

“Shining Faces”

Exodus 34:29-35

Since the dawn of time, human beings have been attracted to shiny things. For centuries archeologists have dug into the depths of human history and discovered silver amulets, golden statues, and jewel encrusted crowns. Fast forward to our present day and have a look at the world around us and we will see that the human fascination with all things shiny really hasn't changed much. In recent years some find themselves attracted to a shiny new gold iphone, the sheen of a brand new pair of shoes, or the glossy look of a car with a fresh coat of wax.

There are some who may assume that this human fascination with all things shiny might have to do with a desire to have things that look pretty...but actually, recent scientific research has pointed to something else. It has to do with our survival.

Belgian scientists have confirmed our human preference for things shiny, by way of a series of experiments like giving blindfolded participants pieces of glossy paper and pieces of matte paper. Without even looking at the paper, participants rated the glossy paper as being more attractive and of higher quality. In another experiment, when participants were shown something like an advertisement in a glossy and a matte finish. Participants always preferred the glossy finish.

Why is this? Well, the scientists, in some of their early conclusions, believe that it has to do with...as I said, our human survival mechanism. You see, what they observed is that things that are shiny and glossy give the appearance of being wet. Because of the human need for water we desire that appearance. In fact, the thirstier participants got, the more they were attracted to the glossy pictures. Yes, they admit that some are attracted to the glossy, because can give the aura of wealth, riches and abundance...but it is our need for water that is at its core. After all, access to clean running water, has always been a sign of wealth and riches. A lack of water is something we associate with people who are impoverished. Our attraction to all that is shiny has more to do with a desire for life and the deep human need to survive than we may realize.

In many respects, the Israelites who were wandering through the wilderness in the Exodus story in the Bible were a people who were concerned with their need to survive. And the wilderness we speak of when we read the Exodus story, is the desert. In this case it is the desert in the Sinai peninsula. It was through that land that Moses led the people on their journey to the promised land.

If you have ever found yourself in the midst of a desert scape, there isn't much that shines in that environment, other than the heat of the sun beating down on you. The sand is flat and absorbs the light, the land is arid and there are little signs of life, of hope or promise. To be caught in the midst of that wilderness without the proper provisions...without food and especially water...is a recipe for death.

Through the Exodus story, the Israelites had always been the beneficiaries of God's gracious provision under the guidance of the prophet Moses. They had received the seemingly miraculous gifts of shimmering manna and sparkling water. Something else the Israelites received in that time that led to their survival was the gift of faith in God. This was Moses primary job it seems, as he led the people out of their slavery in Egypt. Moses was teaching the people how to trust in God for their life, their survival and their provision.

You see, for generations, the Israelites in their slavery in the land of Egypt, had become dependent on the Egyptians for some semblance of life and survival. They had forsaken their freedom for that. Yet now in the wilderness, the Israelites had to learn how to live again and discover the ways in which God could and would take care of them. And God did care for them and established a covenant with them. Yet there comes a time, in this text I read for you this morning, when Moses had left the people for awhile. While he is gone, they begin to question their survival and what might happen to them. What do they do? They collect all of the gold and melt it down and fashion for themselves a shiny golden calf to worship. The Israelites default into worshipping what was familiar and what they remembered from Egypt. Egypt was a land filled with golden statues and idols...as far as they were concerned, that shiny golden calf was a sign of hope for their survival. The shiny calf represented their new god.

I believe it important to recognize the power of what shines in our lives and how the shiny things can direct and influence the way we live. I know that when I find myself in the midst of winter, if there is one thing I crave when things can become so dull and dark and gray, one of the things I crave is a fresh snow covered landscape of a clear day. There is something about the brightness that can help me shake that mild depression that can set in and restore my sense of hope and optimism. I knew of a person who once described to me the same experience she had when she bought a brand new car. She just loved the way it shined and glistened in the sun...she spoke about how that new car helped to boost her spirits. I have to say that I was happy for her, but on another level, I realized that her happiness would be passing, and not everyone can afford to buy a shiny new car...or a shiny new anything to lift their spirits.

I have also given some thought to how televisions and flat panel screens have evolved in a way that seeks to appeal to our need and desire for things that are shiny. Perhaps you will remember that when flat panel televisions first hit the market, they were all what is known as lcd's or liquid crystal displays. LCD's had a flat finish to them that made images look rather dull. Especially when you compare it to what is available now, where almost every screen we buy be it in a television, a smartphone or a laptop or tablet has a glossy screen. Believe you me, marketers have poured a lot of money into knowing what people crave and want. To look into those screens is very appealing to the eye, it is more satisfying and more inviting.

You know in that study that I mentioned earlier about the human attraction to shiny things that those researchers in Belgium undertook, another experiment they conducted was with children's toys. They noted, and perhaps you have witnessed this in your own life, where children have an inclination or an instinct to actually lick the surface of toys that are glossy in their appearance. Yet the children almost always end up disappointed when they discover that glossy finish doesn't provide them with the satisfaction for which they were ultimately hoping.

It's like the story of a young gentleman who once walked into a shop and noticed a shiny, silvery object sitting on one of the shelves. Curious about the shiny object, he asks, "What is that?"

The store clerk responds, "It's a thermos."

The young gentleman then asks, "What does it do?"

The clerk says "It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold." So he buys one.

The next day, he brings it to work with him. His boss, noticing it on the employee's desk asks, "What is that shiny object?"

The employee replies "It's a thermos."

The boss asks, "What does it do?"

He says, "It keeps hot things hot and cold things cold."

The boss then asks, "What do you have in there?"

"Two cups of coffee and a popsicle."

Yeah...sometimes those shining things in life just don't live up to their billing, at least not the way we expect them to sometime, now do they?

And so it was for the Israelites and that Golden Calf they had fashioned for themselves...it really wasn't going to do for them what they were hoping it would. It may have provided some passing comfort and promise...but it wasn't going to help them survive...and Moses knew it too. In the text, God is exasperated with the Israelites and their lack of faith in him and is just ready to call the whole thing off. As the text notes, God is at that point, just willing to leave everything to Moses and forsake the rest.

Moses ends up having a long conversation with God back on Mount Sinai. We can imagine Moses, just wrestling with his thoughts and praying, digging deep, wondering what should he do...should he go it alone...should he forsake the rest of them? But Moses doesn't, instead he decides to advocate for the people. He presses God for forgiveness and grace and the establishment of another covenant. The text that Anne read for us reports that Moses comes down from the mountain with a new set of commandments. Yet something else that Moses comes with this time is a face, that according to the text, is of a different complexion. The text says that Moses face was radiant...it shone.

The Israelites aren't so sure what to do with this change in Moses. At first they are afraid to come near him. Perhaps they realized their folly in worshipping that shiny golden calf...especially when they now compared it to what they were encountering in the face of Moses. Or maybe they were in awe of Moses...that he would still stick with them and go to bat

for them...in spite of the fact that they had turned their back on him. You see, what they were encountering in Moses in that moment was the shining face of true faith.

It was the face of a man who did not give up on them and who did not forsake them and just go on his own way. Perhaps the fear they encountered, was their reverence and humility for what Moses had done for them. After all, it was God who was going to bring them to the promised land...it was this God with whom Moses had been speaking who was the source of their life and their survival...Moses knew this and therefore would not abandon them until they knew it too.

It is very curious that in this text, only a passing mention is given to the commandments themselves. Verse 32 says briefly, "Afterwards they came near him and he gave all the commands that the Lord had spoken to him." What is more important, and what the text focuses on is the appearance of Moses' face. It was his shine that mattered most. It was a shine they hadn't seen before.

The word shine, in the original Hebrew of this text...it means something along the lines of horns...like the horns of an animal...but not quite. If you have even seen Michelangelo's great marble statue of Moses, the statue actually portrays this. Michelangelo depicts Moses sitting, holding the tablets of the law and strangely enough, on Moses' head are two tiny horns. Michelangelo's interpretation is more on the literal side of things. A better way, to think of it, would be to imagine Moses face, with a veneer or maybe a calloused look. You might even say that Moses developed a thicker skin. Moses had worked hard at moving the people to a new land and a new life, he gave his life to it, and they had turned their back on him...yet Moses did not abandon them, he kept his faith in them and for them.

That's why Moses face "shone" ...it shone with the power of faith that was in him for them...it was the faith in a God that made him resilient yet loving, determined yet forgiving. Moses had to dig deep...yet in doing so, he unearthed a shine of a faith that would be for the people their future life and survival.

This wasn't just a surface shine...Moses wasn't just looking good. This was a holy shine, a sacred shine. It came from a deeper place. Remember, horns grow from the inside out...like

our finger nails and our toe nails. The shine of Moses was something that he experienced from within himself and it radiated to others.

I think we have all had people like that in our lives...we certainly need people like that in our lives. People who exhibit shining faces of faith...ones who have endured and advocated on our behalf, ones who have dug deeper within themselves and developed the thicker skins...who have put up with us and cared for us...that's why they shine for us. They are the ones who have worked hard for our survival and our future. We all have them. I wouldn't say that you would want to compliment these people on their horns...for obvious reasons...but these are ones who absolutely deserve to be remembered for their shining face faith... For their strength and composure on our behalf...For digging deep and unearthing something of great value in them and in us.

These are the shining saints in our lives, the ones whose faces we turn to because in them we ones who care about our survival. They are our intercessors -the ones who go to bat for us when we need them. Author John A. Coleman who has written about saints across various cultures and religions has noted that a characteristic saints and venerated persons in all cultures share is that of being an intercessor. These are ones who have that veneer that is the result of a deep faith. The role of intercessor is a characteristic the apostle Paul for example ascribes to Jesus in his letter to the Romans and elsewhere. Jesus is the keeper of the faith for us.

Humans around the globe and throughout the ages have recognized this need for an intercessor. That's why for example, in the Roman Catholic tradition, many people pray to the Saints to work on their behalf...often clutching a shiny medallion or glittery icon. They turn to the face of the Saints in the same way those Israelites needed the face of Moses to shine a faith that was on their behalf....for their future survival...for the sake of their lives.

We need intercessors who are there to shine for us. Though not as icons or medallions...but as the real people who go to bat for us...ones whose shining faces we look to...and we as a people of faith are called to this same task.

It's not easy work, to have this kind of faith and to have such a brave face in a world where there is so much doubt and so many distractions. Yet we know there are others who

need it, those closest to you, the person sitting next to you this morning, those refugees on their way who find themselves wandering in a wilderness and many, many others. Besides, as C.S. Lewis wrote in his book *Till We Have Faces*, "Till that word can be dug out of us, our lives will never be understood, we will never have clarity...we will never have faces." But thanks be to God that through ones like Moses, the Saints, and in and through the life of Christ, we have ones who have done their own digging and encourage us to do our own digging...that we might reveal our own shining face of faith."