoning us to his table even in the midst of our questions and doubts?

In a world in which so much of what we see isn't true to the reality it reflects, we are increasingly tempted to try to portray to the world an image that isn't true to the reality that it reflects. And that is as true in our faith as it is almost anywhere in our lives. We are increasingly more concerned with a transmogrification that changes how we are perceived by the world than we are by a transfiguration that reflects the true light of God's presence within us. Or, if I can sum all of this up in another way, in a world focuses on filters that put a glow on our faces, what we are really doing is putting a veil them and hiding the true glories of God. And I just think we might be well-served to turn the filters off and allow the world to see the glory of God that lies in the imperfections within us all.