



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36**  
**February 14, 2010**

These two passages that Eric has read to us are marvelous, mystifying. They are wonderful. They are a little inexplicable, and I would suggest to you that that's not a bad thing. Even the disciples who were there and saw what happened to Jesus were confused and did not understand. Moses goes up on the mountain and when he comes down, his face shines from the experience. Jesus is on the mountain and somehow, I don't understand this, Moses and Elijah appear over many centuries; all of them shine; the disciples see it. What can all of this mean?

I thought about these texts in light of today being Valentine's Day, I tried to think about remembering a Sunday which was Valentine's Day, it must have happened before. You know, at the early service, we didn't have any heat. It was stone cold in here. You're lucky you came at 11, smart call. A woman at the back said to me, "Now, you may see me snuggling up with my husband, but it's not because it's Valentine's Day." I told her Reverend Roth offers marital counseling should they need that.

Once upon a time, when people thought about their relationship to God, they thought of it in terms of romantic love. In the early church through the Middle Ages, through the Reformation, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, they would use romantic images to explain what the relationship with God, what intimacy with God might be like. We do not do this much any longer. Perhaps that's a tragedy in and of itself, we sort of ruined romantic love. It's become casual, it's become recreational, it's become mechanical. And yet, before real love, we should perhaps learn to be reverent, to be filled with stillness, with yearning.

Thinking about romantic love and the shining of Moses' face, I thought about the shining of Juliet's face. Romeo is there on the ground; Juliet is up on the balcony. He looks up and he sees her face and he says, "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun." You could try this later in the day. And he compliments her face and says "It would cause the stars to blush and the moon to be shamed. The brightness of her cheek would shame the stars. See how she leans her cheek upon her hand? "Oh, that I were a glove upon that hand that I might touch that cheek." Why does Juliet's cheek glow? Is it just because she is so beautiful? Is it because of her ardor, her love for Romeo? Does her face shine because of Romeo's regard for her? Does her face shine because she has a desire but it is not yet satisfied? The way the story unfolds, they can't decide how to conclude the evening. And Juliet says, "I have no joy of this contract tonight. It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden. Sweet good night." And Romeo says, "Oh wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?" And Juliet says, "Yes," which is not very Hollywood-like now, is it? Because if it were Hollywood, Romeo would climb up on the balcony and there we'd go.

It is the unsatisfied desire that is the beauty of this story. I think the same thing happens with Moses on the mountain. Moses wants to see and to know God, and theologians through the years have speculated as to what that could mean. There was a great theologian in the Fourth Century named Gregory of Nyssa, and he spoke of Moses' unfulfilled desire as the true fulfillments of his desires, the quest ever to go deeper with God. Moses knew God like no one else has ever known God, and yet,

Moses only brushed the hem of God's garment. He saw only a glimpse of the depths of the mind of God. He only saw God in passing, perhaps from the back side. But this is not bad. It is the yearning to know more that is good.

We had a youth minister in Davidson, and he had this poster that he put up on his door at one point that said "Got Jesus?" After he did this, he would stick his head in my office on his way to his office, he would pop his head in and say, "James, you got Jesus?" Just to get on his nerves, I would say "No." And he would come by the next day and would say "Got Jesus?" I would say "No." Finally, one day he came in and said, "Please tell me you got Jesus." I said, "I don't got Jesus. I hope Jesus got me. I'm after Jesus, I'm following Jesus, I seek Jesus, but do I have Jesus? Do I contain Jesus somehow? Do I have him accessible in my pocket?" It's God that is always beyond us. It is the yearning for God. If we do not know and understand God, this is the way it is supposed to be. It's not a big problem if we have questions about God. God plants those questions in our soul to whet our appetite so we might always seek after God and have that shining that was the face of Juliet. "Wilt thou leave my desire so unsatisfied?" And God says, "Yes, come, come."

Moses comes down the mountain after 40 days and says that the people were fearful, and they should have been fearful. They had sinned terribly against God. They were fearful, afraid that Moses was coming down with some lightning bolt of a sentence from a wrathful God, and I love what the text says. It says that *The people were fearful until Moses called to them, and then they were comforted.* The people were fearful until Moses called to them, and then they were comforted. What we all want at the end of the day is to be called to. We do not wish to be ignored. You want someone to reach out, to speak, to say words to you, words of mercy, words of comfort. Moses does not come down with threatening words of the wrath of God. He comes down with hope, he comes down with love, he comes down with mercy, he comes down with direction. And the fearful people are no longer afraid.

I love the moment in the transfiguration story. Jesus is on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, and I cannot understand that. I do not know how to make sense of that, but I love this part. There is a cloud that comes down and God speaks from the cloud and God says, *This is my beloved son. Listen to him.* Listen to him.

Tony Campolo, a great Baptist preacher up in Philadelphia, says that we need a new political party in the United States of America. He thinks both Democrats and Republicans have failed us. I could probably get an "Amen" from you if I were seeking that. He thinks they have both failed and he says, "We need a new party" and he calls it the Red Letter Christians, the Red Letter Christians. You know those old Bibles that basically have black type, but the words of Jesus are in red. He's looking for the people of God who will take the words of Jesus as their agenda, who will take the words of Jesus as what we are to be about, those who see this is God's beloved Son, we wish to listen to him.

I've told some of you this before, when I was in Davidson, the bishop and the district superintendent said that every church had to devise a new mission statement. So we rounded up a group of people to work on this. I anticipated many meetings and much word-smithing. Instead, here's how it went, I presented the challenge from the bishop and district superintendent to the group and said "Go." The first woman, she had for years been a missionary in Pakistan, was a great servant of the poor, someone everybody looked up to. She was a little bit wily and cantankerous in a way. She said, "This is a ridiculous exercise." She said, "The mission of the church is easy." She said, "We

just do the stuff that Jesus told us to do." Everyone said "Good, let's go home." And the meeting lasted five minutes. The church is to do the stuff that Jesus told us to do. The word of mercy, we need to listen to him, but it is hard, is it not, in our world, to listen to anybody, much less to Jesus. It's such a noisy world. It's such a busy world. We're full of so much stuff; we need some time to be still, to listen, to clear out the clutter, to make space not only to hear Jesus but also to have the space to follow him, to do what he says.

Moses was on that mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, and Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. And on Wednesday of this week we begin the season of Lent, 40 days and 40 nights. And always at Lent, the church asks you to give up something for Lent. Last year we had the interesting challenge, we asked folks to give up alcohol for Lent. This is not because we're teetotalers as a denomination. You may recall the old joke where a person comes to the pastor and says "Can Methodists drink?" He says "Well, the answer to this is the same as to the question 'Can Methodists dance?'" The answer is "Some can and some can't." And some can drink and some cannot drink. And last year, when we issued to challenge to give up alcohol for Lent, several people came to me and said, "I can't do that." I thought that was an important clue. Others did that and they had great conversations about the role of alcohol in their lives and how we need it after a bad day or how we think it is the social lubricant. Maybe we can look to God. If we took the money that you would have spent on alcohol – we're going to do this again if you want to participate in this – we gave it to some addiction treatment programs in Charlotte and it really helped them a lot during a tough economic year. You don't have to give up alcohol for Lent but I encourage you to give up something and give up something that is not something bad that you ought to give up anyway, give up something that will somehow help you to become attentive to God, something that will help restructure your time so that there might be a space for you to listen to God and to follow God.

A number of years ago, I got the brilliant idea that I would give up television for Lent. I forgot that, you know, Duke basketball happens during Lent. The season wound up poorly though, so it was better not to have seen it. If you give up TV, you've got some time in the evening that might otherwise be occupied with something innocuous. So you take that time and you don't fill it with something else. You listen, you pray, you ask about what is my life about, am I loved, what is my desire for God, is there any glowing from the presence of God that we strive to follow?

The late archbishop, Oscar Romero, once said this, and I will close with his words:

*When we leave worship, we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt. Sinai, with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong, to face the world's difficulties.*

God has come down and we have brushed the hem of his garment. We've been vouchsafed a glimpse, and it makes us hungry, thirsty for more and more, and we listen to him and we want more, and it is good and beautiful, even if a little bit mystifying.

Thanks be to God.