Sermon on Exodus 34: 29 – 35 – Don’t Let the Light Fade Away!

“When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the Lord had given him on Mount Sinai. When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the Lord’s presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the Lord.”

It had only been three months. Three months after nearly 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Three months since the Children of Israel saw God’s mighty hand in plagues of frogs and flies, boils and hail, locusts and darkness, not to mention the death of the firstborn of the Egyptians that would ultimately result in their release. Three months since they had seen the Red Sea parted in two. They crossed over safely on dry ground and watched as Pharaoh’s army was washed away. Three months after leaving Egypt they came to Mount Sinai and encountered an awe-inspiring scene. Thunder and lightening, smoke and fire, and a trumpet blast that grew louder and louder. The whole mountain trembled and God’s people did the same at the sight of it all. And then God lowered the boom by giving them the Law. The Moral Law in the form of the Ten Commandments to govern their hearts. The Civil Law to govern them as a nation. The Ceremonial Law to govern their worship life. In summary, God told them to, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” And then God called Moses up the mountain to put it all in writing on tablets of stone.

Forty days and forty nights passed and the Israelites grew impatient. They went to Aaron and said, “make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.” Aaron gave into them and told them to give him their gold earrings. He made them into a golden calf. He placed it before the people and said, “these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” He built an altar and proclaimed a festival. The people ate, drank, and indulged in pagan revelry. Meanwhile, on top of the mountain, Moses had no idea what was going on, but God did, and he wasn’t happy. God wanted to destroy the Israelites until Moses intervened. God relented and did not bring on them the disaster he had threatened. When Moses came down the mountain and saw what was going on, his anger burned against them. He threw the stone tablets down, smashing them into pieces. He took the golden calf and burned it in the fire. He ground it to power, scattered it on the water, and made the people drink it. Once more Moses intervened for God’s people and God forgave the iniquity of their sin. Once more God called Moses up the mountain to replace what had been destroyed.

Forty more days and forty more nights. This time the people behaved themselves. When Moses came down the mountain again, his face wasn’t burning with anger, it was glowing with the light of God’s glory. It was a sight that filled God’s people with awe and wonder to the point that they were afraid to go near him. But Moses calmed them and shared with them what God had shared with him. When he finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face, not because the reflection of God’s glory was so bright, but because he didn’t want them to see the light of God’s glory fading away. That’s what’s going to happen when you’re away from the light. That’s a truth Paul brings out in the book of Second Corinthians when he writes that Moses, “would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away.” Dear friends in Christ, Don’t Let the Light Fade Away!

I. Spend time basking in the light of God’s glory.

This time of the year finds many people escaping the cold and snow of the Midwest to head to places like Florida, Texas, Mexico, and Hawaii. Whether or not they tell you, you can tell on their faces. They look a bit different than the rest of us. It’s obvious that they’ve been some place warm basking in the light of the sun. It might be nice while it lasts, but it won’t last. It’s only a matter of time before the effects of the sun fade away. It would be different if they got to spend some time in those places on a regular basis. The effects of the sun would go with them indefinitely.

It works the same way with the light of God’s glory. Spend time in the light of God’s glory by spending time in His House and in His Word and it’s going to show in your hearts and lives and even on your faces. Spend time away from the light of God’s glory and it’s also going to show in your hearts and lives and on your faces. When the light is absent, darkness fills the void. Dark thoughts, dark words, dark actions. Frustration, impatience, anger, fractured friendships, broken relationships. I have to admit that many of the counseling situations I’ve come across over the years involved people who weren’t regularly basking in the light of God’s glory. It saddens me but it doesn’t surprise because lamps that aren’t plugged into the light source won’t always shine with the light of Jesus in their thoughts, words, and actions.

II. Spend time reflecting the light of God’s glory.

It works the same way with the light of God’s glory. Spend time in the light of God’s glory by spending time in His House and in His Word and it’s going to show in your hearts and lives and even on your faces. Spend time away from the light of God’s glory and it’s also going to show in your hearts and lives and on your faces. When the light is absent, darkness fills the void. Dark thoughts, dark words, dark actions. Frustration, impatience, anger, fractured friendships, broken relationships. I have to admit that many of the counseling situations I’ve come across over the years involved people who weren’t regularly basking in the light of God’s glory. It saddens me but it doesn’t surprise because lamps that aren’t plugged into the light source won’t always shine with the light of Jesus in their thoughts, words, and actions.
Jesus tells us, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me, you can do nothing.”

To a mother who didn’t see the importance of sharing God’s Word with her children, Martin Luther once said, “Mam, if you don’t teach them, the devil will.” The devil, also known as the prince of darkness. The one who loves to see people avoid the light. The one who loves it when busy schedules and misplaced priorities get in the way of people plugging themselves into the light. The one who loves to lead people away from the light with the hopes of them spending an eternity with him in the outer darkness of hell. The one whose temptations we’ve given into far too often with unkind thoughts, unloving words, impure actions. All evidence of the darkness. All reasons to plug into the light.

Jesus, the Light of the World, tells us that we also are lights in this world. In order to keep the light shining brightly, we need to stay plugged into the source. Regular and frequent use of Word and Sacrament does just that. Jesus tells us, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Out of love for us, the Light of the World came into our dark world. The Light of the World came to defeat the Prince of Darkness. The Light of the World came to free us from the dark prisons of sin, shame, guilt, and regret. Jesus made the most of every opportunity to bask in the light. As we’ve heard in our gospel lessons the past couple of weekends, Jesus spent every weekend in church. He cherished every opportunity to bask in the light and he reflected that light in everything he thought, said, and did. He not only served as our example, more importantly, he served as our substitute to forgive the many times we’ve been poor examples of what a light in this world should be and do.

He called disciples from all walks of life to follow him and become fishers of men. He patiently instructed them with God’s Word and sent them out to do the same. In our gospel lesson for today, he took three of those disciples up a mountain to pray. While he was praying, his face changed and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Matthew tells us “his face shone like the sun.” And there with him appeared Elijah and Moses, once again basking in the light of God’s glory. John made the connection when he wrote, “The law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The law shows our sins. The gospel shows our Savior. The law says do and don’t do. The gospel says done by Christ. The law brings death. The gospel brings life, here on earth and for all eternity in heaven.

His transfiguration would serve to strengthen him and his disciples for the days ahead. Days that would find him in agony of soul as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Days that would find him being betrayed by one of his own disciples. Days that would find him mocked, flogged, and nailed to a cross. It was there that he would carry all of our sins, the many times we’ve given into the darkness instead of living as children of the light. It was there that the Light of the World would be snuffed out as he suffered the punishment that should have been ours. Crucified, died, and buried, three days later he would rise again. In so doing all of our sins have been forgiven and the gift of heaven is ours. He sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts and lives through Word and Sacrament to connect us to the light and keep us connected to the light until we see the full light of his glory in heaven. Today we get a brief glimpse of the light of his glory on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Even the light of that glory would soon fade away. So quickly that there’s no mention of his disciples putting veils over their faces like Moses did. While living here on earth, the glory quickly fades away, which is why it’s so important to be equally as quick to plug back into the light source regularly and often.

Today we leave the Mountain of Transfiguration to begin our journey to another mountain. A mountain far more glorious. A mountain known as Calvary on which Jesus our Savior would suffer and die to defeat the prince of darkness, sin, death, and hell once and for all. This Wednesday we begin the season of Lent. You don’t have to sacrifice anything for Lent, but if you’re going to sacrifice anything, consider sacrificing an extra hour of your time each week to plug yourself into the light of God’s glory by joining us for worship on Wednesday evenings. If you can’t join us in person due to work schedules and such, consider joining us online and pass the website invitation along to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Who knows the impact you might have by reflecting the light of Jesus in this way?

At first Moses didn’t realize that he was reflecting the light of God’s glory, you might not either, but others did, and others will. Like those who spend time in the light of the sun, spending time in the light of God’s glory will show in your hearts, lives, and faces. We’re told that Peter didn’t know what he was saying, but he had the right concept when he said, “how good Lord to be here!” May our prayer be the same, “how good Lord to be here. Here in your House. Here in your Word. Here in your presence. Here in your glory. Lord, keep our hearts and minds plugged into the light of your glory and reflecting the light of your glory until we see you in all your glory face to face in heaven, not for just one shining moment, but for all eternity.”

Amen.