



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, February 14, 2010
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Exodus 34:29-35, I Corinthians 12:27—13:13, and Luke 9:28-36

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LOVE WE CAN HARDLY BEAR TO SEE

The juxtaposition of the famous love chapter of the Bible (1 Corinthians 13) and what is known in the world as Valentine's Day is a preacher's dream. On top of that, we have the equally fertile juxtaposition in the Prayer Book lectionary today, 1 Corinthians 13 alongside the glowing of the face—Moses' and Jesus'. Let's start with Moses.

Moses was granted the privilege of speaking with the Lord. To speak with God is the closest form of communion with God there can be. We are all related to God, because God is our creator. Indeed, all things—not just humans but atoms and electrons and gluons, rocks and spiders, cantaloupe and antelope—all are related to God as their creator. But God creates by speaking his Word, and so to exchange words with God is particularly intimate. Moses had that intimacy, and it changed his flesh. When he came out from speaking with the Lord, his face was shining. People were afraid to look at him. He put on a veil, so that the people wouldn't have to see his glowing face. But when he went in to speak with God, his face was unveiled.

At a turning point in the middle of his ministry, Jesus took three disciples with him up a mountain to pray. His clothing became dazzling white, and his face was changed: "the fashion of his countenance was altered." We call this glowing of Jesus "the Transfiguration." The point, for us, is that under that transfiguration the divinity of Jesus was revealed. Lest we miss the point, a voice came on the scene. We are on a mountain, as Moses was; a cloud covers the mountain, as it did for Moses; and the voice speaks: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Moses had the most intimate communication possible for a human being with God, and his face shown. Jesus, at once both fully God and fully man, is that communication in his own being. I understand the difference in this way: Moses' face shone as a consequence of speaking with God. But Jesus was always shining, since he always was God, yet apart from that moment of revelation on the mountain, his glory was hidden from our sight. That is to say, something changed in Moses when he went up the mountain and spoke with God. But when Jesus went up the mountain, the change was only in the disciples, who saw there what Jesus always was.

We have an icon of Christ here at the entrance to the Resurrection Chapel, and we have an icon of Mary and Jesus in the back of the nave near the Chantry Chapel. Each icon has a gold background; indeed, most icons have that gold background. I once saw an icon of Mary and Jesus, however, which had a green background instead of gold; dark green it was; and the effect on the

viewer is quite different. Why is it green? I asked. What I was told surprised me, and then it made sense. In both cases, in the background of the icon is the glory, the light, that is God. In the gold icons, we see the light as light, the way saints see God's light in Paradise. But in the icon with a dark green background, the background represents darkness. It is the darkness of God: still God as he is, but as we see him on earth, veiled to our mortal sight. *We* cannot see God's light, we cannot see God as he is; for simple human beings, the light of God is experienced now only under a veil of something like darkness.

Now that might or might not be a good account of the background color of icons. My point, however, is not about icons but about God. God is pure light, blindingly glorious light. That light changed Moses' flesh, and even in its mediated form in Moses' flesh the people could not stand to look at it. But Jesus is true God and true man, "light of light" as we will say in the Creed. His divinity, for the most part, had to be hidden from us. But it was there all along: the brightness of the glory of the face of the true and only-begotten Son of God.

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Now to turn to love, I would like to make a comparison that is simple if humbling. In the world, the most wonderful thing to gaze upon is the face of someone who loves you. Yet if that love is true, it can also be the hardest thing to gaze upon. Yes, as St. Paul says, love is patient and kind, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable, does not rejoice in the wrong, bears all things, believes, hopes, endures all things. But while love is being patient and not getting irritated and bearing and hoping and enduring, if it is real love, its gaze is fixed on you. It is patient because it is not going away. It is bearing and believing and hoping because it is continuing to focus on you. And then we start to realize that to be loved that way is to be pierced by an arrow that punctures all fantasy as it prepares us to encounter truth.

It is the most wonderful thing to be loved. But to be really loved by someone who sees through all pretense and falsehood and make-believe and who *keeps looking*: that is perhaps the hardest thing in the world.

I think that a lot of the time the love of God has to be veiled from us, that we cannot bear to see that light, that love, directly. People who go on about the expansive and never-ending love of God need to take care not to separate love from truth. Yes, God takes us just as we are. But his love is the burning light of truth that consumes away dross and sin and self-illusion. An honest person might say, "Frankly, I'd rather not be loved that way." Indeed, does not the Psalmist say to God, "Go your way that I may be no more"?

May I submit to you that you are not in touch with reality if the thought of the love of God does not make you squirm a bit—that, or else you are already a perfected saint. For God's love is God's own being, the light in the background of the icon, both gold and dark. God takes us as we are but will not stop loving us and thus takes us where we might rather not go. From the mount of Transfiguration Jesus came down and walked forward to his "exodus," the cross. Jesus is the love of God and he went where no one wants to go.

The beautiful radiance of Jesus and the painful cross of Jesus are inseparable. None of us wants to go to the cross. But to be loved as God loves us, to hear his lovely Word and to feel the Word work his way into our flesh down to the bottom of our heart—there is nothing more wonderful than that.