

Unveiled
Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 34:29-35
Reading from the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 3:12 - 4:2

So, is the band-aid to protect the wound or to protect your ego and others' stomachs from the nauseating evidence that the cabinet door was quicker than your duck; that the curb was higher than your foot assumed it to be: that against your wishes the floor gave your face a big sloppy kiss. I say that knowing that you know I have stood in this pulpit with a postcard sized band-aid shielding your eyes from the harsh reality that I should probably never chase a dog or act like a twenty-year old athlete without a helmet.

One Sunday I went so far as to sneak a touch of Donna's makeup to hide the latest ding to my shiny forehead. Even today, I am grateful for slacks and a robe because I have an ugly softball-sized bruise on a shin that came as a result of... I have absolutely no idea! Has that ever happened to you? "Hey! what happened to your arm?" Hmmm. I'm 61, either I don't remember, or I've reached the age that you can get a bruise when the wind changes direction. Either way, I haven't the foggiest...

Hidden from view. Let's be honest, who among us has ever strategically placed a placed a couch or an ottoman to hide a stain on the carpet?

Hidden from view. There are things we hide from view to stave off embarrassment. There are things we cover to protect others from discomfort or even pain. Do you tell someone in the deep throes of dementia that a friend has died? And is there a point when it's best to stop correcting their stories, mixed-up memories, or their misapprehensions of what they see or how they experience an event? Long ago, whenever one sweet church member would greet me, who she saw was her pastor from her young adulthood. "Russell, tell me how your girls are doing?" What would be the purpose of correcting her? So, I'd say, "Sarah, the girls are doing just fine."

Hidden from view. Parents monitor what their children watch; fret over them being exposed to ideas, traumas, videos, music, themes, stories that are beyond their capacity to process. Rebecca spends a great deal of time curating resources that are developmentally appropriate and just as much energy calming the frayed nerves of parents when the grittiness of an information age world inevitably breaks through the

defense shields you build around your children. Very often, the key is not so much about shielding them from the outside but walking with them and helping them to process the world they are in.

Hidden from view. There are abundant reasons why we may place a veil over our lives out of the fear of what others would think if they knew who we actually are. We stuff the closet with the stories, wounds, and missteps of the past. We try on different personas and masks, to give impressions that would veil our vulnerabilities and disguise our insecurities.

Similarly, there are plenteous circumstances when some form of a veil shields our eyes from comprehension, understanding, acceptance, truth. News of an unexpected death triggers initial denial. We say, "He couldn't have. I just saw him last night." Similarly, obvious symptoms and friends' observations cannot alter our refusal to acknowledge a potentially life-threatening condition. We protest. "I'm fine."

There are whole topics that are beyond veiled to us. It's as if the entire subject is covered with a blackout curtain. It could be math. It could be physics. There are generations of folks who went off to college

thinking engineering or medicine until they ran into Chem. 11. And how about the many mechanics, electricians, and contractors who mercilessly lose me at hello? I can flip a light switch but don't ask me to trace the path between the switch and the nuclear power plant. "But don't you want to understand..." No, Stanley, I don't. I just want to flip the switch and have enough light to read the *Dilbert* cartoon and see the difference between the *Cheez-its* and the box of croutons in the pantry ... Stanley.

Some things - ideas, concepts, evidence, truths - remain veiled to us because we're not wired to understand. Other things - ideas, concepts, evidence, truths - remain veiled to us because we just don't want to understand. It could be laziness. It could be fear. It could be avoidance of what knowledge may call forth from us. At some point you have probably heard yourself say, "I don't want to know how to operate that thing, because if I did, I might be asked to do it." If ignorance isn't bliss, sometimes it's pretty convenient.

Paul says, "Their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside." In this text the Apostle Paul

is frustrated by veils. In fact, it is safe to say that when it comes to Corinth, Paul is frustrated in general. First Church, Corinth is a confounding congregation. You have to give him credit for moxie. It was a bold move to establish a congregation in the heart of Hellenistic culture, where influences, backgrounds, and ideas were head-whippingly diverse. Greek and Roman and a host of other influences traveling through this port city and trade center. And religion? I groan whenever a mythology category shows up on *Jeopardy* because I can't keep any of those stories straight.

Yes, it was a bold move to start a church in Corinth, and there were probably days Paul questioned why he ever crossed over to the Peloponnese. He might as well have spent his time corralling sand fleas down at the beach where at least there was a nice breeze. He was constantly having to correct them. "No, suing the guy next to you in the pew is probably not a Christlike move; No, you can't treat the Lord's table like the Golden Corral; No, it's not okay to have an affair with your mother-in-law." Yet, Paul hung in there with the Corinthian congregants, and even after he left Corinth, Paul was determined to

correspond with the fragile church and remain in relationship with them.

However, after Paul's first letter to Corinth, his relationship with them went south. You see, a bustling city like Corinth was host to a variety of self-proclaimed prophets and soothsayers. And a primary way schemers seek to insinuate themselves into the lives and minds of a people is to trash the dude who was there before them. And so, trash Paul, they did. Throughout 2 Corinthians we catch glimmers of how they sought to undermine Paul's authority as an apostle. They said Paul was weak and that his sermons were boring. They claimed Paul was mentally unbalanced, and without any evidence, accused him of playing loose with the church funds.

Thus, in Paul's second letter, he seeks to restore the relationship, refute the fake news, and clear up all the misinformation, or in other words, remove the veil that would prevent them from seeing the truth. Using this image of a veil, Paul takes the reader back to Exodus and the encounter between Moses and God on Mt. Sinai. Following the Golden Calf incident and a few verses of *Rock of Ages, cleft for me*, God gives Moses the Law and the instructions related to it a second time. When

Moses descends the mountain with the new tablets of the Law, he is unaware that, having been in the presence of the glory of the Lord, his face was shining, and you can just imagine someone like Miriam saying with alarm, "Moses! You're scaring the children!" So, we read that Moses put a veil on his face to protect the people from being frightened by the refracted radiance of God's glory.

Paul uses this image of the veil to dispel the misinformation and expose the false prophecies of his opponents. He writes, "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."

Playing with the image of the veil, Paul seeks to establish what has been revealed, made clear, brought near in Jesus Christ. Theologian Karl Barth said, "In Jesus Christ there is no isolation of man from God or of God from man. Rather, in Him we encounter the history, the dialogue, in which God and man meet together and are together." Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." The Nicene Creed describes Jesus as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father."

In Jesus, we are seeing, not a facsimile, not an imitation, not a representative, not a stand-in, understudy, or shadow of God. Rather, in Jesus we are encountering God. In Jesus, there is no veil. When we see Jesus, we are seeing God.

Frederick Buechner reminds us that Jesus doesn't say, "The religion founded in my name is the way, the truth, and the life ... Our way of worship, the Christian structure, is not the way," [he would say,] "I am. I am. If you want to know what life is all about, what it's supposed to be, where it's supposed to go, where it's supposed to derive its strength from, don't look at anything people say about me. Don't look at the faith that's been created. Look at my life, which is a life ultimately of sacrificial love."

I never cease to be amazed by the number of bright, savvy, confident, accomplished, driven, capable, prosperous, and intelligent people there are not just in this world or in this country, but in this neighborhood as well. I'm blown away by their accomplishments, their knowledge, their gifts. There's this high school out in California that keeps churning out these phenomenally fast distance runners. The team photo looks like a bunch of undernourished kids headed to a nerd

convention. But put them on a track and they leave the Eveready bunny in the dust, setting phenomenal times and records. And they tend to be wicked smart with the books, too. Incredible. Similarly, I had the chance to go to a special Wynton Marsalis event in New York, and in the vestibule outside the Concert Hall they had these young jazz prodigies laying down some seriously impressive and complicated tunes. Lo and behold, I noticed that the sax player was a former Charlottean who was confirmed right here at SMPC. Do you remember Veronica Leahy, who as a young kid here would march right up to that piano and Light ... It ... Up, leaving everyone out there slack-jawed. I've never seen so many uvulas at one time in my life! It was incredible. And now, she's hanging out with the jazz legends in the Big Apple. She told me she's a student in a joint program between Harvard University and the Berkeley Conservatory of Music. How is that even possible?

So many talents, gifts, and impressive resumes out there. So many neurons firing in so many brilliant brains. So many genius entrepreneurs. So many signs of prosperity all around us.

And yet, as impressed as I am by all the talented, driven people and all the accoutrements that come with all their accomplishments, I

am equally saddened that a significant percentage of them live lives of quiet desperation, having discovered too late that success is very often in a different zip code than wholeness. Our newsfeeds are regularly populated by the stories of the latest celebrity crash and burn, having fallen off the pedestal or the red carpet or the wagon, unceremoniously having their hollowness exposed on their exit from public view. But you know, you know that for every one of those sad celebrity stories of lives unspooled, there are probably ten or more stories of slow meltdowns in your own orbit, people you know. People desperately seeking meaning or escape when the world just won't bend to their will, when the stuff isn't enough, when the inheritance has been treated as more important than the relationship, when the job isn't what was advertised, and their family life looks like a Rorschach test.

And in such a world, there is a line of folks waiting to sell you a solution, hoping you'll invest in their program, their method, their high-priced secret for your emptiness. Let me be honest, I'm not in that line. Whitney's not in that line. Rebecca's not in that line. Lindsey's not in that line. Zach's not in that line. Nancy's not in that line. We're not here to sell you anything. I'm just here to tell you about Jesus. We're just

here to read the stories and say, "I think he went that way." We're just here to say, "Take a look at this. Jesus got game." Karl Barth said, "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is Himself the way"

I was reading a couple of articles in the latest edition of *The Atlantic*, a cerebral periodical with an admittedly niche audience, which of course begs the question of why in the world I was reading it. You certainly wouldn't find it on the waiting room coffee tables in my hometown. The articles were philosophical reflections on human happiness. The authors had consulted scholars, philosophers, psychologists, attempting to find what might bring meaning, and maybe glimmers of happiness to lives filled, yet unfulfilled.

One of the authors was making the intentional effort to change her personality, to be more likeable. She was unsatisfied with life and had basically tired of always complaining about her life to her friends. In grad school she and a partner were assigned to write fake obituaries for each other by interviewing each other's family and friends. The nicest thing the partner could shake out of her loved ones was that she "really liked grocery shopping." Later, on a wedding website in which

she was a bridesmaid, she was described as "strongly opinionated and fiercely persistent."

She wanted a personality makeover. So, she enrolled in an improv class thinking "fake it 'til you make it" because she figured life was about playing at roles until you find one that fits. She consulted "the world's best-known expert on personality change." She read the research. Seeking to be more agreeable, she enrolled in an anger-management class in which she was the only one not court-ordered to be there. She read about the evolution of personality theory. She started a gratitude journal, giving thanks for things like Netflix, leggings, and wine, but after a few days all she could write was, "Very hard to come up with new things." (cf. Olga Khazan, *The Atlantic*) Yet, as she continued to relate a journey of spinning all her intellectual wheels, I was struck that the few random signs of constructive direction and counsel she was getting from all her research looked a lot like the Jesus she hadn't even considered as relevant - his patience, mercy, openness, willingness to see the goodness in others not readily apparent, his self-giving.

I am always watching folks spinning their wheels, investing their resources, energy, considerable brainpower and time searching

everywhere but here to find what has been available here all along.

Remember, Karl Barth's observation, "Jesus does not give recipes that show the way to God as other teachers of religion do. He is Himself the way" In Jesus, God comes to us unveiled and accessible, a light unto our faces and onto our paths. Paul says, "And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed..." Amen.