

## UNVEILED

Exodus 34:29-35

II Corinthians 3:12-4:2

I do not remember my father taking me out to many places as a child, but when he heard that the great magician Harry Blackstone was making his farewell tour, my dad decided to take me. I remember sitting there looking at this great magician perform his tricks, knowing that they were tricks, still captivated by how they might be done.

I knew the woman was not actually being sawed in half; it was some sort of a visual trick. I knew things really did not appear and disappear in puffs of smoke, but they certainly looked like they did. I was positive that he really did not keep rabbits and pigeons in his hat, though I could not figure out where they came from. I knew it was some slight of hand, but as much as I tried to watch his hands do the tricks, I could not see how he did it.

Harry Blackstone is one of a long line of magicians going far back in history that continues today. They baffle us with their ability to divert our attention from what they are really doing, and to hide it with smoke and trick mirrors, with veils and hidden compartments. Now there are magicians like David Copperfield who can make the Statue of Liberty disappear. It obviously does not disappear. It is only veiled, it is hidden with smoke and mirrors and things beyond our capacity to understand.

Sometimes we speak of politicians “pulling the wool over our eyes.” Tomorrow is President’s Day. Someone observed that George Washington was the only President to run for office unopposed, which may be why many believe he is the only president who never told a lie.

Sometimes we veil things for fun or trickery. Putting on a mask, we can pretend we are someone else. At Halloween we put on masks to go trick or treating. In New Orleans this week there is the Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, the parade marking the coming of Lent, with people dressed in costumes and masks.

St. Paul wrote about Moses veiling his face. When he referred to Moses being read, he meant the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These are books that tell the foundational stories of the creation of the heavens and the earth,

the creation of the people of Israel, and the giving and receiving of the law of God. Paul saw how the law, the rules, had become a veil, a smoke screen that kept the people from really seeing and feeling the love of God revealed in Christ. He was referring to the way we hide the things of God, the slight of hand we use to deflect our attention from what God is doing and saying.

This was not meant as a criticism of Moses himself. Nor was it meant in any way to lessen the importance of the law God gave Moses on Sinai, part of which we refer to as the “Ten Commandments.” Paul did not say the law was bad, but looking at everything through the law it was keeping them from seeing what new thing God was doing.

The new was overtaking the old, the incomplete overtaken by the complete. The revelation of Moses was true. It was great. But in Jesus, the revelation becomes complete. As St. Augustine said, “We do wrong to the Old Testament if we deny that it comes from the same just and good God as the New. On the other hand, we do wrong to the New Testament, if we put the Old on a level with it.”

The laws were given by God. Yet in a sense the law is a veil. The law is forced civil behavior. It requires us to obey certain laws or face the consequences. But the law is not the end in itself. It is not the goal. Our relationship with God is in a way defined in the laws given on Mt. Sinai, but our relationship with God will quickly fade if it is only based on and the threat of punishment. A nation cannot long exist with only the threat of legal punishment. For years our nation has been building more and bigger jails, but the threat of jail is proving ineffective in preventing crime. Unless people live out of the love of God, the fear of punishment will not contain them.

This passage from Paul is the first place in the Bible that the term “old covenant” is used. It is the same as the term “Old Testament.” It is the old agreement that God had with the people of God. It is a good covenant, good because God made it. But it is the old covenant, the first covenant. Now there is a new covenant, not something we should hide with smoke and mirrors and veils, but something we should make plain, about which we should speak in freedom and in boldness. It became plain because we can see it in the life and ministry of Jesus.

It is with caution that Christians hear and understand these words from Paul. It is the kind of passage that too easily leads to anti-Semitism, and can be used as evidence that Judaism is an inferior faith. Remember that Jesus was an observant Jew and Paul was an observant Jew and most all the early disciples were Jewish. It was not an anti-Semitic remark by Paul rather a criticism that some of his own people were closed minded, looking only backward at what God did not forward at what God in Christ is doing.

Paul was not to take away from the faith of the Jews, since Jesus and Paul and many other early Christians continued to worship in Jewish Temples. When Paul penned his letter to the church in Corinth, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John did not exist in written form. Therefore whether you worshipped with Jews or Christians, you would hear read the same writings of Moses or the prophets or the Psalms. The criticism was not of the scripture nor of Judaism, but of veiling the mind, covering ourselves so that the good news in the Gospel is not seen, seeing only the law but not seeing past the law to the loving God who gave it.

Rather Paul lifted up the promise of what happens when we remove the veils that keep us from God, when we blow away the smoke and stop the tricks with the mirrors. By the presence and teachings and spirit of Jesus we need no pretense, no primping, no hiding. We can go unveiled into the presence before God.

To be unveiled as Paul spoke of it is not the same as showing off. When we lived down south for five years we found people much more open about their faith and church membership. We also saw some abuse of that. I often found that whether someone was trying to sell you a car or get your vote they would be sure to tell you they were born again and which Baptist church they attended. In New England it is quite different.

Most of us do is not to hide our faith and church membership so much that we just don't mention it but talk of others things which keep people from seeing it. When there is an article in the newspaper about a local citizen acknowledging some professional accomplishment or community service, there is typically a listing of their academic credentials, professional associations, achievements, civic and professional offices held, their family and hobbies. But usually not church membership. I do not know if that is because newspapers do not ask the question, or people do not volunteer the information. Do you know when a person's church membership gets listed

in the newspaper? In the obituary. It is as though people don't join the church until they die.

After mention of the veil we put up Paul went on to say, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." What happens when we veil the freedom? Freedom that is not practiced is like a muscle that is not exercised – it atrophies. Surveys done a century ago indicated that about half of Americans worshipped regularly on Sunday. By the middle of last century that fell to about a third in church on an average Sunday. And now surveys indicate that only about 20% of the Christians in this nation come to worship on an average Sunday.

New England now leads the nation on the lowest percentage of worship attendance and church membership. As a nation we are losing our ability to keep the Sabbath holy. I know it is not easy. I remember a great southern preacher named Bill Self saying at a conference I attended that most people in church most Sundays almost didn't get there. There are many Sunday where I not preaching I probably would not be here. But if the Lord is in his holy temple what are we doing Sunday morning in Walmart?

Paul reminds us that one of the gifts of God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, is a gift of boldness, freedom to acknowledge without embarrassment, without shame, without apologizing, with no smoke or mirrors or veils that we believe in Christ and belong to his church. Yet we easily feel trapped, caught by commitments that keep us from the freedom Christ offers.

There is an interesting story about the great magician Harry Houdini. As the story is told he was once stymied by what he was told was an escape-proof trap. He was placed in a cell and he worked unsuccessfully for hours to pick the lock. When Houdini finally gave up, the jailer opened the cell without effort and without a key, because the door had not been locked.

The door is opened, but we have been tricked to believe that we are trapped inside, that we cannot get free from those things which enslave us. There was once a missionary who wrote from Guatemala about a great revival taking place among the people in the village he served. The missionary said that they are "experiencing tremendous growth...not due so much to missionary presence...but rather to the changed lives of people who share with other people the freedom that they have experienced from alcohol, from

evil powers, from idol worship, from witchcraft, from a fatalism that binds them to a life that means that change is impossible.”

There can be a veil over our faith, something that hides the love of God from our sight. It doesn't seem to get talked about a lot in polite society. You have a hard time finding it mentioned in the local newspapers. But it is the gospel God's people need to see and hear and experience so that we can openly and freely come into the presence of God.

The gospel is not to be hidden, but to be made plain in our life and work, so that even those who are blind may see, and people may know the name of the God whom they meet in their life. Paul's solution was simple: turn away from the veil and toward God, and you will see.

The story begins with Moses who put a veil on his face when he came down the mountain from receiving the commandments from God. He was hiding some of the glory of God, but Paul said we are to act with boldness, to affirm the blessings of God which come to those who come to him. We are not going to hide the truth of God's word but to offer to all God's people the unveiled Gospel which we ourselves received.

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