

Shiny things (Exodus 34:29-35)

The story of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai should be paired with the story before it.

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This story of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai is well paired with the story of Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop, for all the obvious reasons.

I think it's better paired with the story that precedes it in Exodus, the story of the golden calf. A shiny, horned thing, the calf is an object in place of which God sets up Moses to be far truer to the purposes of God—and also, by happy coincidence, a shiny horned thing!

It's true: this story has given cause to imagining Moses as horned. The word translated here "shone" can also mean "horned." It appears as "horned" in the Vulgate, which is how Moses came to be depicted with horns, most famously in Michelangelo's statue in St. Peter's Basilica. It's also contributed to anti-Semitic tropes, a grotesquerie that might have us discounting this as just an ugly mistake, one perpetuated if not driven by bigotry.

But it might actually be wordplay at work in the story, God rejecting the shiny, horned calf that the people have fashioned to worship, pressing upon them instead a far more potent thing, something living, *someone* living, to give life to the law that gives life. Really, this whole thing might be something of a joke, a tongue-in-cheek offering of God to the people. "You want some shiny, horned thing? Well, here you go."

What's more, if God is understood in this pair of stories to be setting up a contrast between an idol and a teacher, then that can preach on Transfiguration Sunday quite well. It's often wondered what it is about these two, Moses and Elijah, that has them appearing with Jesus as he's transfigured on the mountain. The answer most often given: in these two are represented all the law and the prophets, which is to say Jesus is a continuity, not a departure from them but a fulfillment of them. Luke's version of the transfiguration complicates this, though, as Jesus is remembered to have talked with these two about his coming departure or exodus, as if this is what these three have in common—a remarkable exodus.

A third preaching point to play with might be something about God's insistence that we're to gather in God's spirit not around objects but around and amid people, that the "religion" the Lord generates to give life to a gathered people isn't a fixed thing but a dynamic thing. The church is urgently a living body set about the persistent work of discernment of God's will and aim, not about implementing settled talking points.

I'm always amazed at how many Christians assert the Bible as the Word of God—this when Jesus, the living Christ, is testified to (and in the Bible!) as the Word of God. And it's a *living* word, a word still speaking, as my denomination, the United Church of Christ, proclaims. But some Christians seem to worship the Bible even more than they do the living God. I'll sometimes browse church websites, taking note of the ordering of things. If, in listing "What We Believe," they feature the Bible first and God second, I find I'm deeply skeptical about their witness. "Bibliolatry" this is sometimes called. So it might be a good reminder this week, that it is the Living Christ to whom we're to listen, the final revelation in the challenging tradition of being in relationship with people, not things.

This is one of those Sundays that shows up for preaching every year, which makes it tough. How not to say the same thing as last year and the year before? The pairing of transfigured Jesus with transfigured Moses might feel fresh if it includes a third one in the mix, the shiny calf that's never far from attracting our attention, even our worship. How we do love shiny things! And gold—so stable a thing, of such enduring value! But the Lord who calls the church is less interested in stability than in life. Our work together is much more difficult than anything so stable and settled. It's also a lot more compelling, not to mention urgently needed—wisdom in discernment that the future may be bright.

Now there's a shiny thing worthy of our worship.