

## Radiant

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36  
Transfiguration - February 7, 2016  
The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams



**[SLIDE 16]** Moses comes down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, and his face was shining. Jesus goes into the mountain and as he is praying the appearance of his face was changed. His disciples see his “glory.” What is the meaning of their gloriously shining, radiant faces? Why are they important? What do they teach us about God? What do they teach us about ourselves?



A bit of back story to Moses’ shining face. God has delivered the Israelites from Egypt and established the covenant with them at Mount Sinai. God calls Moses to go back up to the mountaintop which is wreathed in clouds. There over where over a period of 40 days God instructs Moses on the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the tent of meeting —the tabernacle — in which God’s presence will dwell with God’s people. At the end of the 40 days God gives Moses the tablets of stone on which are written the ten commandments.

Moses comes down from the mountain with these tablets of stone only to discover that in his absence the people have constructed a golden calf and were worshipping it and calling it the god that had brought them out of Egypt. Moses smashes the tablets of stone, dramatically signaling that the Israelites had broken the covenant even “before the ink had dried.”

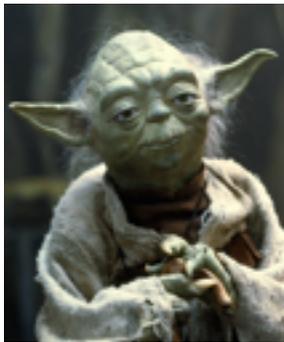
God decides that it is not possible for God to dwell personally in the midst of these stiff-necked people, and proposes sending an angel to guide them to the Promised Land. Moses intercedes for the people. God calls him back up the mountain, passes before him, proclaiming “The Lord, the Lord, a god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty ... (Exodus 34:6-7). Moses is instructed to cut two new tablets of stone and write out the ten commandments. Bearing this second set of stone tablets, Moses comes down the mountain, and his face is shining.

Moses’ radiant face signals that he is the bearer of good news. The God who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt will not abandon them in the wilderness. God offers them a second chance, and renews the covenant. God will be faithful even when the people are unfaithful.

Moses' radiant face demonstrates that it is people, not objects of gold crafted by human hands, that mediate God's presence. The glory of God shines through the face of God's living servant. God's light shines through the words and actions not only of leaders but also through the lives of ordinary people of faith to make God's presence known in the congregation and in the wider community.

Moses' radiant face is the result of his personal encounter with God. When humans interact with the divine they are changed and transformed. We see this especially clearly in our gospel lesson where we hear that as Jesus was praying — as Jesus was communing with God — the appearance of his face was changed and his clothing became dazzling white. We are told that the disciples saw his *doxa* — Jesus' shining brightness, Jesus' radiance.

I wonder, is God trying to tell us something about ourselves?



**[STEP 1]** The radiant faces of Moses and Jesus call to mind one of my favorite Yoda quotes. It's from *Star Wars, Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. Luke Skywalker is training to be a Jedi and is frustrated by his inability to levitate his X-wing fighter out of the bog. He complains, "It's too big." Yoda comes back with:

Size matters not. Look at me. Judge me by my size, do you? Hmm? Hmm. And well you should not. For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is. Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter. You must feel the Force around you; here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere, yes. Even between the land and the ship.

Yoda says, "Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter." The Lutheran theological correction is that we are indeed luminous — light filled — radiant beings even as we are simultaneously beings of crude matter.

**[STEP 2]** Or as Rob Bell puts it so eloquently:

we're made of dust and we come from the stars, we're both skin and soul, blood and being — at 98.6 degrees continually radiating about 100 watts of energy into our surroundings, containing  $7 \times 10^{18}$  joules of potential energy, the equivalent of 30 large hydrogen bombs ... We are both large and small, strong and weak, formidable and faint, reflecting the image of the divine, and formed from dust.<sup>1</sup>

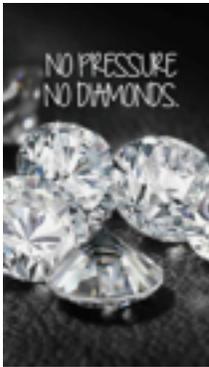


---

<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, (Harper One, 2013), pp. 54-55.

The radiant faces of Moses and Jesus point to the luminous, light-filled, image of God that is at the core of our being. Moses bears in his arms the stone tablets on which are written the 10 commandments — guidelines for living lives that are holy and wholesome — guidelines for nurturing and cultivating the image of God within. The revelation of Jesus’ glory to his disciples is bracketed by predictions of his death. Indeed that is what Moses and Elijah talk with Jesus about on the mountaintop. Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be killed, and on the third day raised (Luke 9:22, 45), and that in order to be his disciples they too must take up their crosses daily and follow him. But they don’t get it. Do we?

The cross is a symbol that stands for the death and resurrection of Jesus, which in turn points us to a universal mystery and a pattern that recurs throughout all of creation, how new life emerges from death. The cold of winter gives way to the warmth of spring, barren trees bud forth with new green leaves, seeds buried in the earth sprout and bring forth grain. Ten billion flakes of skin die and fall from our bodies every day, so that at the end of twenty-eight days each of us has completely new skin. Every nine years our bodies are completely new.<sup>2</sup>



**[STEP 3]** This pattern of dying and rising to new life is not just a physical reality replicated throughout all of creation, it is also a spiritual reality. Richard Rohr likens the divine image at the core of our being to a diamond. Diamonds are formed when carbon is exposed to extremely high temperature and pressure deep within the earth. As a result, diamonds are said to be the hardest substance on earth. The divine image within us is like an immortal diamond being formed under the intense pressure of our lives. God uses everything in our lives — very wise and foolish decision, every happy and sad moment, every triumph and defeat, every birth and death — to construct this immortal diamond that will be strong enough to traverse the valley of the shadow of death and come out on the other side shining and radiant with new life and energy.<sup>3</sup>

The shining faces of Moses and Jesus point us to this great mystery, even as they show us how to nurture and cultivate the divine radiance within ourselves through personal encounters with God on metaphorical mountain tops wreathed with clouds, in prayer and communion with God, in lives that are holy and wholesome. For for all the second chances God gives us, for God’s steadfast faithfulness in the face of our faithlessness, and for God’s constant presence in our midst shining through the actions of ordinary people of faith - we proclaim “Alleluia! Praise the Lord!

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, (Jossey-Bass, 2013), pp. 184-186.