



## Sermon Notes

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It's day, the time after Pentecost when Peter, James, and John freely proclaimed this event (e.g., [2 Pet. 1:17](#)).

### Psalm 99

All the other readings for the day mention Moses; and it may be that Psalm 99 was chosen simply because it too mentions Moses.

Plus, the "pillar of cloud" (verse 7) can be construed as at least a catchword-connection to the cloud mentioned twice in Luke 9:34. But something much deeper and more profound comes into view when Psalm 99 is read in conversation with Luke's account of the Transfiguration.

At first sight, the Transfiguration seems to be all about God's transcendence and otherness. Incredible things happen. Moses and Elijah suddenly appear, and a cloud engulfs Jesus and the disciples, who are understandably "terrified" (Luke 9:34). The biblical word that best describes such an experience of God's otherness is the word "holy," and "holy" is the keyword in Psalm 99. "Holy is he!" is the phrase that marks the conclusions of the first two sections of the psalm; and the word occurs twice more in verse 9, including a final affirmation of God's holiness that recalls verses 3 and 5.

In Psalm 99:1-3, the traditional sense of holiness is operative. There is trembling and quaking (see Exodus 19:7-25) at the presence of God who is "great and awesome" (verse 3). Even within this section, however, there is a hint of what is to come as Psalm 99 proceeds. As it will turn out, the holy God is not wholly other.

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Rather, this transcendent, unapproachable God can be experienced “in Zion” (verse 2), a very specific earthly place. Furthermore, the mention of “the cherubim” (verse 1) is almost certainly a reference to God’s earthly throne that was located in the Temple on Mount Zion (see also verses 5, 9). As Psalm 99 unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the holy God is actually invested not only in a particular place, but also in particular people and the human situation.

Verse 4a is problematic and might better be translated, “The might of a king (is to be) a lover of justice.” In any case, verse 4a goes on to affirm emphatically (the two “you”-pronouns in Hebrew provide the emphasis) that God has established “equity” (see Psalm 96:10; 98:9), as well as “justice and righteousness.” According to Psalm 82, the enactment of justice and righteousness is what constitutes true divinity; so it is not surprising that the enthronement collection (Psalms 93, 95-99), of which Psalm 99 is the culmination, twice portrays God as having come into the world precisely to do justice and righteousness (see Psalm 96:13; 98:9, which I translate in part as “[God] has come to establish justice on earth. He establishes justice in the world with righteousness ...”).

It is crucial to note that justice, righteousness, and equity are relational terms. If God is capable of being wholly other, God has chosen *not* to be. God has invested Godself in the world to set things right among the “families of the peoples” (Psalm 96:7), so that “The world is firmly established” (Psalm 96:10; compare Psalm 82:5 where the injustice of the gods destabilizes the created order). Fittingly, the whole creation celebrates God’s arrival (Psalm 96:11-12; 98:7-8). In short, in the enthronement collection, including Psalm 99, holiness is re-defined. It is not simply otherness and separation; rather it is involvement and relationship.

This re-construal of holiness proceeds apace in the final section of Psalm 99. God’s involvement extends to particular persons -- Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. Although these three may have “kept his decrees” (verse 7), the people they presided over certainly did not. This implies that Moses’, Aaron’s, and Samuel’s crying out to God consisted of requests for forgiveness (see, for instance, Exodus 32:1-14).

This conclusion is reinforced in verse 8, which, like verse 4, shifts from third-person to direct address. Furthermore, there is another emphatic “you”-pronoun in verse 8: “you answered them.” If the next line is any indication, the divine answer is God’s willingness to forgive, even though there are always consequences for disobedience (a reality communicated by the next line, which describes God as “an avenger of their wrongdoings”).

The re-construal of divine holiness as intimate involvement rather than otherness and separation is even clearer when one realizes that the word NRSV translates “forgiving” actually means “to bear, to carry.” The holy God is so present among the people that God is bearing the burden of the people’s disobedience! At this point, Psalm 99 recalls Hosea 11:8-9, where God’s response to God’s wayward child, Israel, is not punishment, but rather forgiveness.

In Hosea 11:9, the divine voice describes Godself like this: “for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst.” In short, what makes God divine is the willingness to forgive unflinchingly. Holiness has been radically re-construed. No longer does holiness consist of separation from the source of sin, but rather of intimate relationship with the sinner. Divine holiness is grounded in grace.

Perhaps Moses' face shines in Exodus 34:29-35, the Old Testament lesson for the day, not only because he is carrying the two newly-given "tablets of the covenant" (Exodus 34:29), but also because the tablets have been given by the God who has just introduced Himself as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6). The very existence of the new tablets is a sign of God's willingness to be in ongoing relationship with a sinful people.

Now, back to the Transfiguration -- reading Luke's account with Psalm 99 in mind invites careful attention to the literary context of Luke 9:26-38. The Transfiguration is immediately preceded by Jesus' announcement that he must suffer, be killed, and be raised (Luke 9:21-22). While the Transfiguration account itself is dominated by traditional holiness-phenomena, its context communicates that divine holiness is manifest ultimately as intimate relatedness on behalf of the other -- that is, holiness is grounded in divine grace and suffering love, as Psalm 99 suggests as well.

Exodus 34:29-35

Readers of the biblical text know good interpretation begins with the question, "What does the text say?"

This question is front and center because preconceived notions can interfere with one's understanding of biblical passages.

Preconceived notions about wedding veils<sup>1</sup> are likely the reason why this passage regarding Moses's shiny face is often misunderstood. Since wedding veils hide a bride's face, it is often thought that Moses's veil hid his face from the congregation after his encounters with God. Hiding was thought to be indicative of the holiness of God. To the surprise of many, however, Exodus 34:35 actually reads, "the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him."

William Baker explains: "It is in fact when he [Moses] is doing his priestly duty of meeting with God and reading out the law to the people that he does not wear the covering."<sup>2</sup> The implication is that when Moses is engaged in everyday life, he wears the veil and when he is involved in priestly duties, he does not wear the covering. Whether veiled or unveiled, both signify that Moses has a unique relationship with God and in the Israelite community.

This story about Moses's luminous face appears at the end of a narrative that covers Exodus 19-34. In Exodus 19, after their long arduous forty-year journey from enslavement in Egypt, Israel finally steps foot on the outskirts of the Promised Land, entering by way of Mt. Sinai. Here at Sinai, God makes a covenant with Israel and gives instructions for life in the new community. These instructions, including the Ten Commandments, teach the Israelites how to respect each other, each other's property, and the land as well as how the tabernacle is to be set up (Exodus 20-31).

In Exodus 32, while Moses is on the mountaintop communing with God, in the valley the covenant is threatened by the Golden Calf incident. Not yet accustomed to worshipping a God they cannot see, weary of the forty day wait and uncertain that Moses will ever return, the people request an image to worship. Aaron, in charge during Moses's absence, acquiesces. God informs Moses of the apostasy and tells him to go down to the valley

immediately, threatening to destroy Israel and begin again with Moses. Moses intercedes, and God relents. Appalled by what he sees when he returns, Moses destroys the tablets. The Levites' heeding of Moses's call to put 3,000 neighbors and family members to death brings an uneasy peace to this chaotic situation.

In Exodus 33 God commands Moses and the Israelites to continue the journey to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but God will not go with them. The people are grieved that God will no longer be with them. They realize that the Golden Calf incident portends that something has changed in the relationship between God and Israel. Israel has crossed the line -- and they know it. As with their longing for Egypt, they may want to go back to things as they were, but this time, they don't even raise their voices in complaint. In an act of silent repentance, even before God commands it, they take off their jewelry.

Disheartened, Moses again intercedes, this time asking for a glimpse of God's glory. Since Moses could not see the face of God and live, God promises to let Moses see, not God's glory (face), but God's goodness (back). In Exodus 33, God declares Godself to be a God who is merciful and gracious. In Exodus 34, in conjunction with the promise to replace the tablets that Moses had destroyed, God further explains that not only is "God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness for the thousandth generation ... [God is also a God of justice] to the third and fourth generations" (Exodus 34:6-7). The tablets are replaced, the covenant is renewed, and three national feasts are established to solidify Israel's relationship with God and with each other.

When Moses's face shines at the end of this story (Exodus 34:29-35), it is an affirmation of the renewal of the covenant. The shiny face is an indicator of Moses's relationship to God, of his openness and vulnerability before God and before the community. It is a sign that Moses trusts God and that Israel, in turn, can trust God and Moses as their leader. Rav Alex Israel observes, "the people need only to look at Moses and realize that he had experienced the ultimate communion with God in receiving the second covenant."<sup>3</sup>

Whether veiled or unveiled, Moses's face is a reminder of the uniqueness of his relationship with God and with Israel. It is a sign of God's care and continual presence, that God's grace prevailed, even in the midst of Israel's sin. In other words, Moses's shiny face represents a "Reversal of Outcome in the Golden Calf Episode."<sup>4</sup> It represents hope in the midst of a national disaster.

In a day and time of all kinds of national upheaval and disasters, one may wonder, is there any hope? No matter how dismal, no matter how unpromising the times, this story from ancient Israel is a reminder to all, even when there is much work to do, in the words of the spiritual, "Hold on just a little while longer, everything is gonna be alright."