

When One Turns to the Lord

2 Cor. 3: 12-18

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I figure that most of us at one time or another played the game of checkers. You remember how it works. If you make a diagonal jump over your opponent's pieces, you get to take those pieces off the board. If you get your piece all the way to the end of the board, your piece gets crowned a king. Lots of fun. And if you've played, you probably remember the surprise of suddenly getting jumped multiple times. You never saw it coming. But your opponent leaps left, right, right, left over four of your pieces and gets crowned. It's stunning. The apostle Paul was a master checker player. But not with red and black circle pieces. Paul made leaps no one ever saw coming in order to reveal the glory of the King he served. He's always surprising us with brilliant leaps of thought.

God gave a mighty task to the apostle Paul. He showed how Jesus is the key that opens the true meaning in the Hebrew Scriptures. He showed how Jesus solves the longing of people to know God truly. More than any other person, Paul made the connections between the promises of God and their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He wants us to see the treasure of knowing God through Christ.

In our passage this morning, Paul has taken up an episode from the life of Moses. In Exodus 34, we read of how Moses went up on the holy mountain to receive the law from the LORD. Moses encountered the Holy One, the Creator of heaven and earth. Now when Moses came down from the mountain, his face was shining. The people were afraid to come near Moses. He had been talking with God. The glory of heaven shimmered in his face and it unnerved the rest of them. So Moses covered his face. He put a veil, a cloth, over his face to cover the glory glow.

Here Paul makes a daring checker-like leap. He gives a very interesting twist as to why Moses covered his face with a veil. It was not just to keep from frightening the people. It was because the glory of this encounter would not last. And Moses did not want the people to see his shining fade. Paul goes on to imply that the glory dimmed from Moses's face because the glory of the Law Moses received would also fade. It was not God's final word. Something more glorious was yet to come. Moses veiled his face to shield them from fading glory.

Next, Paul makes another sudden checker leap. He takes the image of the veil and uses it a different way. He says the veil on Moses face was a symbol of the veil that is over the human heart. The veil that kept people from seeing the glory of God on Moses face represented the veil over every heart that keeps us from truly knowing God. The veil on our hearts keeps us from hearing God even when his Word is read. And that veil isn't just a piece of cloth. It's the hard heart. The stubborn will that makes our minds murky. It's my self-focus that keeps me from seeing who God is. It's my being turned in on myself that blocks me from knowing God. I can't see the glory of God because my face is buried in my own mess.

I'm reeling from the way Paul is moving the pieces. Moses shone from talking with God. So he put a veil over his face. But he did that for a deeper reason: the glory of the old law would be fading in comparison to what God would reveal in Christ. But people can't see the glory of God in Christ because there is a veil over their hearts. The veil means that the human heart is hard towards God. But now comes one more move: when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. When we look up from ourselves and look to what God has made known in Jesus, we see clearly.

But that's not the end of these leaps. When we behold, with unveiled faces, the glory of God in Jesus Christ, we get changed. When we turn to Christ we see who he is, and as we look at him, we get transformed. We get made like the one we gaze upon. His glory becomes our glory. In this way God moves us from fading glory of the old covenant to transforming radiance of the new covenant God makes with us in Christ. My head used to spin when my friend would make eight leaps on me in checkers. Sometimes I'd make him put all the pieces back on the board and show me what he did. Show me the key move you made that allowed everything else.

So here's the one point on which it all turns: when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. We cannot see God clearly because of the veil over our hearts. But when we look up from ourselves and towards our faithful savior, the veil is taken away. We enter the presence of God. And everything changes.

Hundreds of weddings into my ministry, I'm always struck with the rich theology in the traditional wedding ceremony. Nothing in it is accidental. It all has meaning. There's one part of the ancient wedding order that relates to our passage this morning.

The bride enters the sanctuary on the arm of her father, or some other man who represents the family from which she comes. Now I was always taught that if you're escorting a lady, you give her your strong right arm. Traditionally in a formal receiving the man is on the left and the woman is on the right. But in a wedding procession, the bride is to the left of the father. There's a reason for that. For the first part of the service, the father is *between* the bride and the groom. He's the last line of defense for his daughter. One last chance to make sure this young beast has the right intentions.

So they arrive in the front of the sanctuary and several things have to happen before the father steps aside. First, the minister speaks briefly on the meaning of marriage. This is what you're about to do. This is what God intends for a marriage. It's a big, wonderful deal. Second, we make the couple really wants to do this. Having said very dramatically what marriage means, we check with the couple to get agreement. It's sort of like when you sit in the exit row of a plane. The flight attendant says, "I need a verbal Yes from each of you acknowledging that you know this is an exit row seat and you may be called upon to assist in an emergency. You have to tell me yes or I'll move you to the tiny seats." We ask the bride and groom to give us a verbal Yes about their intent. And I love that traditionally we ask the bride to consent first, just to make sure she's not under undo pressure. Beautiful Gazelle, do you take Jim the Gorilla to be your husband? Then we get the groom's consent. Then we ask the congregation, the dearest family and friends of the couple if they give their blessing and promise to support the newlyweds.

Finally, there's just one more person to ask. I say to the father, "Who presents this woman to be married." He replies, "Her mother and I do." On behalf of the family, with everyone present in agreement, he presents his daughter. He now steps out of the way and brings the bride together with the groom. This is also the point where a very important action might occur. You don't see it very often these days. Changing fashions mean not very many brides wear a veil. But it's at this moment, the moment of presentation that a father lifts the veil so that the face of the bride may be clearly seen. The father steps aside, and, unveiled, the bride shines upon her groom. And his knees go weak, and his stomach flips, and we, quite rightly, pause for prayer so these two can find their feet amidst this epic reveal of the glory of the bride's beauty.

Note the order. First you hear what this moment means. Then you express your consent to undertake this tremendous commitment. Once you've turned your hearts toward each other through the mighty pledge of "I do," then the veil is

removed and you get to see each other directly. Only when the father is satisfied of the sincerity of this commitment does he step away. And only then does the couple get to see each other face to face and feel the glory of the union about to be forged. Once you come home to each other in this commitment, then you get to make a home together.

Paul writes, “When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (vs. 16). ...And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Turn to the Lord and the veil will be taken away and you will see God for who he is.

And what is it you will see when you turn to Christ? You will see that God has been seeing you all along. You will see that he has been shining on you all along. You will see that he is looking at you with redeeming love, longing for you to look back at him. You will discover that he has been calling to you. He has been laboring like a fiancé for his future bride, to get a home ready for you. He has laid down his life for you and now expectantly waits for you to see the love with which he loves you. He has been sending his Spirit to tug at you, to woo you, to win you.

We saved a collection of Little Golden Books that we used to read to our kids. One of them is called *Our Baby*, and it’s about a little girl with her doll who imitates the way her mother is taking care of the new baby in their house. On one page, you see the mother leaning over the baby smiling at her. You see the little girl smiling over her doll. The page reads, “As we get them dressed, we smile at our babies so they know that they’re the loved. We smile at them so they’ll know they’re the best, most important babies in the whole world.” That’s what love does. We all know people that when they talk to us make us feel like they have all day, that there’s no one they’d rather talk to than us, that we’re the most important person in the universe. It makes us feel wonderful. God feels that way about each one of us. He has the capacity to love each person utterly. When we look up, we see him smiling at us. He wants us to know we’re the most important and beloved creature in all the universe to him. Each of us. And to feel that reality changes everything.

In Ephesians, Paul weaves together several Old Testament passages to create one stunning encouragement. He writes, “Wake up, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” (Eph. 5: 14). For some of us, those words come as a gentle shake on early morning. It doesn’t take a lot of screaming, just a gentle voice calling our name, saying, “Hey, it’s time now. Wake up and see how

much Jesus loves you. Just open your eyes a bit to the truth of his love.” For others of us, it takes a bit more of an alarm clock. A bit rougher shake of the shoulders. “Hey, it’s time. Get your head out of the cereal bowl. Look up. Wake up. God calls you. Now.” Some of us need a slight turn. Some need a complete about face. But we all, deep down, yearn to hear the voice of love telling us it’s not too late. “Wake up O Sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

There’s a sermon I love that was preached more than a millennium and a half ago. The preacher speaks in the voice of Jesus. He imagines the rising Jesus going to fetch Adam and Eve out of the prison of death in which they have languished. He imagines Jesus as a shepherd seeking lost sheep. In this sermon, I see Jesus going to wake all those who are spiritually dead. Greatly desiring to visit those lost in darkness, he calls to us to come out of the land of death:

Out of love for you and for your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. I order you, O sleeper, to awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in me and I am in you; together we form only one person and we cannot be separated.¹

He calls to us and his voice reaches us even when we have fled to the ends of the earth. He shines on us even when we have wrapped ourselves in deep darkness. He whispers to us underneath the thousand voices clamoring in our minds. He stirs us when we are asleep in lethargy, bloated by our self-indulgence, or dulled by our excesses. He gathers us from the deep loneliness in our souls. He has news.

I order you O sleeper, to rise from the dead. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in hell. I did not make you for destruction. I did not intend you to languish forever in this misery. Get up! Rise from the dead for I am the life of the dead. Let’s go. Let’s get out. I have betrothed you to myself. I have claimed you. Turn to me now and let the veil fall away. See me shining on you. Get up out of the prison, the gates are open. Get up out of the tomb, the grave is conquered. Let the chains fall away.

Wake up O sleeper and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.
When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.
And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed
from degree of glory into another.

¹ <https://churchpop.com/2015/04/03/this-ancient-homily-for-holy-saturday-will-give-you-chills/>