

“Masks”

Exodus 34:29-35

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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“Masquerade, paper faces on parade. Hide your face so the world will never find you.” So said the preacher at a Halloween wedding I attended for a church member in San Francisco. We all wore masks and feather boas—the more flamboyant the better. It was San Francisco after all. Dress up is fun.

I co-officiated at my niece’s wedding last weekend in Atlanta. The service was outdoors and everyone was vaccinated. While we were able to see each other’s faces in this fully vaccinated crowd, I reflected on the costumes we all wore. Dressed up in our wedding finery we put our very best selves forward. Sometimes those costumes make us more confident, like wearing super suits. Sometimes they help us hide, trying on a new identity for size, knowing we can go back once the event is over.

While we all have gotten reluctantly accustomed to wearing masks during this pandemic, imagine the other types of coverings that we wear for protection. What do we use to hide or truest identity? What physical or psychic armor do we don each day?

Masks. Remember when masks were funny? You remember the Jim Carrey movie from a number of years ago. Where a mask had magical powers to transform the wearer sometimes for good, but often for bad. That was so 27 years ago. I remember taking a bus trip with our sister church. The bus had *The Mask* running in Spanish to the delight of the children. It was called ‘la mascara’.

These days, masks have become a political symbol. Real men are seen as shunning masks, even when it compromises their health. It reminds me of old cigarette commercials. Oddly too many of those actors died of lung cancer, even the Marlboro Man.

After not having a Halloween to speak of last year, I know that people are enjoying getting dressed up and giving candy out instead of just gorging on it.

Last night, I walked through Dinkytown and saw costumed people all around. I missed that last year.

Although, Liz Weinfurter posted on social media the other day that she had to break the news to her 6-year-old daughter that someone in her class had come down with COVID. But that wasn’t the worst news. The really bad news was that all of her classmates needed to quarantine until November 8th. No trick or treating for her, breaking her little heart. Antimaskers and antivaxers ought to explain themselves to a six year old bereft of an October rite of passage.

So, on this Halloween service, let’s look at a mask-wearer and see what it revealed and concealed.

We know about old Moses. He alone had the honor of speaking with God. Which meant that he had insider information and he did his best to relay it to the people.

He was able to let the people know that God had promised to deliver them from Egyptian slavery. But now they were in the wilderness. For a long time. A really long time. Moses went up to the mountain several times. He went up to encounter God at the

burning bush. He went back up to get the 10 commandments. But while he was gone, the people lost their faith and made a golden calf to worship. Moses saw it, had a bit of a hissy fit and threw the tablets on the ground, shattering them. I can just imagine his face, seething with rage, veins popping out of his neck. He held good news in his hands and instead had to deal with an insurrection. He had a bit of a temper. Maybe he needed an anger management program, or at least some therapy.

Earlier in today's chapter of scripture, Moses spends 40 days fasting, praying and meditating on the weight of these commandments, the nature of the covenant and what it might take to carry it out. As he comes down from the mountain this time, he's holding a second set of tablets and he doesn't destroy them. Luckily there are no golden calves in sight this time.

The story ought to be about the tablets in Moses' hand. Instead, his face steals the show. The rest of today's scripture is about how Moses' face glows and the need for him to wear a veil. A veil is a mask. People didn't recognize Moses at first. In fact some early religious art depicted him with horns on his head—a mistranslation of his shining countenance.

While Biblically women are often told to wear veils, this is the only time a man wears a veil in public. A veil is a mask. Some Muslim women take off their veils in intimate settings, but wear them in public.

Consider this. Priests often wore veils when entering into the holy temple and God's presence. Moses inverts this, removing his mask to speak with God, but putting it on in public. Was Moses and his shining or horned face that scary?

Is he the phantom of the mountain?

Moses wears the veil to protect the people from his glory—his God inspiration—and maybe from his scary rage. Moses doesn't shine because of his own charisma. Maybe the glow is a kind of charisma. The people were afraid of Moses. He didn't think he had changed, but the people sure did. It's true, our most influential aspect, our glow, is sometimes not something even we can see. It's something that another sees.

Countenance is something that is contagious. If you are scowling, others ape us with scowls. Similarly, if we are at peace and exude serenity or even joy, people see it and respond accordingly. We have learned to smile with our eyes. You can tell a lot more from the eyes these days.

Moses was a humble and reluctant leader. He didn't want this role. He ran away from his royal upbringing. He stuttered and reminded folks that Aaron was a better leader than him. Miriam certainly had more charisma. Maybe it was his humility that helped.

The unbearable brightness of Moses' face is a residue of God's steadfast love for Israel—even in the face of betrayal. We are meant to shine.

Fourteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart put it well: "We should not think that holiness is based on what we do but rather on what we are, for it is not our works that sanctify us, but who sanctifies our works."

When Moses came down from the mountain, his face shone with the glory of God in a way that made people afraid to come near him. Was it rage? Was it inspiration? Whatever it was, they knew something was different about Moses. Maybe it was the way his face reflected their own fears and hopes. This time, they took the tablets and established the Law of God in the wilderness. They believed in the message of God, boldly given to their glowing leader.

Moses' face shown forth with such radiance that he had to cover it. It was too scary, too bold. When Moses spoke with God, the veils were lifted.

Moses realized that encountering God scared people. His bodily transform challenged them. They stood in awe of Moses. But did Moses cover his face because he saw the people's fear? Maybe he covered his face so as not to cause people to confuse him with God. That's way too much responsibility.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote that Moses wore a veil to protect himself—a mask to shield others from the truth—from his pain, his anguish, his unrealized dreams. He wore a veil to hide his blood-red rage at having to be responsible for this stiff-necked people.

I bet Moses liked wearing the mask. He could be for once anonymous. But he really couldn't hide forever. Eventually, he had to convey the words of God to the people.

What part of you are you afraid to show?

What is comforting about your mask?

What might you want to hide until you have refined it?

What if we spend our lifetime refining it and never really show what we truly are?

What if there is a God-spark in each of us that is glowing behind our masks?

As poet Marianne Anderson wrote:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It is not just in some of us, it is in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

At the Halloween San Francisco wedding, there came a time in the service where the grooms took off their masks and saw each other face to face. The implication was that a marriage is about seeing each other for who they are, flaws and makeup aside. And to love them anyway. That's hard work.

This whole mask-wearing time has been a season of introspection. But introspection is not what it is all about. It's a season. And it's a time that prepares us for the next big thing in our lives. For what have you been preparing? For what are you longing?

My friends, we wear masks to keep us safe. There is a time and a place for masks. There is also a time and a place for letting our faces shine—letting out our God-nature. May that day come soon for all of us. Imagine what new covenants we might want to make.

But for now, we wear our masks in solidarity with a world in need, ever mindful that behind them lies a God inspired person who is shining like a fall sunrise, revealing fields covered for months by foliage's masks, illuminating remaining brown and yellow leaves. May we live in constant awe and prepare ourselves for the great unveiling that awaits us all.