

Behind the Curtain

II Cor. 3:12-4:2

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Our text today is about a veil, and an unveiling. It speaks about increasing clarity of understanding regarding faith and the boldness in living that comes with that clarity.

How many of you remember the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*? Based upon Frank Baum's story, Dorothy from Kansas runs away from home with her dog, Toto, as a storm is gathering, when she first encounters Professor Marvel. He is a traveling magician of sorts, selling concoctions to restore health. He stops Dorothy from identifying herself so he can demonstrate his remarkable capability of mindreading. "You're traveling in disguise! No, no! You're going on a visit?" And when her body language tells him each time that he is wrong, he finally hits upon the right answer, "You're running away!" Dorothy is impressed but the moviegoers know professor Marvel is a charlatan, a fake – though not necessarily a dangerous one. He then posits vague and generic reasons for her journey; she is not understood or appreciated, she wants to see new lands. And even though he doesn't guess that the real reason is to protect her dog Toto, Dorothy seizes upon the traveling showman's reasons that ring true to her and declares, "It's just like you could read what is inside of me."

Then toward the end of the movie, Professor Marvel, who has become the wizard of Oz, is unveiled. It is Toto who pulls back the curtain, exposing the pretentious wizard who is using impressive smoke and lights to scare people into doing what he tells them. "You humbug!," declares the Scarecrow. "Yes, that's exactly so, I'm a humbug," says the wizard. "You're a very bad man," proclaims Dorothy. "Oh no, my dear! I'm . . . a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard."

Pulling back the curtain on the wizard of Oz exposes the traveling showman to be less than he pretends to be but still he turns out to be so much more than he appears to be.

Though bumbling and stumbling his way along, he reveals to the four unlikely traveling companions that they have within themselves what they need to find their way home, and to discover the brains, heart, and courage they seek. Things are not as they appear. Sometimes the truth is veiled, behind a curtain of unknowing.

Paul writing to the Corinthians wants them to know that in Jesus Christ, the curtain has been pulled back and God is no longer unknowable. The one who is seemingly inaccessible behind a veil of unknowing, has made himself known.

You see, you have to be open to the Spirit of the Lord! Knowledge of the Old Covenant is helpful, but not enough. “The Lord is the Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” The word used here for being transformed from one degree of glory to another is *metamorphosis*. We are in a process of *metamorphosis*, changing from one thing to another. It’s the same word to describe what the disciples experienced when Jesus was transformed or transfigured before them.

This word *metamorphosis* (which is *transformed* translated in the Greek) is a word familiar to us from our study of biology — when insects and plants change during embryonic development from an immature form to an adult form over the course of maturation. The story of the transfiguration reminds us that there is a changed form, a *metamorphosis* of our understanding of reality as we mature in faith.

Whenever the word *metamorphosis* is used in the Bible, it is always in the passive, even in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. It is not something we can do to (or for) ourselves. We can allow it to happen or resist it but the initiative comes from God. At the Transfiguration, the disciples are forced to see their Lord in a new light revealed behind a cloud of unknowing. This story reveals what Paul would write later: that Jesus is the ultimate revelation and representative of God. “He is the image of the invisible God!” Jesus discloses God through a human face. “Listen to him,” says the voice from the heavens. It’s kind of the opposite of the Wizard of Oz. Instead of being uncovered as a fake, Jesus is unveiled as someone beyond space and time.

That kind of experience has a way of re-opening one's view of reality! Reality does not consist of just you and the world, there is another dimension that breaks into life from time to time. And when it does, don't resist it. With hearts wide open and life flowing into and through us, we can allow the Lord to change us. And that has everything to do with how we see reality and the Jesus who discloses it. Let yourself be transformed by the living Christ. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

This morning some of us may feel a little like Dorothy — a little lost, not sure whether we should be leaving the past or returning to it. You're traveling in disguise! You're going on a visit? And when your body language tells me that I'm wrong, I finally hit upon the right answer. You're running away! You may be running from some moral obligation, or from a relationship that is more demanding than you expected, or from the emptiness you feel inside yourself. You may have put on a disguise this morning so the world won't know how fragile your life has become, or how desperate, or how selfish. Professor Marvel's guess, "You're running away", may be a pretty accurate description of a number of us this morning. What are you running away from?

Don Juel was a New Testament professor for over twenty years at Luther Seminary and his final decade of life at Princeton Seminary. We worked together on several projects and committees. He tells the story of one occasion when he was teaching a group of teenagers in a Sunday Bible study. He highlighted the Greek word *schisma*, from the first chapter of Mark, which translates as "torn apart," and from which our English word *schism* comes from. When Jesus was coming out of the water at his baptism, he saw the heavens "torn apart." Then Dr. Juel went on to explain to these high school students that the only other place in Mark's gospel where that little word appears is in the 15th chapter, when at the crucifixion, ". . . Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."¹

Having impressed the students with his language skills, he then drove home the point that all which separates us from God has been ripped open — the heavens above where

¹ Mark 15:37-38

God resides and the Holy of Holies, and where only once a year the high priest would enter in the temple to atone for the sins of the people on Yom Kippur. Dr. Juel went on to explain that the tearing apart of the Temple curtain and the heavens meant we now have access to God. As he elaborated, and feeling rather impressed with himself, this biblical scholar who is willing to teach this group of young people, noticed a young man his hand and say, "I have something." The teacher nodded, "Yes?"

The teenager said, "I think you have it wrong!" Now imagine that! This kid who studies the Bible maybe once a week in Sunday school tells a biblical scholar, who studies it every day of his life (in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew no less) that he has it wrong! After that opening statement, Dr. Juel listened rather intently to what the young man had to say and later admitted, it changed forever the way he looks at that passage. The young man said, "I don't think it means that we now have access to God. I think it means that all of a sudden, God has access to us." Dr. Juel realized in that moment that the God we have trapped in heaven and behind the curtain, safely tucked away in the sanctuary is suddenly on the loose! Here was a young man responding to the Spirit of the Lord, and where the Spirit is, there is freedom!

We don't have access to God – God has access to us! The buffer between us is gone, torn apart, ripped up! We are likely to have a romantic idea of how it all works. We may pray for a "closer walk with thee." But secretly believe ourselves to be in control. We think we are dealing the cards. But if God has access to us, watch out! You just never know where or when the Lord is going to mess with your life in order to give you a purpose; in order to give you some important undertaking and the true joy of living by being used for a great cause.

We have been on the run, ever since Adam and Eve, according to the Bible. We are running for our lives. We are anxious and uncertain and desperately grasping for something that will give life meaning and significance. We are afraid of failing and falling. We seek to buffer ourselves against human frailty and uncertainty. We travel in disguise and we run away from others. Maybe it's time to stop running away, and instead start running

towards the one who made us – the Spirit of the Lord – where freedom can be found and where the veil is removed, where with clarity of purpose we can live with new boldness and courage.

This week is the beginning of Lent and we will have over 150 people in small groups studying the parable of the prodigal. Here is another story of a child running away. But it is also the story of a child's decision to stop running away and instead to turn around and start running towards his father. In the text the transformation comes in one little verse. After hiring himself out to feed the pigs, he was so hungry he wanted to eat the slop himself, “. . . and no one gave him anything . . . but then he came to himself. ” The child decided life had gotten as bad as he was going to allow. He stopped running away and started running back towards the one who provided real freedom and abundance. Metamorphosis!

Today we celebrate the Lord's Table. It is a homecoming banquet of sorts. The veil has been lifted and the curtain has been torn apart. God, the Father, has provided a banquet for your homecoming too! Come share the feast that he has prepared. Amen