

“Unveiling glory” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on Transfiguration Sunday 31 January 2016.

Some of this material is drawn from the website Journey with Jesus.

On November 10, 2008, Eben Alexander was admitted to hospital with excruciating back pain. Within four hours he slipped into a deep coma that lasted seven days. At the end of those seven days, he opened his eyes and thrashed around in bed. After the doctor removed his ventilator, Alexander took his first unassisted breath in a week, calmed down, and then said, "thank you." Looking around the room at his family and doctors, he smiled and said, "All is well. Don't worry, all is well."

He wrote a book about his experience.

Before his experience, Alexander was a friendly sceptic. He wasn't religious but he went to church at Christmas and Easter. He had spent twenty-five years as a neurosurgeon, including fifteen years at Harvard Medical School. He had published over 150 peer-reviewed scientific articles.

The diagnosis of his illness was so rare it made medical history. Somehow he had contracted spontaneous E. coli bacterial meningitis. The doctors never determined how or why. No one could find even one other case like his.

His type of meningitis was almost always fatal, and so his doctors gave him little chance for recovery. His brain's neocortex had shut down.

His book is less about his illness and more about the "profound spiritual experience" he had when he was "completely free of the limitations of my physical brain." He had no memory of any events during the week of his coma, but he had absolute clarity about what happened "outside my brain." He now believes consciousness exists entirely independent of the brain.

He compares his experience to lifting a veil. A veil can function like a filter, and so can the brain. Although the spiritual realm beyond the brain is available to us, "during the brain-based, physical portion of our existence, our brain blocks out, or veils, that larger cosmic background, just as the sun's light blocks the stars from view each morning." This brain-filtering is good and necessary for life on earth; imagine if you always heard every sound at once. But this brain filtering also obscures the more important realm of the spirit, unless we take deliberate steps to see "beyond the veil."

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai after forty days and forty nights, "his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord." He had been transformed by his direct encounter with the infinite God. People were scared to look at him or even come near him. It was too much, and so we read that "Moses put a veil over his face." In this case, the veil "filtered" the unbearable glory of God.

In the Transfiguration story, as Jesus was praying, "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" — like Moses on Mount Sinai. In the Transfiguration story, Jesus is the New Moses.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he's also the mediator of a new covenant. Paul says that "we are not like Moses, who veiled his face." In fact, "whenever anyone turns to the Lord, 'the veil is taken away'" (Paul quotes Exodus 34:34). And so we, "who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness." In this instance, there's a veil that doesn't merely filter but that obscures, and therefore needs to be removed.

There is a danger in our world that we get used to so much noise that it obscures or veils all those things in life, like the realm of the spirit, that are necessary for being fully human. We use spirit language to name the depth of things or the power of things beyond seeming human power. It refers to the greater narrative of life beyond the moment and the person and the institution and the particular. It refers to the experiences which we cannot easily fit in a human box, although they may be deeply human. Walter Wink would include principalities and powers that constantly influence and which we struggle to see.

Amy Frykholm writes that "learning to see in new ways is one of the most difficult tasks of the transformed life. Old habits of selective vision, old choices about what to leave out and what to focus on tend to dominate us, even as we search for new ways of living that are in closer communion with the life of the Spirit. Transfiguration involves a transformation of vision."

"As we move between the extraordinary accounts of Transfiguration in today's readings and the ordinary events of seeing in our own lives, we do not need to collapse the two. But we can remember that the light of God is not so hidden that we cannot see it in ordinary life."

Travelling across cultures, I have learned how different cultures see things others don't.

Alexander highlights how we live veiled lives. He writes of the Perfect Love that exists at the heart of the universe. "This is the reality of realities," he writes, "the incomprehensibly glorious truth of truths that lives and breathes at the core of everything that exists or that ever will exist."

The Opening of Eyes, by David Whyte

That day I saw beneath dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

From *Songs for Coming Home* (Many Rivers Press, 1984).

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