

I have had a song stuck in my head all week, thanks to this morning's Old Testament reading about Moses and his "glow." And naturally it is a song that I am not particularly fond of... REM's song, "Shiny Happy People" has been on a loop in my head, playing over and over,

*Shiny happy people laughing*

*Meet me in the crowd*

*People people*

*Throw your love around...*

Beyond the reference to shininess I have no idea why that has become stuck in my mind. The song and the reading could not be further from each other in terms of emotion and sentiment.

No, in the passage from Exodus we do not find a lot of happiness. In fact we find fear. And I suspect that the fear of the people of Israel has its roots in an earlier episode. After their exodus from Egypt Moses leads the people to the base of Mt Horeb/Sinai. There God re-establishes God's covenant with the people of Israel, who at first are pleased to hear this news. Then God decides to come closer, so that "the people may hear what I say to you." Well, the Israelites take one look at that holy mountain wrapped in clouds and lightning, with thunder and quaking earth, and they say to Moses, "My, look at the time... We've got to be somewhere – anywhere but here – so Moses YOU go up there and you fill us in later. Give our best to the big Kahuna..." This is one of the most poignant turning points in the Hebrew scriptures: from this point going forward God only speaks to the collective people of Israel through a mediator. The underlying issue is fear; the people are afraid of the reality of God.

Today's reading picks up the story as Moses is coming down with the commandments of God – for the second time (we have to keep in mind that whole ugly "golden calf" fiasco). When the people see Moses they refuse to come near him. He seems to have brought the holy mountain with him. The Israelites are filled with fear because Moses' face is all aglow from his time with God. Moses is transfigured – that is, his appearance is changed – and the people cannot abide it. And so Moses calls a vestry meeting with the elders and they come up with a solution: a veil. When Moses talks with the folks, the veil goes on. When Moses talks with God, the veil comes off. Veil on; veil off; veil on; veil off.

Now I love this story. And I love it because it challenges us. It challenges us on several fronts. First, the "God-glow." Here is a fact of faith: the more time we spend with God, the more we engage in acts that reveal God's love, the more we reconcile rather than fight, the more we subjugate and align our will to the will of God – well, the more we take on a "glow." We shine with the reflected light of God. It is not our light. It is God's light. But we can and do reflect that light. Indeed, this season of Epiphany is all about light and the contagion that light is. The glow of God is infectious. You catch it by being near it.

Unless of course something interferes. Like, for instance, a veil. The veil. We know it well. And it raises several questions. First, why the veil? As our reading so perfectly illustrates the need for the veil finds its source in fear. Although many may be drawn to the light of God, as many fear that shine. Perhaps they are even more wary of reflected light; if it could happen to you it could happen to me. The Israelites feared being destroyed by the proximity of God. Those folks in our time that fear intimacy with God or your reflective surfaces also fear a destruction of sorts. Charlie Roper, a retired priest in this diocese, once said to me during my discernment process, "Intimacy and vulnerability are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other." I have often reflected on these words as I have striven to walk ever closer with Christ. God will have you as you truly are, not as you want you to be. Much must be let go of to take up the you that God loves and created you to be. And so there is almost a knee-jerk

reflex from our brothers and sisters out there who live the life of intense individualism: keep away; I like the me of my own making; YOU cover up; veil on.

And we often do. Perhaps more shocking than the demand that Moses cover up his God-glow is Moses' acquiescence to that demand. In our epistle this morning Paul says, "Deal with it. No more covering up the light of Christ!" Paul tells us that Christ sets aside the veil once and for all. But in my experience we have to be willing to yield the veil to Jesus. How often have we Christians laughed along with a belittling racial joke, or looked the other way in the face of unscrupulous business practices, or have averted our eyes when confronted with the physical or verbal abuse of a child? These are all veils that hide the glow of God's love. We wear the veil because we don't want to rock the boat (make things uncomfortable), or we don't want to risk our jobs, or we aren't ready to let go of the veil because we have also bought into the profit of the joke, or the business practice, or even the abuse. At their core these too are veils of fear.

We Christians have yet another veil. The veil of self-righteousness and intolerance worn proudly in the name of Christ is often the most opaque. One of the best illustrations of this is found in the "Church Sign Battle" between two churches over the eternal status of dogs. Perhaps you have seen the exchange... If not, this was a feud between a Catholic and a Presbyterian church in a southern town – fought on the battlefields of their church signs. Initially the Catholic church posted the message, "ALL DOGS GO TO HEAVEN." The local Presbyterian Church responded, ONLY HUMANS GO TO HEAVEN. READ THE BIBLE

Catholic: GOD LOVES ALL HIS CREATURES, DOGS INCLUDED

Presbyterian: DOGS DON'T HAVE SOULS. THIS IS NOT OPEN FOR DEBATE

Catholic: CATHOLIC DOGS GO TO HEAVEN. PRESBYTERIAN DOGS CAN TALK TO THEIR PASTOR

Presbyterian: CONVERTING TO CATHOLICISM DOES NOT MAGICALLY GRANT YOUR DOG A SOUL

Catholic: FREE DOGS SOULS WITH CONVERSION

Presbyterian: DOGS ARE ANIMALS. THERE AREN'T ANY ROCKS IN HEAVEN EITHER

Catholic: ALL ROCKS GO TO HEAVEN

Yes, this is funny. And the particular denominations don't really matter. The roles could easily be reversed, or it could certainly involve two Episcopal churches. The point I wish to make is that one of these churches shines with the openness and grace and possibilities of God's love while the other is veiled in literalism and doctrine. And behind this veil lies fear as well, fear that we might be wrong, fear that God doesn't fit in our box.

Now, after bashing the demand for veils – and our ready use of them – in all fairness I need to acknowledge that Moses wore his veil primarily so the Israelites could hear his words. His veil facilitated revelation. This is important for those who bear the glow of God's love. How do we shine so that others not only can bear it but perhaps begin to glow a little themselves?

Some time ago I had an encounter with a children's sports coach. We were talking about college basketball teams. And I told the coach that I was a Kentucky fan. The coach admitted that he was an avid supporter of Duke basketball. Then the coach told me why: "Duke is a team that is at the top of the polls every year, and they do it white." I told him I didn't understand what he means by "doing it white," although I feared I really did. He went on to explain that they were young men of integrity and commitment and bright minds. At this point I was seething: "What does he mean? What in his small mind does "doing it black" look like? What about the countless

black men and women of integrity, commitment and intelligence? Aren't most if not all the folks who have wrecked our economy white? Isn't that "doing it white?" I had the lecture/sermon broiling in my mind. Had I delivered that sermon I have no doubt that he would have shut down and become defensive. But instead – and I do think this was a moment of grace – I asked him, "Are you talking about character, or skin color?" He stopped for a moment, and then said, "Well, character." We talked a little more, and he went on to reflect on the excellent minds and integrity of Andre Dawkins and Grant Hill and other African-American Duke players past and present. I decided to push him a little bit. "You're practically quoting Martin Luther King," I said. "I have a dream that my children might live in a land where they would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." He nodded and walked off to coach the kids. Oh, there was so much more that I wanted to say – should have said – but maybe in veiling my anger we exchanged words that could be heard.

God is in the business of revelation, and we do begin to take on a glow when basking in the light of God's love revealed. We do become instruments of revelation, becoming "shiny happy people, throwing love around." May God grant us the courage to set aside the multifaceted fears that veil God's love. And may God grant us the grace to speak God's truth in words that others can hear.