

Sermon - February 27, 2022 – “Behind the Mask”
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Last Thursday, I was on a zoom meeting with a colleague, when a young man from IT stopped at my office and asked if he could “map my computer” or something to that effect. It appeared that in order to make the new printer they were setting up in the office next door to mine, allow me to print from it, I had to get mapped, whatever that meant. I explained I was on a zoom meeting, but he insisted it would only take four minutes or less, and there was no need to sign out of anything, and so my colleague and I agreed to turn off our video cameras and microphones and let him do the mapping. He sat in my chair at the computer, and I sat nearby. When my profile picture came up on the screen, he let out a loud: “Wow!” I asked: “what was wow about?” and he said it was my picture. I looked at the picture that I had hastily chosen two years ago at the beginning of the pandemic, that was not chosen for the portrait – the face part -- but because I wanted to have a picture that showed me in the halls of the hospital doing my thing – an action shot – per se—that presented a comfortable familiar scene to those who knew the hospital. Surprised, I said: “My picture? What about my picture?” And then he said: “Your smile – what a smile!” And then it hit me – we’ve had two years of very few, and sometimes, no smiles. I said: “We sure haven’t seen a lot of smiles, have we?” (I tried my hardest to smile with my eyes). He said he was new to the hospital, and for most of the people he meets, he says, he doesn’t have a clue what they look like – and there have been no smiles. No smiles literally, and what a metaphor for the last two years, no smiles figuratively! **No smiles.**

This is the last Sunday after the Epiphany before we go into the Lenten liturgical season that begins this coming Ash Wednesday, also known as the Penitential season of Lent. On that day, we will participate in a service that marks the beginning of the forty days that precedes Easter Sunday. We start the beginning of Lent with having ashes put on our forehead in the sign of the cross. These ashes were made by burning the palm branches that were used during that Palm Sunday service the previous year. Thank goodness for our Church’s Facebook page recordings, otherwise I wouldn’t have a hope of remembering the last two years’ Palm Sundays and what I was doing then. But surprisingly, the Palm Sunday of 2019, I can vividly remember – blessing the palms in the courtyard and then processing and waving them as we all walked together into the church. Is my brain purposely not remembering the last two years, I wondered – like one would have amnesia after a horrible event? And is not remembering a good thing or a bad thing – what will happen when the masks come off? What will **we be** behind our masks?

Today’s readings are extremely helpful in helping us answer this question. From Exodus, we heard the remarkable story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Up on the mountain, Moses had encountered God, and after this encounter his face was shining, and shining so much that those encountering him were afraid. His people came to understand that his shining face was proof of his encounter with the divine, and because of how powerful that was -- it caused the skin of his face to shine. But after that, Moses wore a veil to cover his face. In other words, Moses wore a mask! And Moses appears again in our Gospel reading from Luke, the story of the transfiguration of Jesus. There, Jesus meets Moses and Elijah and speaks to them on top of the mountain. But before that happens, and while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed too, and his clothes became dazzling white. What a sight this must have been for the disciples Peter, John and James who witnessed this – so wonderful, in fact, that Peter proposes staying up there, staying on the mountain top. And as in the Moses story, God speaks to them confirming that Jesus is God’s chosen one, the Messiah, one who should be listened to. The miracle of both stories is about how God’s presence can brilliantly change us – even change the very skin on one’s face. What can this mean for us who have been wearing our veils for so long, wearing our masks?

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (3:12-4:2) helps to explain this when he says "Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." As we come to what we hope might be the end of the mask wearing Lenten like two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, this Lent, this Lent starting on Wednesday might be our opportunity to reflect, and through our reflection, remove our masks to reveal that we too have been transfigured, and not only in a way that will finally show the world our smiles.

I know in my ministry with patients who have gone through life-changing medical events that has caused great suffering, and with people who are incarcerated who have committed crimes which has caused them and many people to suffer, that these times of pain, trials and tribulations can be opportunities for transformation and great positive change. And part of this change frequently involves a connection or re-connection with God that changes or transfigures the person, and the person's lives thereafter. As we begin our Lenten season, let's use this opportunity of reflection and introspection to see how what we have all experienced over the last two years in the desert might have taught us about ourselves, about our relationship with God, and about what God wants for us as we move forward without our masks. What is and what will be our faces when we remove our masks? Have the past two years of suffering, loss and separation caused us to become angry, bitter, cynical and less like God when we present our faces to the world? Have we gotten used to being on our own and not as connected to each other and to our communities than we were before the masks, when we could not hide our faces? Has the last two years divided us in ways that make us angry, and less likely to work hard to reconnect to others, and to see suffering as an opportunity for us to help, and to go out of our comfort zone, and to give more of ourselves? The time during Lent, as our masks begin to drop is the perfect opportunity to engage in reflections about who we are as a person and as a people who have now experienced an event that had never happened in our lifetimes. As the horrific events unfold in the Ukraine, are we more compassionate because of the last two years, or are we fed up and tired of being worried and frightened? And do we find ourselves turning away from watching or caring about hard things?

However, we know that the period of Lent leads up to Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter, and through this time we hear the stories of how Jesus modelled God's love in his every being, including his face, and, also of how he was wrongly persecuted, tortured and killed. But we also know that Jesus' story did not end with his suffering. We know that Easter always follows Good Friday. Let us use Lent to reflect on how our faces can shine too, and in doing so reflect the **Christ in us** to those who meet us, and to those who need us, and to a world that will still have suffering, disease and war. What will be your Lenten words that will remind you to let your love and your face shine, and your smiles be a visible sign of God's love for the world? For me it will be from Micah – "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you **but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.**" (6:8) May this Lent inform you, transform you, and give you peace. **Amen.**