

February 14, 2021, the Transfiguration of the Lord (Year B)
Masking Up

Mark 9:2-9

²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

In a very touching and thoughtful act many front line medical staff began wearing surgical masks with a picture of their smile printed on them. Granted they weren't always smiling behind the mask, but patients isolated from familiar human contact could find comfort knowing that their caretakers could smile on them. A familiar condemnation of untrustworthy people is that they are two-faced. It is important in child development to see the emergence of facial recognition. That's one of the first things we do as infants, and it has long term survival benefit to know who cares for you. A common cartoon trope is the doe eyed maiden behind a veil who proves to have buck teeth and no chin when the veil is lifted. So much value is placed on our faces, but we are not alone because many animals learn to know one another by sight. Of course they also rely on other senses which we humans are not very adept at. So we see faces and sometimes we see faces where they don't exist. Clouds stare at us. Clothes strewn on a chair make for feeling like you're being watched. The moon looks down upon us, unless you see a rabbit up there as some cultures do. Those necessary social distancing masks have taken away something fundamental to being human. Many people who resist wearing them haven't thought that it's more than physical discomfort, it's a mental problem.

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When cultures want to sequester women they commonly insist she cover her face. Folklore is full of evil fairy folk who look like familiar faces but hide strange inhuman things behind those faces. We trust the face so much that it is very unsettling to suggest that we cannot trust it. Of all the little tells that let us know someone is lying facial expressions are the most obvious. The eyes slide sideways, the head tilts and even before the words leave a person's lips you know not to trust them.

One of the many joys of reading the Gospels is going along with the disciples on a journey of discovery. When we meet them meeting Jesus they are just beginning to form opinions about him. When Peter finally, in the central pivot point of Mark, answers the question, "Who do you say I am?" There is a change of direction in the narrative. First off they are now headed to Jerusalem, but also Jesus begins to reveal what Peter's words really mean. They projected on Jesus an image; what they hoped he would be, and when Jesus revealed himself and his mission; he began pulling off the mask, they rejected it. No, that's not who you are supposed to be.

Get thee behind me Satan is such a fun thing to say. It's a response to someone trying to get you to become inauthentic, untrue to the face behind the mask. A very good meditative practice is to repeat to yourself, "Who am I?" The answers that come are significant because most of the time we don't adjust our projection to the fundamental material. I am who God made me to be is different than I am who you think I am. In this time of masks we have to work especially hard to overcome that gulf because our faces aren't out there betraying us, giving out who is in here. The eyes may be the mirror of the soul, but we have learned to hide our eyes. Our faces tell a story though.

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If you ask who Jesus was you have to stand in line with a great many people of faith across the history of Christianity. Was Jesus the glowing figure who could go up a hill and talk to dead people, or was he that little baby raised by Mary who went on to be an itinerant preacher? Unlike us and our masks Jesus was always this and that too. It's hard to comprehend – that's why there are so many statements of faith and denominations and heresies in our path to this day. Those medical people with their photographic smiles are a bit like Jesus in that the mask is true to what sits behind it.

We should try to make the mask match the face we wear behind it. Most of us are ashamed of us, imagine being ashamed of something God made with God's own two hands and pronounced good. Does the Mona Lisa feel ashamed of da Vinci? Does the Fifth Symphony think Beethoven could have done better?

Mark 8:29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

After his confession Jesus began to instruct them and demonstrate just what a messiah is. At first they wanted him to put the masks back on, the ones they fashioned, but he revealed himself to them and to us.

Closing Prayer: Almighty God, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, shine with the radiance of his glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen