

It was a pizza commercial, I think. A commercial for one of the big national pizza chains (though I can't remember which one, so in the end, it probably wasn't a very successful commercial). It was a commercial about pizza... but also about perspective. Pandemic perspective. In the commercial, ordinary people (or paid actors -- it's hard to tell these days) share some of the "little things" they've appreciated in the midst of the pandemic. One person talks about his family eating dinner together nearly every single night, something that never happened for him before. Another talks about spending her days -- even her "work" days -- in comfortable clothes (yoga pants, I think). These are the little things, the small blessings... and while they certainly don't balance out the utter devastation of this pandemic, or in any way make it "okay"... blessings are always worth noticing, worth counting, worth appreciating.

Maybe you have your own list of "little things." I do. Don't get me wrong: I hate this pandemic... but I like that my morning commute has turned into a morning walk. I like that I haven't had to fill my gas tank in a while. I like that we have more family dinners together around the table. I like that I haven't had to put on makeup in quite some time.

Is that true for any of you? I don't really bother with makeup anymore. Most days, the only people I see are the ones in my family, and they already know what I look like first thing in the morning. Besides, the makeup just ends up smudging the inside of my face mask. So it's settled. So long, Covergirl. Good riddance. After all, it's probably better for my skin. My pores can finally breathe again.

I suppose I've had skin care on my mind lately... not because I'm so utterly concerned with the appearance of my pores, but rather because today's brown bag item is a skin care item. Throughout these past several weeks, as the season of Easter has given way to the season of Pentecost, it's been the season of "brown bag" here at Wesley

Church. Each week, our worship has been inspired by random, everyday items -- “brown bag” items -- provided by so many of you. It’s been fun (for me, at least) to see what these ordinary items can teach us about the gospel, about God. And now, we’ve come to our final week of “brown bag” season, our final “brown bag” item: a quartz rolling facial massager, courtesy of Mikailyn Maticavage.

Truth be told, when I first saw the photo of Mikailyn’s brown bag item, I had no idea what it was. Clearly, my skin care routine is lacking. When used regularly, a rolling facial massager is a handy little tool that is supposed to evenly distribute lotion or oil, reduce inflammation, and relieve tension, while improving overall skin tone. Plus, it apparently feels nice on your skin. The end result? Younger, healthier, more radiant-looking skin.

More radiant-looking skin? Wouldn’t you know, church... that reminds me of a story.

[Exodus 34:29-35, NIV]

<sup>29</sup> When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. <sup>30</sup> When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him. <sup>31</sup> But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. <sup>32</sup> Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.

<sup>33</sup> When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. <sup>34</sup> But whenever he entered the LORD’s presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, <sup>35</sup> they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

Here in this story, we find Moses in a familiar place, a holy place... a place called Sinai. He has led God's people Israel out of Egypt, through the sea, into the wilderness, and to the foot of this holy mountain. While this newly-freed people waits at the foot of the mountain, Moses ascends... to speak with God. And this isn't just ordinary old prayer. Moses sees God (or, at least... the back of God). Moses speaks with God in person (or whatever you call it when it's with God). Moses beholds God's glory, there on the mountaintop.

When Moses finally returns to the foot of the mountain, the people are shocked... not by his reappearance, but by his *appearance*. "When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses," we're told, "his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him" (Exodus 34:30, NIV). *His face was radiant*. So radiant, in fact, that he had to cover it with a veil, a mask, presumably to shield the Israelites' eyes from his own radiant, shining face.

How about it?!? The first biblical example of someone wearing a face mask. Actually, that's why I read this very story to the kiddos of Wesley for our Zoom "mask-parade" a few weeks back. I reminded them that even God's friend Moses wore a mask to protect other people, and we can, too. It's a great story for kiddos who are feeling overwhelmed by this new reality of face masks.

But to be sure, there's something in this story for the grown-ups, too. Moses beholds God's glory in a way that is transformative, spiritually transformative, physically transformative. His very face is changed. He is radiant, and without the benefit of a rolling facial massager. The time he spends with God on the summit of Sinai changes him in a way that is obvious to everyone around him. And there, right there... that's where we find our way into this story.

Hear that again: the time Moses spends with God on the summit of Sinai changes him, transforms him, in a way that is obvious to everyone around him. And so, as I read these ancient words, I wonder, church... I wonder how the time we spend with God can change us, and transform us, in a way that is obvious to everyone around us. I wonder how that part of the story can be part of our story, our lived experience, our everyday lives.

It's worth noting, of course, that there's nothing "everyday" about Moses' encounter with God on the summit of Sinai. It isn't routine or ordinary. It's specific and unique. It's "once in a lifetime," not "everyday life."<sup>1</sup> Even still... I think there's some wisdom there, some wisdom for our everyday lives.

I think that's especially true in this moment, as our "everyday lives" are experiencing an overhaul in the wake of the pandemic. Some are calling it the "new normal." Others, the "great reset." Differences in language aside, one thing is clear: life isn't like it used to be. Life isn't the same as it was before. We're still figuring out what life looks like in the midst of coronavirus, and after coronavirus. In fact, we're just *starting* to figure it out (despite the fact that this is now the sixteenth week of "covid-tide."). Up to this point, we've mostly been in "survival mode," without much opportunity for big-picture reflection... but now, we're starting to settle in for the long haul, in a reality indelibly marked by coronavirus. Now, we're discovering and navigating and (to some extent) choosing what "normal" might look like in that new reality.

That can be a daunting prospect. Seriously, do any of us really feel equipped for that reset? It's not easy to navigate your way through a paradigm shift. It's more than a little overwhelming.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Leander E. Keck et. al (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 953.

But at the same time... it's also an opportunity. That's what's good about a reset, right? You get to... reset. Make new choices. Set new (and better?) priorities. It's what we love about holidays like New Year's. (And while we're on the subject: we're only halfway in and frankly, I'm over 2020... so why not have an early yet overdue "New Year's" right now? We did Christmas last week, so let's just go for it.) So... yeah, I see opportunity here. This is the moment. Now is the time. Now is the time to establish the habits that will lead us through a "great reset" and into a *better* "new normal." Now is the time to make time with God a priority. Now is the time to make a new or renewed habit of tending to your faith. Now is the time to be intentional, to set aside regular moments to spend on the mountaintop. When we do that -- when we regularly spend time with God -- I think that encounter changes us... not *just* like it did for Moses, but... just like it did for Moses. When we regularly spend time with God, that encounter transforms us in ways that become obvious, radiantly obvious, to everyone around us.

In the end, that's what God intends for us, right? We read of it in the gospels, in the words of none other than Jesus himself. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read:

[Matthew 5:14-16, NRSV]

<sup>14</sup> "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup> No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Let your light shine," Jesus says (Matthew 5:16, NRSV). It's funny... I've read those words I-don't-know-how-many times, but I've never read them alongside this story from Exodus, this story of Moses and his radiant, shining face. I'm glad I have, now. This story from Exodus is helping me read Jesus' words in a new way.

“Let your light shine,” Jesus says. I’m with Jesus here, 100%. I’m on board. At the same time... I don’t really think it’s possible to “let your light shine” unless you’re exposed to the “light” in the first place. Maybe... maybe all of this works like glow-in-the-dark paint. Sure, it shines in the darkness... but first, it has to have contact with the light.

First, it has to have contact with the light. First, we have to have contact with the light. First, we have to spend time in the light... kind of like Moses, there on the summit of Sinai. First, we have to spend time in God’s light... because it’s that time in the light that transforms us in ways that are obvious, radiantly obvious, to everyone around us.

Friends, at this point in this “great reset,” we’ve just now entered the “green” stage. Elected leaders and public health officials have been careful to remind us, time and again, that “green” doesn’t mean “normal” (at least, not like the “normal” we used to know). But the green stage is the start of a new kind of normal... one that we (in part) can help shape. So let’s shape it well.

Be intentional, friends... and as you shape your new normal, make sure it includes regular time on the mountaintop, intentional time with God, transformative time in the light. Allow that time in the light to transform you in ways that are obvious, radiantly obvious, to everyone around you. Think of it as a spiritual skin care regimen.

And then, let your light shine.