

Spiritual Makeover

Exodus 34: 29-35 Luke 9: 28-36

Makeovers have been a steady and presumably popular staple of TV shows. It seems everyone likes to see something that is in need of some serious attention and watch how it gets transformed into something wonderful. One of the most popular versions has been the PBS show “This Old House” which started with host Bob Vila. It is still on the air, but now there are so many competing shows that I doubt it commands the viewership it once had. And of course, there have been dozens of shows in-between, focusing not just on houses but people, and coming in all kinds of variety. The mission was fixing up men in Bravo’s “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” which broke boundaries by bringing gay men into leading roles to teach heterosexual men not to be quite so gross, unkempt, and slovenly. That the subject looked much better at the end wasn’t too remarkable since a haircut and some better clothes would have done the job. Whatever the scenario, viewers get to witness a stunning change that took hours if not days to generate, edited into an hour-long episode of transformation.

The producers likely see something in the person, place, or thing that is hidden within, faded from perception, worn over time, and reduced by neglect. Yet they can still perceive how it bears promise underneath a kind of mask that prevents the average observer from giving it much notice. Whatever it is slumbers, needing the kiss of Prince Charming to awaken its being with new life.

The faithful can seem to slumber. There may have been a time of excitement in making a commitment of faith, becoming aware of a sense of purpose and promise that lies ahead as one embraces the call to serve and grow and heal and bear witness to new life. But things have a habit of happening that dull the edge of the spirit, that turn joy into reflection into concern that things aren’t what they were supposed to be. Quite frankly, most churches are excellent at taking the spirit and crushing it with stunning effectiveness, as if trying to bring the spirit into a slumbering level that won’t awaken the congregation. The tried and true expressions come out that ‘we don’t do that,’ ‘we don’t do things that way,’ ‘we’ve never done it that way before,’ ‘oh, that would mean changing things,’ etc.

This is why the Presbyterian church has a whole separate class of ministers who serve as interim pastor between one permanent pastor and the next one. It helps to get things changed up a bit so that the new pastor doesn’t have to deal with those statements (as much), and the congregation can find the interim pastor reckless, loathsome, and disturbing while knowing the interim will be gone before long. It’s a really smart process that enables a transition and allows the new pastor to come in and bring some new energy to the somewhat-awakened saints.

Our scriptures describe special occasions known as “mountaintop experiences.” even if there isn’t any actual mountain in any of these stories. Our scriptures take us to the actual mountaintop in both passages. This is pretty much how the term derived. The journey to the top of the mountain becomes a meeting place between the self and the

sacred, the culmination of an arduous trial that is rewarded with the blessing of new life, new identity, new being. It is an awakening for the individual and affects those around them.

The opposite of the mountaintop experience is the valley experience, the descent into the dark unknown that's hidden in the shadows of the mountains. There is a sense of threat and uncertainty that suggests peril and testing. If anyone has had both of these experiences, you probably know that the journey between the two can be can stunningly short. How long does it take to go from the mountaintop all the way down to the valley?

Former heavyweight boxer James (Quick) Tillis was a cowboy from Oklahoma who also boxed in Chicago in the 1980s, fighting Mike Weaver, Earnie Shavers, and even a young Mike Tyson. He remarked about his first day in Chicago arriving from Tulsa. "I got off the bus with two cardboard suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, 'I'm going to conquer Chicago.' When I looked down, the suitcases were gone." That's the speedy trip from the mountaintop to the valley. You'll see how this plays out as we turn to the scriptures.

After returning to the mountaintop to get two more tablets from God, Moses comes down from there, returning to his people, but he is literally radiant. His face glows like a light bulb and he can't shut it off.

Fear is the response from Aaron and the people. Recall how consistently this is portrayed in scripture, the immediate response to an awareness of the sacred intruding on human affairs is a sense of fear. The divine messenger is always saying to the trembling mortal, "Fear not." Presumably Moses said the same 'fear not' thing to get people to approach him.

But it wasn't a temporary thing for Moses; this glowing business didn't stop. It was such a problem that Moses decided to wear a veil over his face most times, except in the presence of God, and when he's addressing the people. It seems kind of silly to hide this radiance behind a veil, while at times revealing his facial brightness anyway. Was there any doubt about what was behind the veil? It doesn't seem like the veil made things any more *normal*.

Moses' luminous face is a sign of God's presence that now rests among God's people. You'll recall how God had traveled through the wilderness with his people as a pillar of fire and a pillar of smoke or cloud. The wilderness journey is coming to an end as the Torah Law is given to Moses. God's presence with his people is now taking a new form as God's people begin a new phase of their journey. Moses is the vehicle for this transition. Moses is truly reflecting the spirituality of God, a spiritual connection that all can see.

There is a new spiritual connection being established, a new phase in the spiritual experience. But this presence can be disconcerting and uncomfortable, both for the one who bears it, and for those around them as they encounter someone who has had a

spiritual makeover. The veil is an attempt, albeit perhaps a feeble one, to make this new look of spirituality normal. The glowing spirituality can be off-putting and problematic, and we are compelled to find ways to cope with this new reality and what it means for us and for those around us.

In the story of Jesus' transfiguration, we find some of the same elements.

Jesus and his inner circle of Peter and brothers James and John went up to the mountaintop to pray. Not only is Jesus' face changed there, but his clothes become a dazzling white. In this miraculous spectacle, Jesus is joined by Moses and the prophet Elijah. While Moses and Elijah respectively represent the promise of the Law – getting pictured like on the bulletin cover holding the tablets – and the promise of the Messiah, but not really being the one who is not holding the tablets. It's also true that they had both met the direct presence of God, the glory of God himself: Moses as we just heard in the other scripture in receiving the Law, and Elijah saw God's backside when he was hiding out in a cave. That they should be present to bear witness to God in Jesus here is natural for a storyteller.

In this wildly abnormal situation, Peter tries to create a semblance of normalcy, covering up the bizarre by offering to build three shelters. Even Luke adds his own mocking comment as an editorial remark: “[Peter] did not know what he was saying.” Not that James and John are much better. They don't utter a word. Peter is like the church folks who want to gain control of the exuberant spirit who has come to change their slumbering lives. It won't work here. Despite Peter's efforts to create the normal and contain an unmanageable situation, the cloud comes and the voice within it declares, *This is my Son whom I have chosen; listen to him!*

God won't let them hide behind the veil of normalcy. God won't let them try to empty the sacred spiritual power of the moment with a lame attempt to cover it up and control it and continue as if nothing had happened. God makes clear to them what should have been obvious by now; Jesus is God's chosen Son and 'contrary to what you've been doing, fellas, you really ought to *listen to him.*'

When all of this is done, the text explains that the three disciples kept this event *to themselves*. Oy! That was hardly the idea. They were witnesses to the transfiguration so that they could give witness to the others, getting on track with Jesus and his sacred mission. Again, they didn't want to relate this abnormal event to anyone else since they would seem wacky. Better to just keep it quiet. Just cover it up; put a veil over it.

In these instances of spiritual makeover, a vital spiritual connection has been made. In these witnesses, we have an illustration of God's presence with God's people. No, *we* don't walk around with glowing faces, or shine forth in robes of brilliant light. However, the experience of spiritual makeover, of spiritual awakening can make all things bright when they had become dull, and make all things new and alive when they had become stale and deadly.

People have tried to replicate this mountaintop spiritual experience, but they typically miss the mark. Granting ourselves permission to consume in self-indulgence is much easier, believing that we will satisfy what hungers within is one foolish method that's been tried many times. Our culture and its obsession with acquisition and status is a false god that promises joy and blessing when you take care of yourself. A healthy spirituality can see through that, recognizing how the reverse is true; joy and blessing come from a spiritual inspiration to generous charity and grace, giving it away and giving yourself away.

We may get caught by the portrayal of the good life and our culture's imagery of success and satisfaction, believing the gospel of advertising and marketing, that doing certain things will bring peace, healing, and new life. They can be very good at stirring the froth of spirituality, engaging the emotions, and tugging at the heart without ever dealing with anything of consequence. The spirituality of the gospel of Jesus speaks to a whole other reality, a transcendent spirituality that seeks to transform self and society with peace, with spiritual power, and with sacred promise.

The light of God's presence is empowering, emboldening, and indeed transforming. A spiritual makeover is the radiance that has shined from people of faith through the ages. Outstanding people had the transcendent courage and deep spiritual grounding to move mountains, challenge empires, defeat the powers of deprivation, despair, and destruction. They knew oppression, saw exploitation, and had the spiritual audacity to shine the light of liberation and healing, and to strive sacrificially to bring justice and peace.

Such witnesses wore the brightness of a sacred faith and lived in its glow, not on Sundays, not for a season, but as the directing beam for their life's work and journey. Had they remained behind a veil, had they conformed themselves to something "normal," we never would have known them, known their impact, and history would be the worse.

May we know that God has come to be with us, his people. God has come to invite us to a spiritual makeover. May we lift any veil from our awareness to reflect a glowing spirituality that God is indeed with us. May we celebrate our God who stands with us and empowers us to be faithful, vital, and bold servants of our Lord Jesus.