



SERMONS

Behind the Mask: Getting Real

We Have Hope

Exodus 34; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

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I walked into our bank the other day to do some business. When I stepped up to the teller I said, "I cannot tell you how odd it feels for me to walk into a bank with a mask on." And she replied from behind HER mask, "I've never heard that one before." I was taken aback. I've banked with this woman for years but her response was so grouchy. Of course, part of the problem was I couldn't see her face when she said it. Was she smiling as she teased me...or frowning at my corny joke and as sick of wearing a mask as I am?

If one year ago you had told me that most everyone in our country would be wearing masks, I wouldn't have believed you. But now you go into a grocery store and you'd think you were in a Middle Eastern country. And it is such an emotionally charged issue, isn't it? Cyndi and I went hiking this summer. We didn't wear masks on the trail and when we met others...out in the middle of the wilderness... some literally stopped and turned their backs on us as we walked by. We felt like lepers.

One of the consequences of mask-wearing is dehumanization. We turn away from each other. We grow suspicious of each other. We have a hard time understanding what someone is saying...and when we DO understand the words, we are unsure of their meaning because we can't see their expressions. The other day someone said to me, "By the way, I am smirking under here." We have a hard time knowing what is REALLY going on behind the mask, don't we?



Good morning to all of you! I'm Pastor Mark Toone and I'm pleased to welcome you to worship, both in-person and on-line, as we kick off our new program year. Today, we begin a series called "Behind the Mask: Getting Real" based on 2 Corinthians. Did you know that the Bible talks a lot about mask-wearing? One of our human tendencies is to put up façades. To pretend we are something we are not; to present a front to others that doesn't align with who we really are inside.

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that Christianity is not about appearing to have it all together. It is about facing hard times with honesty and humility, trusting that God uses even suffering to build his people. Paul wants us to get real. One of the illustrations he uses to encourage authenticity is... a mask! And to understand this passage, we must return to Exodus. Moses is on his way back down Sinai carrying the Ten Commandments. Listen. Ex 34.29 ff:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand...[he] did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him...[so] Moses would put [a] veil over his face...until he went in to speak with God. THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD, ETC.

Last week, Pastor Ellis taught us about the holiness of God and he used great illustration: the Sun. Our sun is the life-giving center of our universe. But we can only take so much of it! If we draw too close, we are consumed by its power. That's what we mean by the "holiness" or "glory" of God. God is so good...so pure...that sinful humans cannot get too close to him. We just can't bear it.

It turns out that after Moses hung out with God on Mt. Sinai, some of God's glory rubbed off on him! It was like a holy sunburn that glowed in the dark but didn't hurt.

Moses wasn't even aware of it until he came down from the mountain. But when the people saw him shining...it freaked them out! They couldn't even pay attention to what he was saying, they were so disturbed by his shininess. So...in order to calm them down... Moses put on a mask so that they would not be distracted by his glowing face. It's a pretty timely story, isn't it? But it turns out, there is more to the story... as we discover in 2 Cor 3:12-13. Paul writes this to the church in Corinth:

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.

Do you realize what Paul just did? He outed Moses. We assume Moses continued to wear his mask because his shiny face distracted people. And in fact, that's how it started. But Paul tells the rest of the story. After a while, Moses faded. But he kept wearing the mask anyhow. Why? Because...after a while Moses faded! His shiny face was a spiritual badge of honor; proof that he had been in the presence of the Lord. It gave him prestige. But when it started to fade, Moses didn't want the people to notice! So he KEPT wearing his mask long after the glow had disappeared!

Now...what do we call someone who puts on a mask, pretending to be more spiritual than they really are? Jesus used a Greek word a lot against the Pharisees: *Hypocritas*. Hypocrite! A *Hypocritas* was an actor. In the first century, actors wore masks in order to depict different characters. So "hypocrite" would be another way of saying "mask-wearer." Jesus took this word...which means "actor"... and applied it to the spiritual world. In fact, he was the first person to use this word in this way. He condemned hypocrisy; those who pretend to be something on the outside when they are actually something different on the inside.

Last week someone told me, "When I walk in the door of the church, I put on my mask. When I walk out the door of the church, I take my mask off." Of course, she is

doing this to be safe. But it is an ironic illustration, isn't it? Even when we are NOT in a pandemic, how many of us put on a spiritual mask when we walk into the church...a mask that presents an acceptable image...a mask that hides the pain in our marriage or our children...a mask that disguises our struggle with alcohol or sexual addiction or eating? On goes the mask when you walk into church... and off it comes the minute you walk out.

Why is that? Why do so many believers feel the need to mask up in front of those we CALL our brothers and sisters in Christ? Perhaps it is shame. It is a hard thing to admit the truth about our broken lives. Especially in a place like Gig Harbor, we want to pretend we have it all together...because that's what we DO in Gig Harbor; we have it all together. Or PERHAPS it's because we're afraid that if we reveal who we really are...what we are really struggling with...what we are really ashamed of...that we will be rejected. Ostracized. Humiliated.

I wish I could say this isn't so. But it happens too often. The church of Jesus...which ought to be the place of greatest grace and forgiveness...is too often a place of judgment and condemnation. It has been said that the Christian army is the only one that shoots its wounded. I'm so grateful for ministries like Celebrate Recovery where people are ENCOURAGED to rip off the mask so that real healing can begin. So...is this the mask you wear? A mask of Hypocrisy?

Hypocrisy is the mask that pretends to have it all together. But there is a second mask: Hubris. Pride. Those who wear this mask really THINK they have it all together...and look down on those who don't. Listen to what Paul goes on to say about his fellow Jews:

...their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.

What does Paul mean here? He is talking about the Jewish people who rejected Jesus. The entire Old Testament pointed to the coming of a Savior. Stories we studied this summer like the Passover and Exodus... hinted that one day, God would send a Savior to set his people free from the bondage of sin. This hope was in plain view throughout the Old Testament...but when Jesus' own people read these prophecies, a veil covered their heart. A veil of hubris. Of pride. The belief that THEY were the chosen people, that THEY alone had a special relationship with God, that THEY could maintain that relationship by keeping the rules and that THEY didn't need Jesus.

This is a second mask we can wear. A mask of hubris. Of spiritual pride. Such a person forgets that they were saved by the grace of God. They become more and more "judgy" towards others...especially others who are not following all their spiritual rules. There is nothing more unattractive in a church than an attitude of spiritual superiority. And there is nothing more unchristian. I pray to God I don't wear this mask. That I have never portrayed myself in any way other than as a fellow sinner, like you, saved by grace.

So...two masks. The mask of hypocrisy hides the person who knows they aren't living the way they should but pretends otherwise to impress others. The mask of hubris hides the arrogant soul who forgets that they are a sinner saved only by God's grace. Either mask is dishonest and destructive. So...what do we do about it? Well, Paul continues with wonderful words of hope:

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

The good news of the gospel is...when we turn to the Lord Jesus, HE removes our mask! It is the work of his Holy Spirit to tear off the veil of pretense. Where the Spirit



of the Lord is, there is FREEDOM. To every one of us hypocrites, the Holy Spirit says, "Here...let me take off that mask. You don't have to pretend with me. I know who you really are...and I love you anyway. You have nothing to hide...and you couldn't hide it if you wanted to. YOU...ARE...FREE!" To us prideful person, the Spirit says, "Here... let me take off that mask. You aren't nearly as good as you think you are...but I love you anyway. I don't love you because you keep rules... I love you because you are my child. YOU...ARE...FREE!"

It is the Spirit who removes our masks of hypocrisy or of hubris, stripping us right down to our raw and real selves. But...and here's the great thing...he doesn't leave us that way. Listen to this last...WONDERFUL ...promise of what happens when we allow the Holy Spirit to tear off our masks. 2 Cor 3:18. Love this!

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Hear that! The Spirit allows us to look upon the glory of God...the glory that used to be too painful to bear. Jesus has revealed God's glory to us...and when we look at him...really look at who he is and what he has done and what he wants to empower us to do and be...we are transformed into the image of Jesus. We become more like him. From "one degree of glory to another." I LOVE that verse. I cannot suddenly become like Jesus. He's too far beyond me. But if I keep my eyes on him...follow him...listen to him...love him...over time...bit by bit...gory to glory...I am becoming more like him. More like Jesus! Imagine that!

Cyndi and I ride bikes for exercise. We ride the Cushman Trail but, in order to meet our fellow riders, we have to climb UP steep Gig Harbor hills just to get to our rendezvous point. In the early days of the season, I couldn't even make it to the stop sign on Soundview without resting. But the other day, I realized how much stronger I



have become. I cycled all the way to the top without much effort. Bit by bit... day by day... I have become stronger. I didn't recognize it at the time, but now... as I look back...

This Tuesday will be our daughter Rachel's 28th birthday. Were any of you here when Rachel was born? I can hardly believe it! Our little girl, is now a grown woman. Of course, on a daily basis we didn't notice her growing. It is only in these moments when we pause and look back...and see where she was...and where she now is...that we notice the transformation. Bit by bit. Day by day. Glory to glory.

Next month, our granddaughter will be born. Right now...we know her as a bump in Deb's tummy and as blurry sonogram. But bit by bit...day by day...glory to glory...she is growing, changing, becoming more and more the person God created her to be. And one day... soon...I will hold my granddaughter in my arms and look at her, face to face.

That is how our heavenly father wants to look at us. No masks; no pretense; absolute transparency and authenticity. Are you willing to allow the Spirit to rip off whatever mask you are wearing so that you can bask in the father's adoring gaze? Here's a starting point. Let's pray together. Let's meet together...in community...as a people of prayer this Tuesday night. Let's come together and ask the Lord to do his work of revelation and transformation in our lives and in our church. In this season of masking and division and pretense and suspicion, let's come together and ask the Holy Spirit to help us become more and more and more like Jesus....bit by bit...day by day...glory to glory.