

# *The Visage behind the Veil*

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; 4:16-21

## **Introduction**

It was a sultry day in the summer of 1979. Stanley invited me to lunch. He had recently retired and was exploring ways of investing retirement hours into service to the church. Within minutes of our being seated, a man from a nearby table assertively approached us, stared at me, and inquired, "Aren't you so and so?" The person he mentioned was a nationally-known celebrity, who had supposedly dodged the draft and had allegedly paid someone else to go in his place to Vietnam. Before I could respond to his question, he sat down and accelerated the interrogation: "How was it? How did it feel to have someone else go in your place, especially when so many were dying on foreign turf?" The questions hooked my Thespian inclinations; and I began to play the part, answering his questions as if I were the person he imagined me to be. By the time our self-imposed visitor had returned to his table, our plates were empty, our coffee cups filled for the last time, and the bill lay in the center of the table.

It had been a stellar performance! . . . but there followed a defining moment of profound tragedy. To be sure, I had lost all personal authenticity with Stanley. For him it was as if I had placed a veil over my face, or as if I had adopted a different face altogether, a visage to which he could not relate at all. The inevitable, indelible tragedy of that theatrical tangent was this: I never . . . never . . . no I never was able to recapture that opportunity for an authentic interchange with Stanley . . . never, ever again.

What I learned and never forgot from that fateful event was that our souls crave authenticity. We want people to be real with us. We want people to be authentic with us. We want to trust that what we see in another is his or her true self. What good is a love that is contrived, or a faith that is devised, or a loyalty that is strained, or a face that is false, or a countenance that is counterfeit?

I have often thought of that day in 1979, and every time I think about it, Hawthorne's short story *The Minister's Black Veil* comes to mind. Written in 1837, the story features the Reverend Mr. Hopper of Milford in New England, who, on the eve of his wedding, assumed a black veil and never discarded it, even on his deathbed. After pleading with him to no avail to remove the appendage from his visage, the Reverend Mr. Hooper's fiancée refused to marry him. His parishioners continually looked at him with terror, and his life fell into despair and gloom. The black veil served as an object lesson, as evidenced at his death when, surrounded by those who still cared about him, he slowly turned his veiled face round the circle of pale visitors, and summoned up enough strength to exclaim, "Why do you tremble at me alone? Tremble also at each other . . . I look around me, and lo! on every visage I see a Black Veil!"

There is a truth implicit in the minister's madness or eccentricity. Not a **small** truth it is! . . . one, in fact, which persists to the present more than a century later. The truth of the matter is that you and I hide ourselves from each other. In point of fact, as much as we crave authenticity, deeply imbedded in the nature of our humanity lies the proclivity to hide ourselves from God and from other people.

### **Person and Personage**

Paul Tournier, the renowned Christian physician and Swiss psychiatrist, as early as 1957 drew a distinction between the authentic **person**, whom we cannot fully know, and the **personage**, which effectively hides the unknowable person, in whom *remains . . . something of impenetrable mystery . . . The person, pure and unvarnished will always escape us. Doubtless only God knows it. I can never grasp the true reality of myself or of anybody else, but only an image; a fragmentary and deformed image, an appearance: the 'personage' . . . There is thus a strange relationship between the personage and the person; they are linked together, and yet they remain distinct.*<sup>i</sup>

The personage serves, then, as the image or countenance we show one another. It logically follows that I have a different personage for my wife than for my children, a different image for my children than for my colleagues, a different visage for my colleagues than for my friends, and a difference countenance for my friends than for my acquaintances, and yet a different personage for my acquaintances than for strangers. When one personage is displayed, obviously the others are veiled. Tournier would contend that at all times our very own person—our authentic being—is hidden from every other person and, in reality, even in part from ourselves.

### **The Eclipse of God**

A veiled visage, however, is not a **human** phenomenon alone. While it is characteristic of our very nature to hide our authenticity from God and from each other, God also is cloaked in mystery. Martin Buber's descriptive phrase for this is *The Eclipse of God*: God is hidden from us. There is nothing in our power we can do to force God to reveal himself to us. It is God's choice: when and how and where and to whom and in what circumstance God engages in self-disclosure . . . if at all.

Hear the lament of the Psalmist: "How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?" There is no way we can mistake the psalmist's anguish, fervently punctuated by repetition:

***How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever?***

***How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?***

***How long must I bear pain (hold counsels) in my soul,***

***and have sorrow in my heart all the day long?***

***How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?<sup>ii</sup>***

At certain times, during certain intervals, in certain conditions in our lives the psalmist's words have become our words . . . on those occasions when we have felt deserted by God . . . when God's face was hidden, eclipsed to our sight. God, eclipsed from His world. Countries ravished by hatred and war want to know how long God will hide his face. When we human beings go sauntering along in our own folly, we ultimately want to know: How long will that visage be veiled?

### **God Removes His Veil in Baptism**

On this third Sunday after Christmas, we have just savored the renewed realization that God has revealed himself in the Child of Bethlehem. Further self-disclosure of the divine occurs at Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. God actually removes his veil in the baptism of his beloved Son. Jesus is baptized; Jesus prays; heaven opens; the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove; and God's voice issues forth from above: *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*<sup>iii</sup> The people who had been witnessing John the Baptist's call to repentance wonder if indeed he—John—is the Messiah. John denies the conjecture and in essence points to Jesus as the authentic one, the authentic disclosure of the true God of Israel. *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*<sup>iv</sup> In effect John proclaims that this Jesus of Nazareth is the authentic revelation of the hidden God. Though still cloaked in mystery, God in Christ is no longer eclipsed, no longer hidden behind the veil of distance and obscurity. He has dropped the veil from his visage.

So, to be sure, the crucial lesson we learn about self-disclosure is one we learn from God and from his activity in the world with us and through his Son Jesus Christ—God's very own authentic being.

### **The Highest Expression of Personal Authenticity**

Let me press harder on this issue of authenticity, of authentic being, and on being authentic. We want to make the case that authenticity is inextricably connected to compassion. To say it more boldly, compassion is the highest expression of personal authenticity.

Look at the paradigm: Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth. When he hands the scroll of the prophet Isaiah back to the attendant and declares that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he is attesting to the fact that he is the Anointed One of God (the Messiah); and what has he been anointed to do? *...he has anointed me*<sup>v</sup>

*to bring good news to the poor—*

an act of compassion . . .

*to proclaim release to the captives—*

an act of compassion . . .

*to accomplish recovery of sight to the blind—*

an act of compassion . . .

*to let the oppressed go free—*

an act of compassion.

The authenticity of the Christ as Savior of the world is most assuredly characterized by his acts of compassion. Compassion is the highest expression of personal authenticity.

*For Mercy has a human heart,*

*Pity, a human face,*

*And Love, the human form divine,*

*And Peace, the human dress.*<sup>vi</sup>

No doubt you have seen Daniel Goleman’s book *Emotional Intelligence*. Among his pages of penetrating insight, he describes how David Busch, an American soldier during the Vietnam War, reacted to an act of compassion and pacifism in Vietnam rice paddies.

*It was early in the Vietnam War, and an American platoon was hunkered in some rice paddies in the heat of a fire-fight with the Viet Cong. Suddenly a line of six monks started walking along the elevated berms (ridges) that separated paddy from paddy. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire. "They didn't look right, they didn't look left. They walked straight through...It was really strange because nobody shot at `em. And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight went out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting."<sup>vii</sup>*

Goleman goes on to claim that emotions, expressions, acts of compassion are contagious.

This is an insight worth assimilating! Every act of compassion you and I express is contagious. Every act of kindness catches on. Every act of love, of peace, and of justice can be caught. Every act of compassion reflects in its essence the way of the cross.

### **The Way of the Cross**

Perhaps you know of the Catholic Retreat established by the Anawim Sisters located in Frenchville, Pennsylvania, eighteen miles north of Clearfield. On an ascending hillside behind Bethany Retreat Center there is a long pathway designated as the Way of the Cross, which features the fourteen Stations of the Cross and concludes at a chapel on top of a high knoll. At Station IV Mary mourns for her Son who has been condemned, bruised, and now is carrying his cross along the Via Dolorosa. At Station V Jesus meets Simon of Cyrene, who is conscripted to carry Jesus' cross for him. It is the Sixth Station at which we Protestants might pause for a longer time than at any other. There—at the Sixth Station of the Cross— is Veronica with her veil. Let's be perfectly clear here. Veronica is not found anywhere in scripture along the Via Dolorosa. Her story is strictly legendary. In point of fact, Veronica is a legend devised in the Middle Ages by the Roman Catholic Church . . . and yet what a wonderful, beautiful story! ... a story filled with eternal truths and lessons for life.

Here's the scene: As blood pours down his face, gushing from wounds inflicted by a crown of thorns; as his back torn to shreds reveals gaping abrasions; as his exhaustion seems unbearable; Jesus passes by a woman named Veronica (*verus*=true, *icon*=image). Moved by deep pity, Veronica removes her veil, exposing her face, showing her identity, disclosing her authenticity in an act of compassion, and with her veil wipes blood from the face of Jesus. The legend contends that because Jesus was so grateful for her

compassion, he left a permanent image of his face on her handkerchief, on her veil. This is the image I want you to remember: Veronica's removing her veil in an act of compassion, for in every act of compassion our authentic self, our authentic being, is disclosed and our true identity is discovered. If I could be so extreme—and I shall be—I'll assert that we are known authentically **only** in acts of compassion.

Once again, Martin Buber, the modern Jewish theologian, is helpful to us here. "All real living is meeting." *Spirit* does not belong to the individual person but lies *between* persons in the authentic relationship. It's in those acts of compassion that the spirit is known and becomes real. "Spiritual kindness," wrote Kahlil Gibran, "should be the source of every law upon the earth, for kindness is the shadow of God in man (humanity, all of us)." <sup>viii</sup> Kindness is the shadow of God in all of us.

### **The Church as Community of Compassion**

Do you know who we are? Do you know what kind of congregation Bower Hill Community Church has become? We have become a community of compassion.....again: a community of compassion. Tell me, is there any higher calling? In that compassion we become authentic. In that authenticity we meet each other; and in that meeting, we encounter the paradigm of compassion, even Christ Jesus. For, to be sure, your kindness, my kindness, our *kindness is the shadow of God in all of us*.

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The Baptism of the Lord

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**Notes**

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- <sup>i</sup> Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, pp. 13 and 15
- <sup>ii</sup> Psalm 13:1-2
- <sup>iii</sup> Luke 3:22
- <sup>iv</sup> Luke 3:16
- <sup>v</sup> See Luke 4:16-21
- <sup>vi</sup> William Blake, *The Divine Image*, stanza 3
- <sup>vii</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, p. 114
- <sup>viii</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *A Third Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, p. 213