

Beware or Be Aware
First Reading - Luke 9:28-36
Second Reading - Exodus 34:27-35

I don't like spiders and snakes; and that ain't what it takes to love me ...

You fool, you fool. Do you remember that bawdy, halfwitted tune from the previous century, the song played ad nauseam on the AM radio of your wheezing Vega as you cruised from the bowling alley to the A&W on those hot summer nights? Nothing but vapid nonsense, really, and Jim Stafford was no Bruce Springsteen, but the song got him a top ten record and an appearance on *American Bandstand*, nevertheless. Remember, this was the same era that gave us *Convoy* and *The Streak*, a real high water mark of American cultural sophistication.

I don't like spiders and snakes... I can at least appreciate the sentiment of that, particularly when it comes to snakes ... Not a fan! I recall one traumatic encounter with snakes. Saint Louis has a great zoo in case you didn't know that; a must see spot if you ever make it to the city. However, there was an incident at the Zoo in late August, 1970, that was the lead story on KMOX news. Zookeeper Jerry McNeal was cleaning out the cobra cage in the herpetarium when an alert came out that a number of dogs had wandered onto the grounds. Dogs on the loose at the Zoo ... Not good. So,

immediately, reptile workers, bear keepers, penguin protectors, gorilla guardians, and giraffe wranglers were deputized as dog catchers.

Unfortunately, amidst the chaos of the emergency, McNeal forgot to retighten the drain he had been flushing out ... in the cobra cage ...

What?!? The next day when he remembered it, he returned to the cage only to discover that a 4 ft. long spitting cobra had escaped, busted out, gone on the lam, taken a powder, vamoosed ... What?!?

I heard that and my 9-year-old eyes sprang right out of their sockets like Daffy Duck at the sight of Elmer Fudd's gun barrel. Cobra! I knew about cobras. I had seen Charlie Chan and Born Free, and I wanted those cobras to stay on the other side of the globe. *Mom, what's a spitting cobra?* Before she could respond, KMOX's Julius Randle gave the answer. A spitting cobra isn't just a rude reptile. When threatened, this snake possesses the ability to spit its poisonous venom, targeting the eyes of its foe, potentially causing permanent blindness. What?!? I was terrified, imagining the slithering assassin accessing our drainage pipes, or creeping out from the corner of the garage. I'm lying awake at night worried that there could be a crack in the baseboard the cobra could slide through.

We lived eighty miles up the river from St. Louis, but hey, the snake could have found a warm spot on the engine of a neighbor's Buick and hitched a ride up the highway to my street. Took his kids to the zoo, came home with an unexpected guest. They didn't find the snake for 40 days! I don't care if the Cards were playing in the World Series, I wasn't going anywhere near the Gateway city. When it comes to me and poisonous snakes, I'm no fight, all flight.

Fear. Whether rational or irrational, fear can paralyze you, shut you down, stop you in your tracks, hijack your plans, physically debilitate you, drown your enthusiasm, kidnap your conviction, steal your enthusiasm, alter your personality, lead you to say what you do not believe and do what you abhor. In other words, fear can ... mess you up. And yet, fear is as inevitable in life as dawn and dusk. There is such a thing as healthy fear, the fear that sharpens focus, energizes performance, moves one to protect and safeguard others, but far too often fear becomes the fuel for harm, manipulation, prejudice, injustice, retreat from the good, and evasion of responsibility.

Among the most repeated exhortations in the Bible is the message — *Do not fear; fear not; Do not be afraid* — and each time you read it you want to shout — *That’s easy for you to say!* The Lord to Abram; the angel to Hagar; God to Isaac; the Lord to Jacob; Moses to the people; the angel to Zechariah; Gabriel to Mary; the heavenly host to the shepherds; Jesus to the disciples; the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene; the Lord to Paul. In these and scores of other texts, our Lord is revealed to be the bringer of peace, who calms our fears, and is present to us. Yet, these texts also indicate that the Bible is populated with a whole lot of frightened people. Ultimately, the question is not whether we shall fear but how we shall face our fears.

Today we read — *“Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”* That seems a bit odd because it’s not like this was their first encounter with Moses. They had been traveling with him for some time, and truth be told, fear wasn’t the typical response of the people toward Moses. Throughout the exodus they had spent far more of their energy complaining to Moses. They didn’t like

the menu, the scenery, the accommodations, the lack of a wine store or brewery. Moses didn't strike them as intimidating. No, Moses was the unfortunate clerk staffing the complaint department at the travel agency.

This isn't even the first time Moses appeared before the people with the Ten Commandments after being on the mountain with the Lord. Do you recall that first occasion. It did not go well. While Moses was waiting on the Commandments at the engraver's workshop up on the mountain, the people were down below firing up the kiln to shape a calf from gold so they could worship it instead of the Lord. Exodus reports — *“As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.”*

After that ugly and deadly day, Moses announces to the people — *“You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”* Moses trudges back up the mountain and intercedes on behalf of the people. The Lord is merciful and promises to go forward with the people, however, it is interesting that this time Moses has to etch

the commandments onto the tablets himself, and so it takes a lot longer to finish before he heads back down to the people he's been traveling with, managing, fussing over, and dragging toward the promised land.

Yet, something is different this time. *“When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”* It's the same Moses, and yet, the Moses who climbed the mountain descends the mountain a changed man. *“The skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”*

Much of the conversation around this text has focused on what we are to make of the word translated as *shine*. The Hebrew word is *qaran*. Strangely, the word may also be translated as — *to grow horns*, which, if that were the case here, would certainly have me stepping back from Moses — *they were afraid to come near him*. No kidding. Artists, including Michelangelo have often depicted Moses with literal horns, while others interpret *qaran* more as shoots or horns of light emanating from Moses' face, possibly similar to the scene of Jesus at his Transfiguration in Luke's Gospel — *“And while [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”* Still others resolve the language by

suggesting *qaran* could mean that exposure to God’s glory had hardened Moses skin into a leathery substance, ossified like horn.

While all of that debate is intriguing, it distracts us from what the scene reveals about the glory of the Lord and our reaction to it. When it comes to the presence of the Lord, we are like those who bravely talk a big game until they actually look down from the high dive, like those who say they want to follow Jesus right up until the moment Jesus calls upon them to love the stranger, like those who are good with loving our neighbor until the first sign of discomfort or inconvenience, like those who only want to follow a domesticated God. We speak, even sing of the holiness of God, but when that holiness draws close, we too, back off lest we be changed.

“When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”

If not confusing, it is at least ironic that the Bible which so regularly conveys the message — *Do not fear* — almost as often directs us to — *Fear the Lord*. *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,”* it says in Proverbs.

So what is it, *fear* or *fear not*? As we consider the Israelites fearfully backing off from Moses upon seeing the shine of his face, perhaps it is helpful for us to consider the difference between *Beware* and *Be Aware*.

Now, I love dogs, and if I'm at a party I am often more comfortable hanging with the dog than flailing in my attempt to make intelligent conversation. However, if I'm walking down the sidewalk and come near a chain link fence with a big ol' sign posted, *Beware of Dog*, I'm crossing the street. If I'm hiking in the mountains, and the trail brushes up next to a steep cliff with a sign posted that says *BEWARE*, I'm hugging the hillside.

However, the words *Be Aware* mean something very different to me. Do you remember *Casa Gallardo* up on Park Road? Those big tables where families and friends would devour basket after basket and bowl after bowl of chips and salsa? By the time it came to order, you were so full of chips and Coke that you weren't sure you'd even be able to eat your chimichanga ... but you did, didn't you? Made for a blissfully miserable afternoon, but it tasted good going down. Anyway, do you remember the most frequently heard words at Casa Gallardo. It wasn't — *Could I interest you in a sopapilla?* or even — *More tea?* No the words repeated most often at the

Casa? Be careful, these plates are very hot. Be aware. They weren't telling you to forego your enchilada. They certainly weren't inviting you to ask for a refund. Rather, the message was — This is going to be very good. It will make you all warm inside, and we want you to enjoy it. Just be aware ... pay attention, wouldn't want you to burn your pinkies on the plate. Be aware. Pay attention.

Sometimes, our fears lean toward terror, for example — spitting cobras. Beware! Run away! However, at other times our fear could be defined more as *respect* or *reverence* like when the Lord instructed Moses — *Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.* Or in the classic choral introit — *The Lord is in His Holy temple; Let all the earth keep silence.* Be aware, you never know when you may be walking on holy ground.

Too often, fearing the unfamiliar, we keep our heads down and walk by holy ground without realizing it. Sometimes, we'll catch the first intimation of the Holy, and draw back from it, fearing that it may change or challenge us in some way.

Too seldom, do we tentatively step toward the Holiness of God when invited. It could be a chance encounter with a stranger, the voice of an old friend, the glimpse of some simple act of kindness, the wisdom of a child. In such brave moments the heavens open, entreating us to break our agenda, escape the bonds of our far too settled and seemingly comfortable routines, look up from our low expectations and witness the glory of God all around us. These are the moments that change us, shape us, transform us. Think of what we would have missed if we weren't paying attention. A suitable motto could be — Heads up for the Holy.

Perhaps it is the difference between *Beware* and *Be Aware*. Sometimes we run away from the sacred fearing we'll be changed by it. But sometimes, if we're paying attention, we sense the sacred and tentatively, with reverence, walk toward it, trusting in the One who alone can make our faces shine. Amen.