

Divine Illumination
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Rev. Stephanie Ryder

Exodus 24: 12-18:

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Have you ever had an experience where it was so bizarre and strange you didn't really want to tell anyone because you didn't think they'd believe you? Or maybe because it was just so personal, you didn't know quite how to describe it?

I've had a few. One happened just recently. This is going to seem really strange, so I'm just going to warn you about that. I was driving along a very busy 2-lane street at 3pm, and a giant car pulled out of a side street and began to cross right in front of me. It came so close that I slammed on my horn to try and stop it. We were smashed together, there was nowhere for me to go left or right, and the van was right in front of me, pulling in to me. I didn't hear a crunch or crash. I didn't feel a big bump. But somehow it seemed something wasn't quite right.

The person in the van pulled across into the left turn lane and I passed by slowly, wondering what had just happened. I kept going, slowly, not quite sure if I'd been in a car crash or not. The person in the other car seemed not to be bothered a bit, so I bewilderedly kept going, too. Later that evening, from the garage, my husband said, "Someone hit you today!" and showed me the big scrapes across the right front of my car, where the other car had come so close.

Now here's where the strange part gets stranger. I took my finger, and touched the scrape, and it peeled right off. I went to find a towel, and I rubbed the scrape that took up the entire right side of my car, and the scrape rolled right off. It disappeared. There is no evidence of any damage on my car. I don't know how to explain this. And I didn't tell anyone about it until just now because I know it sounds unbelievable.

I'm wondering if this is why Jesus tells his disciples on the way back down the mountain not to tell anybody about what they just experienced up on the mountain. He knew people wouldn't believe them. He wanted to wait until something else happened that people knew about so it would maybe make more sense to them and people would believe the disciples. Maybe. We are still reading the stories today and trying to understand and wonder if we really believe. Jesus wanted Peter, James and John to know something, so he showed them.

He took them on the mountaintop and he showed them God's glory through himself, God's powerful and wonderful light, so that they would remember it. They would remember the beautiful sparkling dazzling light, that it was real, and maybe it would help them in times of darkness when they were scared or sad. They could remember Jesus lit up with God's light, and the cloud that came and told them to listen to Jesus. And Jesus told them not to be afraid. So when they were scared, they could remember the light. The beautiful light.

I officiated the wedding of my nephew and his fiancée last summer, two people very much in love. I encouraged them to always remember the love and light and beauty of their wedding day, because it would sustain them during rough times. That the love they felt was real, as were their hopes and dreams. There would be times, sooner or later, that things wouldn't be so lovely and light. Times when they were frustrated, angry, bored, irritated, resentful, and wanting to give up. It will be important to remember the power of that love on their wedding day, which is real.

I heard about a couple who was in their twilight years of marriage, and it was becoming so difficult because one of them had experienced loss of mobility and relied completely on the other for every basic need. It put a strain on the marriage. They were advised to write love letters to one another every day for 30 days, and it has changed their marriage for the better, as they evoke the love and the light in their lives, that was given them so long ago.

Marlena Blavin, in the educational film, "Love at Second Sight," tells about how she was late to her first day of massage class that took place at a hospital clinic. She heard a voice of another student on the other side of the curtain in their clinic during class. She loved the sound of this low, deep voice; it gave her goose bumps. She said she loved how the voice talked with his partner so gently. Something in his voice pulled at her heartstrings. She imagined a tall, dark and handsome man on the other side of the curtain.

When the curtain was opened, she looked up with excitement, and was completely repulsed and aghast, and thought "Ewwwww!" as she turned and stepped away.

David Roche was born with what he now calls a birth *difference*, rather than birth defect, or severe facial disfigurement, as it is called in some circles. As a baby, his face blossomed like clusters of grapes, called an extensive cavernous hemangioma, a benign tumor consisting of blood vessels. He endured many facial surgeries and heavy radiation therapy that left burns on his temple and eyelid. The radiation caused his lower face to stop growing and he lost all his teeth.

He recalls being taught as a boy to walk down the aisle in church, hands clasped in prayer and head down. He raced home to show his grandmother, so she could see what a good boy he was. As he was showing her, she suddenly jumped up reached out and grabbed his face and yelled "You keep your chin up! You be proud of who you are! Look them in the eye, and be powerful!" She thought he was being taught to hide his face, and she wasn't going to allow it. He recalls his mother, always telling him she loved him and that he could be whatever he wanted to be, because he was so smart.

Flash back to Marlena. She remembers when she was 14, she moved from the city to a very big high school in the suburbs. She wanted to make new friends and so she tried to change her appearance. She tried hair straightener to remove the frizz and freckle cream to remove the freckles on her face that she despised. Well, instead, she was left with the freckles AND red blotches, and the top of her head burned like a crew cut.

Three weeks into the school year, a popular girl came up to her and touched her on the arm and said, "You're new here, aren't you? I'll introduce you to my friends." The first time she went to the girls house, the girl said, "Marlena, don't let my parents know you're Jewish, they are always making nasty comments about Jewish people, and they won't let me be friends with you if they know you're Jewish." She remembers that you don't have to look like David to know what it feels like to feel rejected.

Back at the massage school, David finally got up the courage to ask Marlena on a date. She said yes. David and Marlena say, "We all deserve a second look." Marlena followed her heart to connect to David's inner light.

She remembers telling her mother over the phone that she had fallen in love. The mom asked about him, and she said, well, he has a crooked mouth, bulgy and purple splotches all over his face, and sometimes he drools. Her mother couldn't understand. This was one of those examples of something you can't quite explain. People just won't understand. They eventually married. Marlana says, "It's not the first look that counts. Now I don't even see him as different anymore, he's just who he is!"

David and Marlana now speak at schools throughout the country about being different. David says, "Having a facial difference has taught me a valuable life lesson because I was forced to find my inner beauty. My passion is to share my experiences and inspire people, especially kids, to appreciate what is unique in themselves and others." David says he now realizes his face is a gift. Not quite the gift he wanted, not like when you open the box and say, "YES!" but more like, "Awww, you shouldn't have."

Some of the reactions of the middle school children who come to hear David and Marlana speak are this: "When I first saw him, I thought he must feel so sad; now when I see someone with a disability, I'll think of how special they are on the inside." "David, you accept that you're beautiful more than people who don't have a face disorder." "When I first saw him, I felt bad for him. I wondered what he must have gone through. After I heard his speech and I got to know him, then I was happy, because he felt good about himself."

Jesus takes his disciples – Peter, James and John, up on the mountaintop so they can see who he really is. He is transfigured before them, with brilliant, glittering, spectacular, majestic light – his face as bright as the sun and his clothes dazzling white. His friends suddenly see him differently. Something radiates from him. They see him as someone very, very very special. Kind of like Marlana, when she gave David a second look. They see the glory of God in Jesus' face, and the face of God in Jesus, and it gives them hope and confidence that they can get through whatever darkness will come, because of God's bright light shining upon them. God is made real to them on that mountaintop. They can feel it in their hearts.

Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appear -- prophets who lived a long, long time before Jesus. This may seem really strange to us. But I have another unbelievable story to tell you, that I really haven't told anyone before. A few days before my ordination, when I was going to become a minister, right here in this church almost 2.5 years ago, I was a little worried. Of course, about what it meant, was I ready, was this really God's calling on my life, but also about the service itself. There were so many people and things that had to come together to pull it off. Would there be enough parking? Would there be enough food? Would the ministers leading the service show up on time?

I went up on a mountaintop, because we are so fortunate to have one here, Mt. Tam, and I went up on that mountaintop and the sun was shining bright above me, it felt

like the light of Jesus, and I got on my knees and I prayed for all the things I was worried about, and guess what? I know you might not believe me, but people started showing up, like angels, saying they would help me, people who had died. My grandmothers, Ravanell and Lucille, my grandfathers, Raymond and Galen, a parishioner, Marian Judd, my great grandma Esther.

Each one of them came to me and said they would take on a responsibility so that I wouldn't have to worry about it. Marian Judd would handle the parking. Lucille would handle the food. Esther would bring a joyful, fun and uplifting spirit to the place. So whenever I got scared, I would remember that time on the mountain, that all those people said they would help me. It was nice being up on the mountaintop in the sun with all that love and support, and at some point, I knew it was time to go home. To go make dinner. To carry on with my work.

Peter in the story is loving so much being on the mountaintop with Jesus and Moses and Elijah, that he offers to build some tents, so that they can all stay there. He wants to prolong the joy. And as he's discussing his plans, a voice from a bright cloud tells him to stop talking, and to listen to Jesus. The voice is overwhelming, a bit frightening, and the disciples fall to the ground.

Then Jesus touches them. He tells them not to be afraid. They can get up. Then Jesus and Peter and James and John head back down the mountain, back down to the places where the world needs to see the light, too.

Wow, that was some experience, they were probably thinking. Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about the vision (ὄραμα; hor'am-ah in Greek) – meaning a divinely granted sight -- Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about what they saw until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Because maybe no one would believe them, or maybe no one would understand. Maybe because they didn't know yet how to explain that God can change people until they saw that God can raise people. That God can make all things new. That God has the power to do what us humans can't do. That God gives us light, and we are meant to see God's light in ourselves and in others and to share that light that is love.

The good news today is that the light of God is available to us, and we can march, dance, sing and pray in the light of God. We have seen the light in Jesus Christ, from the gospel story, and perhaps from our own miraculous experiences. The light is real. We might not be able to explain it or understand it, but it is real. Let us hold on and live into this light.

Thanks be to God!