

February 14, 2010
Transfiguration of Our Lord
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:25-36
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WHAT MAKES YOUR SKIN SHINE?

What makes someone's skin shine? Is it make-up on the outside or something inside them?

And what about the glow that some people seem to have? It's Valentine's Day, after all. Maybe you remember falling in love and people saying that they could see it on your face. Your whole being radiated a kind of joy, a kind of giddiness. Something wonderful in your heart was shining on your face.

Oh, we can see it at other times as well. A child's face beams while opening a present, or telling of some new discovery. A singer's face literally glows because the words and music come from a deep place within them. A friend is so excited about a new opportunity that you can see it on their face.

So, what makes our skin shine?

Well ... cosmetics is a billion dollar industry. Even the ancient Egyptians painted their faces to enhance their appearance. They developed a wide variety of products to deal with skin problems such as getting rid of stretch marks or scars, shrinking wrinkles, and making hair grow.

Maybe we want to look younger than we really are. Maybe we simply want our skin to have a natural, healthy glow. Facials. Make-up. Masks. There is a plethora of products and procedures, for both men and women.

So what do you do when you are feeling stressed, tired and unglamorous? When you look in the mirror and see not shine and glow, but the effects of aging, lack of sleep, some hard times and some bad choices? Though you may not be able to reverse a year of sloth and cheeseburgers in a few hours, maybe you need a nutritional facelift. One dermatologist attributes lack of energy, dull skin and wrinkles to low-grade inflammation caused by sun exposure, pollution, stress, sugar and dehydration. He says that if you eat the right foods—fruits and vegetables rich in antioxidants, foods rich in omega 3 fatty acids, and carbohydrates low in simple sugars—you'll be the hit of the party. Your face will glow across a crowded room. Goodbye match.com, hello valentine.

As you heard in the readings, our texts today are full of face talk. Shining faces, to be exact.

On the mountain Jesus has such an experience of the holy, of the transcendent, of God's glory, that the appearance of his face changes. Some scholars wonder if the gospel writers are inserting a vision of the risen Christ into the narrative of Jesus' life. In any case, it is dazzling. It is otherworldly. Jesus' face has become the face of God. It must have been almost blinding to Peter, James and John. Sometimes the divine is that way. It can overwhelm us. Frighten us. Change us. Transfigure us. Those God moments, those aha moments, those wonderful moments that make our skin shine and glow, come all too infrequently. And we'd like to store them up so we have a reserve of them when times get tough. When the look on our face is fear or boredom or anxiety.

Peter must sense that. He wants to make three dwellings, three booths, for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Maybe the radiant energy from the top of the mountain would be like a solar-heated home. A place to bask in divine glow. But of course we know they can't stay there. They must follow Jesus to the topography of ministry, struggle and suffering.

But it's the reading about Moses that is also fascinating. He comes down from the mountain, after talking with God, and the people notice that the skin of his face is shining. No cosmetics. No facials. Who knows what kind of diet! Just a face-to-face with God. The shining skin is so overwhelming that it hurts the eyes of the Israelites. They are afraid to even come near Moses. He has to wear a veil to cover the shining skin of his face.

I imagine there are some pretty happy faces in New Orleans after the Saint's Super Bowl victory last Sunday. Add the festivities of Mardi Gras and there's probably quite a glow down there. They may not be wearing veils, but many people paint their faces or wear masks, enabling them to be whoever they want to be. Funny how in real life we often wear masks, trying to cover up what's really inside or who we really are. Strange how we don't always want our faces to show what we're really feeling.

In a few days we will be asked to take off our masks. From the merrymaking of Mardi Gras we move to the serious business of Lent. Ashes will be smeared on our faces, inviting us to be honest about the truth of our lives and our need for God. There are those who say, just put on a happy face and everything will be OK. But look at the faces of the Haitians. Look at the faces of those without jobs. Look at the faces of those whose hearts are breaking. Lent will invite us to be in the struggle, to face what we'd rather repress or deny, most notably that we are fragile and mortal.

Do you ever try to read faces? Are you ever in a large crowd, look at all the faces, and wonder what their lives are about? Do you guess what's on their mind or in their heart? What makes their skin shine or their eyes sad? A face can be a window to the soul.

As Christians we say that Jesus reveals to us the face of God. Through his life, through his healing, through his compassion, we get a glimpse of the divine. Even in this brief glimpse, there is grace. For God is revealed not only on the top of mountain but in profound moments when we are most human: falling in love and intimacy struggles with illness and suffering ... and in self-forgetful moments of care for another.

What makes our skin shine? Sometimes it's from being together as the people of God. Encountering Christ among us in word, water, bread and wine. Sometimes it is the oil of healing on our brow, shining with the promises of God.

Both Christians and Jews treasure a benediction in which God beams with a glowing, radiant face. "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy."

Even sunscreen can't block those rays. So let your skin shine.