



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FEAST OF THE TRANSFIGURATION, AUGUST 6, 2023  
EXODUS 34:29-35; PSALM 99; 2 PETER 1:13-21; LUKE 9:28-36

## MIRROR NEURONS AND THE FEMININE FACE OF GOD



Transfiguration of Jesus by Macedonian artist Armando Alemdar Ara<sup>1</sup>

**Exodus 34:29-35** *[Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but*

*whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.]*

In his award-winning book *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel shares a sublime description of the experience of God that changes the entire trajectory of young Pi's life. Raised a Hindu in India, and having never met people of other faiths, he finds himself drawn into the orbits of two spiritual guides—a Muslim and a Christian—each informing his own spiritual journey that unfolds from there. He is a seeker, a God-loving boy, and he yearns to be in God's presence.

Barak Obama would write a note to Martel in 2010, having just finished reading the book with his then-teenaged daughter. Obama wrote to thank Martel for his gift to humanity; that his book was “an elegant proof of God and the power of storytelling.”

Early on, Pi meets Mr. Kumar, a Sufi mystic who runs a bakery, whose Islamic faith is so integrated into his daily routines, into his thoughts and words and actions, that Pi is captivated by the rhythmic beauty of that life.

He yearns to experience it in some way. So transparently grounded in God's presence is Mr. Kumar's humble expression of faith, that Pi literally feels the glory of God alight on him when he spends time in the dusty bakery. Martel describes Pi riding his bike home from such visits, with flecks of God flinging off his face. It is a beautiful image to consider, this gift of emanation, to have such a profound sense of encountering the holy that one is changed, transfigured by the experience of the Other melding into your very Being, and knowing it to be right, good and true.

In our first scripture reading this morning, Moses comes down from the mountain with his face shining, the glory of God having imprinted on and in his flesh in a way that somehow strangely goes unnoticed by Moses himself, and yet everyone else around him can see it. Moses glowed with God's emanation, and it terrified them. They kept their distance. The people did not want too

close to such divine power. So Moses shares what God has told him while on the mountain, and then puts a veil on his face so he can move about his people. I wonder if that settled their fear even as flecks of glory might have floated in their direction.

The Jewish mystic tradition has a beautiful image of Shekhinah, literally meaning to dwell, as in God dwells in this place or that place. The word is not found in the Bible at all, but there is a delightful thread in the midrash reaching back more than two centuries that offers an enlightening path of being with God, of dwelling with God, or of experiencing the dwelling of God in one's midst.<sup>ii</sup> The Talmud says that two people studying Torah together experience Shekhinah. How does that presence of God transform them and their study? When ten people pray, God is there with them. Shekhinah.

Somewhere along the way, this mystic tradition began to identify Shekhinah as the feminine manifestation of God coming to

dwell in our midst, and delivering the divine attributes of maternal comfort, nurture, protection and compassion. Perhaps these are designed to offer a counterbalance to the more traditional images of God as king, ruler, father and judge, but I think there is something more profound here.

I have to say I have always imagined Shekhinah being the glow on Moses' face, and the glistening raiment and shining face of Jesus' transfigured moment on the mountain. Burning bushes conjures not just the divine presence of a thunderous voice calling one to action, but the thought of such a manifestation makes me feel that heat of glow on the face that comes when sitting by a hot fire. The voice of the fire crackling its ineffable message while embers of glory flicker around our heads as if to declare there is an untamable quality to it all.

But this notion of Shekhinah as divine feminine also connects with the science of mirror neurons I think, and the science of maternal bonding, where mother and infant

forge intimate connection by the mirroring acts of facial expressions, less learned than instinctive, which is to say deeply seated in the ground of being that binds the two together. Shekhinah. Whose face shines in such moments, and can we see it as the gift of godly love that enthuses us, transfigures us by discovering that we dwell with God in all places? Or perhaps more accurately, that God dwells with us in all places, if we will just trust that to be true. Shekhinah.

It seems fitting that we observe the Feast of the Transfiguration today, midway through summer, in the long stretch of ordinary time on the church's calendar. We set aside the prescribed readings for this particular Sunday, to hear stories of transfiguring beauty so that we might be buoyed as we continue to journey.

In Matthew's version of the Transfiguration story, it says that Peter, James and John were terrified by what they saw. They fell to the

ground and covered their eyes. It was all too much. But Jesus comes to them and says, do not be afraid. Get up, he says. Literally, it is the verb used elsewhere in the gospels as rising up. Be raised. Rise up, he says, let's be on our way.

So it's a story of resurrection really, months away from Easter, and months still before we get to Christmas and the mirroring of Mary and her newborn child, but faces are afire, my friends, in resurrection and incarnation, and all the moments in between, including today, here and now, if we are willing to see it in one another. Can you see it on the face of one sitting near you? Can you feel it on your own?

This Shekhinah, this glory of God has imprinted on and in our flesh for a purpose. Know it to be right, good and true.

May the transfiguring, healing and bright beauty of the divine feminine be yours this day and always.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration\\_of\\_Jesus.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_of_Jesus.jpg)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-divine-feminine-in-kabbalah-an-example-of-jewish-renewal/>