

Veils

We often speak of the spiritual life as a kind of journey.

And today's readings are among those that encourage that kind of thinking.

There's Moses, trooping up and down the mountain, with each trip bringing new blessings — and a shining face!

And then there's Jesus and the disciples, heading up the mountain where the transfiguration occurs, and then back down again to life in all of its messy complexity.

And while the spiritual life is a kind of journey, it's not about going from point A to point B.

From San Francisco to New York.

Or Honolulu to Manila.

When I was a drug counselor, one of the most common things that newly recovering addicts recalled were the number of "geographics" that they took.

"What's a 'geographic,'" I asked?

"Well," they explained, "a 'geographic' means changing my location in the hope of changing myself."

And what every single one of them experienced was that the same person who got on a plane in say, Dubuque, Iowa, was the exact same person who got off the plane when they landed in Honolulu.

Yes, they took a journey.

But nothing changed.

Which brings us to the second piece of the puzzle in today's readings.

Where all three of our readings, explicitly and implicitly, ask us to think about veils.

Veils can be face coverings, like the ones so many of our moms wore to church back in the day.

Or veils can be shrouds that cover a new piece of sculpture — or a corpse.

The veil in the Jewish Temple separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple.

Veils cover something, hiding it from view, leaving us to wonder what it is that's lurking behind it.

And yet, the very thing the veil is hiding is also present, isn't it?

For Moses, it's his shining face.

A face too bright to look at for those not yet transformed.

For Jesus and his disciples, all those days, weeks and months before this mountaintop experience, the veil that kept them from seeing who Jesus truly is, is lifted, even if just for a moment.

A lifting that causes panic and joy and even terror in his best friends.

That's why Paul is right on target this morning.

Because he insists that the spiritual journey is not about miles walked but about hearts and minds transformed.

It's not about traveling to a new country.

It's about the willingness to receive a new consciousness.

Causing the veil to be lifted.

And gently inviting us into a new way of seeing the world — and each other.

Allowing us to see behind the veil of the ordinary, the everyday.

Sometimes, like in Paul's case, the veil is instantly, stunningly, lifted.

Knocked to his backside, he's given a vision that totally upends his life.

But usually, for most of us, lifting the veil comes from the slow and steady work of doing kingdom things.

Kingdom things, like, letting go of control of people, places and things.

Like, trusting that all shall be well, even when things don't seem to be well.

Like, getting into the habit of wasting mercy and forgiveness and compassion on those who don't deserve it.

These are the practices that allow the veil to be lifted.

Giving to others can lift the veil.

But so can a willingness to receive from others too.

There are many who give all that they are, but find it almost impossible to receive in turn.

And yet the ability to receive, as well as to give, is vital.

It's a flow that we are invited into.

And a flow is just that.

It's an exchange.

Not simply a pouring out — but a taking in as well.

Ego can not only cause us to be tightwads in giving.

Ego can cause us to be tightwads in receiving too.

And so Jesus today invites us to join him on his journey.

One made up not so much in miles as in metanoia.

That entering into the larger mind of the Source of all that is.

Which we, as a shorthand, call God.

The nameless, mysterious creator of all that is.

Infinitely far from us, yet intimately close as well.

When we begin to peer behind the veil of what seems to be, we begin to see that the Way of Jesus is less about ritual and rules and more about entering into the life that he lives.

A life that extravagantly pours out compassion and mercy, love and forgiveness.

Jesus spends his days healing and teaching.

Healing the young epileptic boy, then teaching the boy's dad about faith.

But Jesus is also able to receive.

As the woman pours perfume over his feet.

Was it Marx who said: "The ends justify the means?"

But in fact, the means must be compatible with the end.

The means must serve the end.

Mirror the end.

St Catherine of Sienna knows this when she, filled with joy at having peered behind the veil, sees that "All the way to heaven is heaven, because Jesus says, I am the Way."

Indeed, the journey is the destination.

When we turn Jesus into an object of worship, yet fail to do as he does, to live as he lives, we've missed the point.

The veil remains.

We've not yet developed kingdom eyes.

When ritual replaces transformation, we've missed the boat.

Jesus doesn't say: "worship me."

He says over and over: "Follow me."

"Do what I do — so that you may become who I am."

These reflections are particularly apt as we begin the season of Lent.

This time of stepping back and of reflection.

This time of checking in on my own inner transformation.

Am I simply moving from point A to point B — or is something changing within me?

Am I finding myself less interested in my own self-centered needs and more interested in the needs of others?

And yet, by the same token, am I developing the humility to receive as well as to give?

Am I developing the ability to listen to those who disagree with me — about politics or society or religion?

Am I developing that trust in God — that all shall be well?

Even in these days of saber rattling.

Even as war rains down in Europe?

As Sister Joan Chittester implores:

“What the world needs is an openness to the Holy Spirit and a commitment to basic principles of truth and justice and goodness and to the Will of God for all humankind.

We need a faith that functions in the present, not a religion that’s stuck in the past.

Being open to the Spirit is never an easy thing.

Such openness demands that we let go of our own limited ideas — to make way for new ways to encounter the presence of God.

It’s not a comfortable call, this invitation of God to embark on that dark walk toward a distant future.

But taking that dark walk is precisely how we respond to the Spirit.

It takes imagination and vision to see good will — especially in those with whom we disagree.

It takes courage to admit our weaknesses — that corrupt our strength and erode our hearts.

It takes a genuine openness to see God everywhere and in everyone.

Especially when we assume that godliness is our possession.

Limited to our groups and our nation and our church and our ideas.

Imagination and courage and openness to the Spirit call us to a new vision.

To a softening heart.

To an expansion of our souls beyond our self-centered worlds and chauvinistic politics and segregated social lives and intellectual mediocrity — that poses as faith — and parades as religion.”

Modified.

Perhaps this Lent we can ask ourselves this pressing question:

What veil covers my eyes?

And what might I do or stop doing, in order to come and see, in the words of the poet, that “Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God?”

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