

## THE LONG BLACK VEIL

Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Listen once more to a mysterious incident in the life of Moses. As Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, holding the Ten Commandments, he didn't realize that his face shone because he'd been talking with God. When everybody saw Moses his glowing face scared the daylights out of them as you can well imagine. So Moses veiled his face. But St. Paul adds, in our Epistle lesson, that sometimes Moses face didn't shine. The glory would fade away from his face leaving the stress and strain and worries of his responsibilities clearly visible. Moses didn't want the people to see his face when the glory faded.

We're a lot like Moses. We wear veils. <sup>We wear veils to hide the glory...</sup> We wear veils because we're afraid if other people see us the way we really are we'll frighten them. Some of us have good reason to be afraid. You once took off your veil. You shared a deep doubt or hurt. You revealed a dark secret. And you scared people. They didn't know how to react. They started to avoid you. And so you put the veil back on.

We wear veils because we're afraid people won't love us as we are. When I was in college I was attracted to a girl who sat next to me in English history. Beautiful. But I never spoke to her. I was afraid she'd reject me. One night I stood alone on the steps of the student center. I thought of her. I looked up at the starry sky. A full moon was shining – so bright. But dark clouds were scudding across the sky. One large dark cloud covered the face of the moon and veiled it's light. I went back to my room and wrote a poem for the girl in my English history class.

A cloud can hide the moon  
And cover up its face;  
So I have worn a cloud  
To hide from you love's trace.  
Clouds are just the thing to wear,  
When fear makes beauty hard to bear.

I sent her the poem through the college post office. I stood where I could see her without appearing to be looking at her. She opened the envelop. She read the poem. I could tell her beautiful smile that she loved the poem. Her face shined. She showed the poem to her friends and they giggled. I was so thrilled. The problem was I didn't sign my name. She thought it was from somebody else. She never knew I sent it. She never knew

how I felt. I wore a veil. When was the last time you took off your veil and told someone how much you love them?

Nathaniel Hawthorne, the great nineteenth century American novelist, wrote a short story, *The Minister's Black Veil*. A thirty year old minister, Mr. Hooper, stepped into his pulpit one Sunday wearing a black veil that completely covered his face. From that day on he never removed the veil. His reserved New England congregation were afraid to ask him why. The elders visited the manse to inquire about the veil but returned without asking. Hooper told his fiance that he'd never remove his veil as long as he lived – not even for her. She broke their engagement. Rumors said he had a loathsome disease, that his face had become terribly disfigured. He remained a minister in that village for the rest of his life but was never seen again without his black veil. "Kind and loving, though unloved, and dimly feared" (Hawthorne). The years went by, he grew old, and his time to die arrived. Elders and members gathered around his bed. He raised himself up and looked around the room with his veiled face and said, "Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, *These* only for my black veil? Look! Look all around you! Lo ~~thee~~ many years – all of you have been wearing veils – when will friend show his inmost heart to his friend. When will the lover show his inmost heart to his beloved? When will you stop shrinking from the eye of your Creator, treasuring up your secret sins?" Then Mr. Hopper fell back and died.

Moses wore a veil so that people wouldn't know the glory had faded from his face. Most of us have been trained from childhood to wear veils. *so people won't know the glory has faded...* We come to church and sit with smiling faces. We shake hands. *The glory has departed* We joke but inside too many of us feel terribly lonely or sad or frightened or angry or doubtful. So many of us go forth daily to battle with the demons within us and around us – all alone. We fear that if another sees us as we really are they'll be afraid to come near us – like the Israelites feared the unveiled face of Moses. In a desperate attempt to be loved and accepted we wear veils.

Some of us have had wonderful experiences of God's grace and have witnessed in ~~your~~ *our* own ~~life~~ *lives* God's providentially working but we're afraid to talk about our relationship to Christ – good or bad – for fear of being though ~~fanatical~~ *+* fanatical. We Presbyterians fear emotion so much. We're so reserved when it comes to allowing others

to see joy how much we love and trust Christ. But we wear veils because, like Moses, we fear we'll frighten people. *if they see the joy.*

The church is where God intended for us to remove our veils. Of all people we have a hope. We have a hope in the grace of Christ. We have a hope that God love us unconditionally and accepts and forgives us as we are and gives us the grace to become what God wants us to be – and what we fulfill our deepest desires. In short, we have hope that God will win in the end over all enemies – death, disease, prejudice, hatred, demons within us and demons around us and in our culture. St. Paul wrote, “Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.”

The Christian pilgrimage should not be a lonely struggle with sin, unbelief, and crippling grief. The Christian pilgrimage is more than a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is that and without that personal relationship it is nothing. But the Christian pilgrimage is so much more. The Christian pilgrimage is a journey in community – life in the Body of Christ – life with our brothers and sisters. God doesn't want our struggle to be a lonely individual struggle. Our life is nourished in the community of God's people by the sacraments and worship and fellowship and prayer and service.

Every church I know of needs a greater sense of community.<sup>1</sup> *one reason for Nomad diseases,* Some of us already enjoy that sense of community but many of us don't. Community has to do with how we relate, how we listen, how we confront, how we forgive, how we tell the truth and pray. M. Scott Peck has written that a community is a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, where relationships go deeper than their *masks* of composure and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, to mourn together, to delight in each other.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the Christian martyrs of Hitler's Third Reich wrote a little book entitled, *Life Together* – about how Christians are meant to live together without wearing our veils. Bonhoeffer wrote, “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkable horrified when a real sinner is

suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we *are sinner!*”

Don't be surprised to discover that the person sitting next to you is a sinner. After all, we believe in original sin. Every worship service begins with a confession of sin. We believe we're sinners. We believe we're damned sinners apart from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. All of us. So it shouldn't come as a surprise to discover that the person sitting next to you really is what he or she confesses to be – sinners, but sinners saved by God's grace.

I'm not suggesting that we publicly take off our veils and confess all the dark secrets of our hearts. That would be extremely destructive. But I am suggesting that if a brother or sister in Christ unveils himself (herself) to you – don't retreat in fear. Don't condemn no matter how shocked you may be – don't give advice. Rather, come near and listen. Come near and pray. Come near and weep.

St. Paul tells us that when we turn to the Lord the veil is removed. When we turn to the Lord, we can boldly take off our veil. With unveiled faces we look at the Lord and the Lord sees us as we really are, sees our unveiled face and doesn't condemn us, doesn't shrink in horror. The Lord does overlook our sin. The Lord doesn't excuse our sins. He forgives and empowers us to be transformed into his image. We can see who the Lord really is only when we remove our veils and look to him – and as we look on him and his grace, love and forgiveness we are transformed – like a stone that warms up as the summer sun shines on it.... “All of us,” Paul says, “All of us with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”

Let us pray: Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.