

The Fifth Sunday in Lent – Pr. Faugstad sermon
Exodus 34:29-35: “The Perfect Mediator Imparts His Grace.”
April 5/6, 2025 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and everlasting God, who, according to Your unspeakable mercy in Your dear Son, called us to the new testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit, we humbly ask You, remove the veil from our eyes, that we may behold the glory of Your Gospel; and grant that we all, beholding as in a glass Your glory, may be changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord; through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 154)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the thirty-fourth chapter of the Book of Exodus. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with Him. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, “*who make[s] His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you*” (Num. 6:25), dear fellow redeemed:

I imagine you have heard the proverb: “Bad company corrupts good character.” The apostle Paul quotes it in his First Letter to the Corinthians (15:33). The opposite is also true: “Good company promotes good character.” But good company can also be painful for us when we are doing or saying things that are not good. You may have had the experience of criticizing or making fun of someone, only to have a friend or acquaintance defend that person and speak well of him. That can make you feel pretty small as you become aware of your own pettiness and your failure to uphold the Eighth Commandment.

When this happens, there are typically two responses. You might admire your friend, react with humility, and be thankful that he or she spoke up. That would be “good company promoting

good character.” But you might also get angry and accuse that person of being self-righteous. You might even put some distance between the two of you and choose the company of friends who will not question you like this. That would be “bad company corrupting good character.”

We see something like this going on in today’s account of Moses coming down the mountain with a shining face. The people knew why his face was shining; *“he had been talking with God.”* They also saw *“the two tablets of the testimony in his hand,”* just like the first set he broke when he found them worshipping the golden calf. And instead of approaching Moses with humility, they ran from his presence and kept their distance from him.

Moses’ shining face reminded them how unholy they were, how much they had fallen short of the glory of God. They weren’t even seeing God’s glory directly; this was a reflection of His glory, and it was still too much! But Moses called the leaders of the people to come near. He recognized their fear; he spoke gently with them. The scene is similar to when Joseph revealed his identity to his eleven brothers in Egypt. He had the power to harm them after they had sold him as a slave many years earlier. But instead he called them to come near and embraced them (Gen. 45:4,14-15); *“he comforted them and spoke kindly to them”* (50:21).

Moses had been chosen by God as an intermediary between Him and the people. No one but Moses could go up on Mount Sinai when God descended in a cloud to talk with him. We are told that the LORD spoke with Moses *“as a man speaks to his friend”* (Exo. 33:11). God gave His holy commands to Moses, and Moses gave them to the people. After Moses finished speaking God’s Word to them, he would put on a veil to cover his shining face. But when He returned to the LORD’s presence, he removed the veil and kept the veil off until He had conveyed to the people what God had said.

Moses had some privilege and power as the mediator. Nobody else had this close communication with God, and whatever Moses said, the people accepted as God’s truth. His constantly shining face reminded them how different his station was than theirs. But Moses was still a sinner like them. The holy Law of God applied to him as well, and it condemned him whenever he followed his own sinful will. So Moses was a mediator with flaws and limitations. He had no power to make God do anything. He had no power within himself to save the people.

A different mediator was needed for that, and today’s Epistle from the Book of Hebrews tells us about Him. But to understand what Hebrews is saying, we need to understand the ceremonial laws about worship in Old Testament times along with the responsibilities of the priests. God gave instructions to Moses how he was to construct a tabernacle or movable tent for the worship of the LORD. The tabernacle had two main sections: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. These areas were separated by a thick veil.

Behind the veil in the Most Holy Place, the Ark of the Covenant was set. Three things were put inside the ark: a golden urn holding some manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the tablets of the Law that Moses brought down the mountain (Heb. 9:4). On the lid of the ark, God directed Moses to put a “mercy seat.”

Only once a year, the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and only after he had washed and put on holy garments and been consecrated for the work. He sprinkled the blood of a bull and a goat on the mercy seat to make atonement for Israel's sin before God. This blood sprinkled on the mercy seat covered over the Law of God which was stored below it. The high priest was directed to perform this ritual every year because the people continued to break the holy Law of God (Lev. 16).

Today's Epistle brings this practice forward to the time of Christ. It says, *"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."* As the high priest brought blood into the Most Holy Place to make atonement each year, so Jesus presented His own blood before God in heaven once and for all.

This shows us that the tabernacle that Moses built and later the temple in Jerusalem that followed the same design were patterned after heaven. And the work of the high priest each year with the sprinkling of blood pointed forward to Jesus' atoning sacrifice and the shedding of His blood for the redemption of all sinners. This is an *"eternal redemption,"* sufficient for all time, because no common blood was offered before God. Jesus offered His own holy blood for our cleansing.

The author to the Hebrews writes that His blood *"[purifies] our conscience from dead works to serve the living God"* (9:14). "Dead works" are all the works we have done in our sin — our lack of love for others, our self-centered behavior, our giving way to bad habits and choosing bad company. They are dead works, which mean they don't work. They destroy everything. These dead works clutter up our conscience; they weigh on us like a heavy burden.

Jesus' holy blood washes away these sinful works; it cleans them out of us as though they were never there in the first place. His blood cancels the debt we owe to God for breaking His Law. Jesus paid for our sins. He made atonement for them. No matter what bad things you have done or said, God neither sees nor remembers them anymore. He forgives you all of them.

He has washed these sins out of you and freed your conscience, so that you can serve Him. That is the great liberating effect of Jesus' atonement and the absolution He announces to you. His forgiveness of your sins means you get to move forward. You don't have to continue to dwell on your transgressions in the past. You go forward in His grace, ready each day to serve Him by serving your neighbor.

You are free to serve the living God. That sounds very different than serving God because you are afraid of Him, afraid that He will destroy you in His anger if you mess up. That is the message of the old covenant, of God's holy Law. But there is another covenant, the covenant of God's promise. This is the promise that God the Father made to send His only Son to keep the Law for us and die for our sins. Romans 10:4 says, *"Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."*

If we read the old covenant apart from Christ, it is like reading it with a veil covering it, a veil like the one Moses wore over his shining face. Apart from Christ, we don't see the Law clearly

and how it applies to us. But as St. Paul writes, *“when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed”* (2Co. 3:16). Then we have freedom, freedom through the knowledge of our forgiveness, freedom to approach God for mercy and grace.

This was underscored by the amazing thing that happened when Jesus took His last breath on the cross. Right at that moment, the thick veil in the temple (thick as a person’s hand!) that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place tore in two, from top to bottom (Mat. 27:51, Mar. 15:38, Luk. 23:45). What was veiled, was now opened. What was formerly restricted, was now freely accessible. The hymnwriter explains what that means for us:

Jesus, in Thy cross are centered
All the marvels of Thy grace;
Thou, my Savior, once hast entered
Through Thy blood the holy place:
Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption,
From Satan’s dominion I now have exemption;
The way is now free to the Father’s high throne,
Where I may approach Him, in Thy name alone.
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* 182, v. 8)

This is what our perfect Mediator, our holy High Priest, has done for us. He offered Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, which gives us continuous access to the Father’s throne of grace. He imparts this grace to us through His holy means of grace. As we hear His Word and partake of His Sacraments, we receive His heavenly gifts. His holiness covers us, His life fills us, His light shines through us.

As awesome as it would have been to converse with God on the mountain like Moses did, we have everything that Moses had and more. He looked ahead to the fulfillment of God’s promises. We see them fulfilled. The Old Testament laws and rituals, the detailed requirements for daily life, the constant emphasis on holiness – all of these anticipated the coming of the Holy One, our Lord Jesus Christ. All those things were *“a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ”* (Col. 2:17).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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