

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Last Sunday of Epiphany, March 3, 2019.

Our lessons today are about a veil. Not the veil, which is a Temple furnishing, as in the veil of the Temple being torn when Jesus was crucified. But the veil as something worn.

- Moses wears a veil when speaking to his fellow Israelites, but takes it off when in the presence of God (**Exodus 34:29-35**).
- St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians (**II Corinthians 3:12-4:2**) confirms that the veil is removed when we speak with the Lord. He describes this unveiled conversation as “freedom.”
- St. Luke (**Luke 9:28-43a**) tells us that when Jesus prayed, his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. A veil is not mentioned, but clearly the “glory” that the disciples notice is a result of Jesus being with God.

Well, what are we to make of this veil business? Here are some possibilities:

- Jesus is more relaxed in God’s presence than with the disciples, and therefore doesn’t need the veil.
- Jesus understands that the disciples are not yet able to handle the glory of God, and therefore he, Jesus, confident that he is God, veils himself in their presence so as not to overwhelm them.
- Maybe it’s a simple matter of respect. God invites us to meet with him. Overwhelmed by this invitation, we ask ourselves, “Do we come as we are, or do we dress in a more formal manner?” And perhaps we conclude that we should dress formally and wear a veil.

I wonder, if we are in God’s presence, might God say, “You don’t need to wear that silly veil. Take it off and relax and tell me what is on your mind.”

This is another way of describing Jesus at prayer. Jesus doesn’t need the veil. He is with his Father after all. It’s all in the family. No veil needed.

So, what is the message for you and me? Certainly not that our relationship with God should be on a casual basis. Surely some formality is appropriate. After all, we are in the presence of the Creator of the Universe. If not a veil, at least something to let God know that we respect Him and honor Him and thank Him for His approachability. This is what Jesus is all about, isn't it?

Approachability. Our call is not to search for God, but to respond to God searching for us. And in a variety of ways. There is the grandeur of the Universe – the formal end of the scale where a veil probably is appropriate – but also through a birth in a manger – the informal end of the scale where somehow a veil seems out of place.

Think of the cross. There is no formality about being nailed to a cross. There is plenty of Mystery, of course, as in the Transfiguration on the mountain top, but not a lot of formality.

When God spoke to the disciples, He did not say, "Where's your veil? God said rather, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" And when God wanted to underscore His approachability in today's gospel, He did so through a messy healing. Look at the verbs: seizing, shrieking, convulsing, foaming, mauling. This is not high tea. This is down in the trenches.

The truth is that the faith you and I embrace is a wonderful mix of formal and informal. Our worship takes many forms, from stone Cathedrals to wooden chapels, from dressed-to-the-nines to donated clothes, from "O Lord thou art" to "If you're there, God, please pick up the phone."

The veil itself is a very interesting garment. It has a variety of uses. We can wear it as a sign of respect and we can wear it as protection. It can be a symbol of adoration and a symbol of submission. In our collect this morning, we speak of "the light of God's countenance" – a lofty term - in order to "bear our cross" – a down and dirty term. And in today's psalm (**Psalm 99**), we note that God "forgave them, yet punished them for their evil deeds."

No wonder we're never sure whether to wear the veil or not. What we can be sure of is that conversations with God are never casual. There's a reason why the skin of the face of Moses was shining. When you and I enter into prayer, when

we walk into God's courts, even with praise, we shouldn't assume that we know how God will respond. The Lord might well say, "Okay, now that you are thankful, what are you going to do with your blessings?"

Imagine being in the presence of Jesus. Instinctively we would probably reach for a veil or some other sign of respect. And then imagine him saying, "Thank you for the respect, but you can remove the veil. It's okay. Let's just visit."

Our skin would change, wouldn't it? Our life would change. And maybe the lives of others would change. God can speak out of a pillar of cloud. And God can speak out of the son of a carpenter. And, while it's hard to believe, God can speak out of you and me. Really? Yes, really.

And, with a shining face, maybe red, maybe ashen, definitely changed, we retire to contemplate what it all means. And where is one place where contemplation is possible? Welcome to Church! Welcome to proclaiming the greatness of the Lord. Welcome to moments of formality and informality. It's not veil or no veil. It's veil and no veil. We fall on our knees sometimes and we stand tall other times.

We take our cue from the Lord, including transitioning from one Season to the next. We are now at the end of the Season of Epiphany. This coming Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Season of Lent. We move from enthusiastically sharing the Good News to acknowledging that our effort is not what it could be. We are conflicted. We have been up. And soon we will be down.

But isn't that pattern okay? Isn't that pattern what life is all about? Isn't that pattern what faith is designed to address? Sometimes up and sometimes down, and lots of time in some crazy combination of the two. Never just one or the other, but a mix. And it's our mix. When we say yes to Jesus, we own the mix, and it's up to us to deal with the mix.

And, so we do, chiefly by thanking God for our blessings, but also by acknowledging our shortcomings. And, oh yes, we give trials and temptations their due. But we come to the conclusion, year after year, that God knows what

we are going through and is determined to help us, even to the point of dying on a cross and rising to life again.

It's called Salvation. It is a promise. It is, we believe, a reality. Not based on something we read or something someone told us, but on our own experience of juggling conviction and uncertainty. And not just by ourselves, but in community, and in one-to-one conversations with God, otherwise known as prayer.

So, as we prepare to go to the wilderness with our Lord, let us continue to give thanks for all of God's blessings, including the privilege and joy of going on this journey of faith together. As strong as we can be individually, we are always stronger collectively. So, buckle up! In a few days, we're off for forty days of struggle with Satan. Veil is optional. But, not to fear, we will never be alone, just as Jesus was not alone. We have our Lord and we have one another. Now that is really good company.

Amen.