

“Who Was That Masked Man?”
Rev. Darcy Hawk
October 18, 2020

Exodus 33:12-23

¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

My daughter was astounded to hear that TV used to go off at night. “Indeed,” said I, “there was always the Star Spangled Banner played while rockets red glared and then fizzy snow through the night until by dawn’s early light the test pattern came on.” Yours truly would be sitting cross legged in pajamas and cowboy boots watching that Indian in the center, waiting for him to do something interesting. He never did but in time *Sunrise Semester* would offer college level classes and finally Howdy Doody began the time of many westerns. I didn’t realize that this was religious education until a seminary professor, Bob Ezzel, turned his love of westerns into a class on theology and film. High on that list of stand-ins for Jesus was, of course, that masked man who traveled in company with his Indian companion, Tonto – which means *idiot* in Spanish. But fear not because *kemosabe* means *wet shrub* in Navajo. It does seem that the idea of a masked

stranger who brings justice and good only to melt back into the desert has religious overtones.

One reason American Christianity can seem peculiar to other Christians is the strange relationship of Jesus with our heroes. We want Jesus to be more like the Lone Ranger taking action against baddies. In all those classic westerns the townsfolk were helpless before evil and needed an outsider to come and save them. The westerns of those days became the “space” operas of now. We tell ourselves the same old story. What it means for us is a refusal to accept that our savior saved us by losing. His followers were sure Jesus was about to lead them in a miraculous victory over their oppressors when in fact he led them to understand the roots of human oppression and what true freedom means. Having passed through death there was nothing further the Romans could do to him.

We are programmed to have a Palm Sunday faith that leaps to Easter morning when the hero rides in on a donkey (well you can't have everything), and relieves the community of the burden of the bad guys. Much as I recoil at some images of Christ on the Cross it does point out that the empty cross we picture was once the place where Jesus suffered and died. Who ever heard of a hero who got shot by the bad guys and died in the middle of the street? If that had happened to the Lone Ranger what possible reason would we have to tune in again next week?

While Jesus is a different type of hero there is this odd coincidence of the mask. It led in the TV series to the inevitable question, “Who was that masked man?” That echoes the story of Moses' encounter with God. To see God's face is to be undone, to die. Mortals cannot look on God. I think of it as more than we can take in, like

overloaded circuits that simply burn out. So God wears a mask. In some sense that mask is Jesus; a form of God that people could look at and live. We've had 100 generations to ponder what might be behind that mask. The early church constantly wrestled with who Jesus was, what lay behind the mask of Jesus' humanity. Their job wasn't finished when the Gospels were written because the question is present to each of us now. Who was he and, as the song goes, "what is that to me?" Jesus is similar to a lot of our heroes but he is not heroic. He doesn't arrive out of the desert on a white horse, he is among the townspeople. He rescues us from evil by motivating us to do something besides being victims. Rather than the community being impotent Jesus empowers communities. We don't need to wring our hands and wait for a savior, we are saved and together we can rescue others from evil.

Concluding Prayer

Lord, tireless guardian of your people, ever prepared to hear the cries of your chosen ones, teach us to rely, day and night, on your care. Support our prayer, lest we grow weary. Drive us to seek your enduring justice and your ever-present help. Grant this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.