

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Bright Shining Faces

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If you venture to South Bend, IN for a Notre Dame football game, on your walk to the stadium you cannot miss the 134' mosaic mural on the side of the library.

Named the "Word of Life," this image depicts Jesus bathed in heavenly light, luminescent, and raising his arms towards the heavens.

Since his arms extend in nearly the same gesture as a referee declaring a touchdown, everyone knows him as Touchdown Jesus.

Any visitor to a game may wonder if the religious fervor is for him or football.

Outside of the library, stands another piece of art: a soaring 17 feet, bronze sculpture of Moses holding in one hand the chiseled stones of the Ten Commandments. The other extends towards the heavens, almost certainly in a gesture intended to draw our attention to God.

And yet, a football fan sees Moses' pose similar to a referee signaling a first down. I could not find the sculpture's official name, only the nickname "First Down Moses."

If you look closely, his foot rests atop a disembodied head, perhaps celebrating his ultimate triumph over that nasty

incident when the Israelites created a golden calf idol for their worship.

Even that's not the strangest aspect of the statute. This artist placed two prominent protrusions around the temple region of Moses' skull. In simplistic terms, they look like horns.¹

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, a day to mark the pivot from Epiphany, when the light comes into the world, and we join Jesus on his march towards Golgotha during the season of Lent. Both of these artistic renderings become relevant in our understanding of God's continual quest to bring us into right relationship with God and one another.

Today's lectionary from the Book of Exodus brings us to the mountaintop encounter between Moses and God. It occurs after one of our faith ancestors' glaring failures.

For overall context, Moses convinces the people to trust God and convinces Pharaoh to free them from Egyptian bondage. Their journey to the land promised by God leads them through a wilderness.

"Wilderness" implies both the life-threatening conditions they face and the chaos of disarray – no longer enslaved but also

¹ [Irish Traditions: \(Mostly\) Known & \(Some\) Unknown – Notre Dame Fighting Irish – Official Athletics Website](#)

not sure how to sustain their peaceable freedom. They need God's guidance.

So, Moses ascends Mt Sinai to receive instructions.

In his forty-day absence, without a leader and feeling fragile against the terrors of the unknown, the Israelites sought security through something familiar.

They create a bright-shiny, golden calf. Why not craft with their own hands something to worship that symbolizes power and might?

When Moses descends the mountain, he becomes enraged at their idol worship, throws the tablets containing God's commands at them, breaking them into pieces. Arguments ensue. Accusations are tossed. Even God's temper explodes, calling the Israelites "a bunch of stiff-necked people."

Yet still in the wilderness they face a decision, turn back or try again.

Moses ascends Mt Sinai for a second time. He hears God say, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Our God is a God of second chances. Despite their flagrant disobedience, God loves them. Moses chisels new tablets.

O God, when fear rises and chaos closes in, those shiny objects can lure us into false security. We confess how easily we place our trust in things, seek human powers, and defy your love. Silence in us any voice but yours. Shine your light upon us as we seek to know your will through the words of scripture. Amen.

Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them.

³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the Lord, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with God.

A little story. My parent's farm in central California included a small animal menagerie with cows, chickens, sheep and one ram, barn cats, owls. Various field critters claimed their pasture as home. And, of course they had a dog. Unbeknownst to me their neighbor pastured longhorn cattle on the other side of a common fence.

One afternoon, while on my hands and knees cleaning irrigation filters, I felt the ground shake. It was California. It must be an earthquake. I looked up to see the longhorns charge our fence with such speed I was certain they would thunder right through it.

I raced the length of the field. While I gasped for breath, and they leisurely chewed the grass, my dad stifled a chuckle saying, "Oh, honey, they're just curious to meet you".

A longhorn can weigh up to 2,500 pounds with horns spanning nine feet. Those steers were not that big, but honestly, they seemed even bigger. They moved with fierce body strength that overwhelmed me, as they have menaced people throughout the ages.

After that encounter, if I were to cast an animal to symbolize power, neither my dad's rooster nor the ram with graceful,

curved horns would suffice. I'd bow to a bull with massive, iron-like horns.

Religions in the Ancient Near East commonly cast bulls from precious metals as idols to worship. They offered sacrifices to ward off danger and to acquire that same source of power animating the bull.

Raging bulls. Horns of breadth. Shiny gold. These symbols reflect a fragile faith, diminished to fit within the limits of the human imagination, and reflecting the immaturity of being enamored with symbols of wealth.

When Moses comes down off the mountain, the people should have noticed the tablets. They need to know what they say and mean. But, no. The light beaming from Moses' face has them spellbound.

If we remember, at the time of creation, God says, "'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good." Light is the very first thing God creates.

God's sturdy, enduring light ignited in Moses' very being.

The storywriter uses the same root word as "horn" to describe the light emitting from his face. It is not a fragile light, as one could turn on or off with a light switch, or snuff out a candle.

The brilliance of that light from Moses shines as if God says to the people, “you want horns of strength, become intimate with me and follow my will. Follow the commands on those tablets and I will ignite within you a light that no one can extinguish. It will transfigure your soul and body.”²

When Michelangelo sculpted Moses, he placed horns protruding from his head, to signify the light he brings from God to the people. Marc Chagall also imagined Moses as a witness to the covenant with spikey, light beams of God’s graciousness, anchored in his head.

More commonly, if we think of Moses, we imagine Charlton Heston from Cecile B DeMille’s iconic movie, *The Ten Commandments*. But, that image feeds off of our limited sensibilities – honestly smaller than whom God calls him to become.

Moses’ desire to serve the people gave him the courage to be intimate with God, humbled by God’s will, and to be awed by God. That’s when the light literally begins to shine from him.

These past weeks, we’ve listened to stories of Jesus ministering to people with a word of hope against the powers of the world. As he prepares to make his final trek toward

² Thomas Joseph White, *Exodus (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016).

Jerusalem, like Moses, he withdraws to pray and be close to God.

Unlike Moses, he takes a few of the disciples to see with their own eyes. Peter, James, and John witness Jesus ascend a mountain to pray. While there, he confers with Moses and Elijah. They see Jesus transfigured, meaning turn dazzling bright, while God says, “this is my son, my chosen one, listen to him.”

They follow Jesus. We know the story. And, we will read it again in Lent for the truth. He confronts the corrupt state. The dictators attempt to destroy his divine message of loving and caring for all people.

Jesus supposedly loses his life in a feeble attempt by the rulers to kill love and compassion.

God is a God of second chances.

On the dark of Easter’s morn, the disciples witness God’s new morning light, a light that has existed since the beginning. They followed that light and invite us in Christ’s journey.

We all hunger for that kind of transformation, don't we?

Theologian Rudolf Otto says that we are both drawn to God and yet terrified of holy encounters. Deep inside, even among the skeptical, we yearn for the sacred and for our own lives to radiate with significance. We want something or someone to draw us into goodness. And then, we want to become a part of this goodness. We want something or someone who will leave us shining, shimmering, and beaming transcendent.³

This is possible. This is what *our* transfiguration is all about.

Lent invites us to honestly face our failings, name the small gods that demand our devotion but leave us empty.

Do we live in ways that bring honor to the rest of God's people?

Do we adhere to the covenant to place God above all else? To not covet or steal? To honor all of God's children?

What Lent asks us to do is hard – to look at shiny objects without letting the glitz captivate us. Following Jesus asks us to move about the world without attempting to dominate others or turn away from neighbors in need.

In this tender time, we will become vulnerable as we strip away all the false illusions of grandeur and masks. In such

³ Rudolf Ott, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, (HardPress Publishing, 2012).

humility, God's light will fill us. Grace is fierce and it is strong. And it penetrates right to the heart of each one of us.

This is the task before us. And trust that as we do so, we will allow God's light to take hold within our lives, to guide us bravely to live and love in faith. Our God is a God of second chances. We only have one life – claim the second chance and make your life matter.

Be so bold as to let God's light shine from your face with the strength of a bull's horn.



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