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Texts: Exodus 33: 18-23; Exodus 34: 29-35
May 31, 2020

"The Hidden Face: Veils, Masks, and the Experience of the Holy"

Over the past several weeks, I've been out of the house more than at any time since March 13, when the lockdown began. Protests, rallies, marches, and small group gatherings – the moment has required a physical, bodily presence that has meant, at least for some of us, breaking quarantine and reentering the public. We do our best to maintain our distance. We remain outdoors. We use sanitizer on our hands. And we always, always, wear a mask.

I don't know about you, but wherever I go, I wind up sitting in the parking lot for several minutes before exiting the car, tying on one of the masks that was given to me by the Ladies Who Stitch. It's a beautiful mask, and as these things go, I kind of like it. But especially during the first few weeks of this whole experience, I felt terribly self-conscious when I would put it on. I would walk into a store, feeling both physically and psychologically uncomfortable. Physically, because my glasses kept getting fogged up, but psychologically because of some deep-seated ambivalence about what it is to conceal one's features so fully from other people. It's hard not to be able to read other peoples' faces. It's strange to have to rely on one's eyes alone to communicate friendliness or human warmth. It's disconcerting to place a cloth between oneself and the world from our mutual fear of sickening one another. "I may be your contagion," the masks indicate, "even as you may be mine." Nothing about them feels easy. And yet I've started to become accustomed to them, even as they've become charged symbols suggesting one's basic orientation in the midst of the pandemic. I'm convinced that they're a significant piece of what's keeping many of us healthy right now, even as many of us have begun to emerge from quarantine. Indeed, we'll be experimenting with our first outdoor worship service next week, but it's vital to the success of that experiment that we greet each other not with a hug and a handshake, but with a smile concealed by a mask.

What I'd like to do in the next several minutes is to think about the religious, and more broadly, human, properties of masks. While masks are often thought to be a means for concealing one's identity (who was that masked man?), and while we often think of masks as connoting the opposite of authenticity in human relationships (drop the mask, we say, when we want someone to be more forthright), I wish to suggest a more complicated understanding of masks. Masks are, I wish to suggest, an essential piece of what it means to be a human being. My favorite of all blues singers, Charley Patton, once recorded under the name The Masked Marvel. Michel Foucault, for me one of the most insightful philosophers of the 20th century, once called himself the "Masked Philosopher." Bob Dylan once opened a concert by declaring that on that night, he had on his Bob Dylan mask. Great art, great thought, great literature, are imbued with questions of masks. But it turns out, masks are also an essential piece of what it is to encounter God. God comes to us as one masked, as one veiled, even as we must sometimes veil ourselves in order to preserve the essence of our humanity. What I wish to say, what I wish to tell you today, is that the mask you tie around your face in the

supermarket parking lot has a deep symbolic resonance that's well worth exploring together in this time of corona. Yes, there are public health reasons for wearing masks right now, but my hope is to persuade you that there's actually a theological significance, a deep human significance, to the masks we're donning.

It turns out that masks and veils have a rather long history here in New England. At some point after putting a mask on in that parking lot, I recalled a story about masks from Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled "The Minister's Black Veil." It appeared in print in 1832, and tells of how a New England minister named Rev. Hooper begins wearing a crape veil to cover his face. The veil, a kind of mask, if you will, conceals every feature of his face other than his mouth and chin. No explanation is given as to why he suddenly chooses to wear it. He simply appears one Sunday morning with his veil, leaving his congregation stupefied and rather chilled after the service. Hooper steps into the pulpit as he always does, and he preaches a sermon, not unlike any of his other sermons, but now with his face concealed by the veil. Soon after that he conducts a wedding, where the veil unnerves everyone in attendance, nearly ruining the occasion. The church sexton comments that he can't really feel that the Reverend's face is behind the veil at all. An older woman opines that the minister has changed himself into something awful by hiding his face. For one and all, the veil creates a sense of dread, for the mystery that it presents. People begin to avoid the minister. Children go out of their way not to cross his path. And no one can anyone persuade the minister to remove the mask – not the perplexed lay leaders who meet with him, not his fiancé, not anyone. In time, most people assume that Rev. Hooper carries a secret shame, one that he wishes to hide behind the black cloth.

It is only at the end of his life, as he nears his own death, that the minister explains the presence of the black veil. "Why do you tremble at me alone?" Hooper asks an assembly of onlookers. "Tremble also at each other…when the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator…then deem me a monster for the symbol beneath which I have lived…I look around me, and lo, on every visage, a Black Veil."

What the minister suggests is that the veil, the mask that has concealed his face, was only an external demonstration of what was and is already the case: that every human face is a mask. Every smile, every furrowed brow, every pursed lip, every squinted eye - these all conceal as much information as they reveal. The human face, to say nothing of the human heart, is anything but an open book. A face is something complex, as indecipherable as a holy text, as inscrutable as an ancient hieroglyphic. One might achieve an adequate reading of a face, but it is only ever that – a reading. The self beneath the look, however, the essence beneath the surface, always remains elusive, just out of reach. As with a text, we're left with a system of signs to interpret, signs that we frequently get wrong. But even when we get them right, the signs, the play across the surface of the face, shift and change. A mask is dropped, and another is adopted.

That notion is built into what it means to become a person. It's a word derived from the theater, where the Greek word *prosopon*, which was an actor's mask. Borrowing from that original meaning, we can say that to become a person in the deepest sense of that word is to don a series of masks. It doesn't mean that there's no substance beneath the surface of the mask. It's simply to say that in the process of becoming fully

functional human beings, we adopt personas that we perform, personas that are true and lasting, but that never fully reveal everything that lies beneath.

It's true of our interactions with strangers, but it's no less true of our interactions with those we know best. My children, my parents, Rachael – no matter how well I know them, they remain mysteries to me, even as I remain a mystery to them. That doesn't mean that no one truly knows another person. It simply means that we're fathomless to one another. A fathom is a unit of measurement approximating an arm's length. Thus, to be fathomless to one another is to acknowledge the ways we can never fully grasp another human life. It is to celebrate that even given a lifetime of careful study and observation, we'll never be able to get our arms all the way around the personhood of another, even those we love the most. Which is to say, what if Rev. Hooper's veil, his mask, might be the occasion not of dread and gloom, but of very good news about the bottomless complexity of the human soul? What if the Reverend's mask was an indication of the holy itself, shrouded in each human visage?

I've come to suspect that the demand to remove one's mask, to reveal oneself fully and wholly, without mediation, without barriers, without a covering, is, at root, a totalitarian dream. In such a dream, there are no secrets, and everything about one's personhood is laid bare. One's past, one's preferences, one's feelings, one's ambivalence or misgivings, one's guilt or shame, one's pleasure or ecstasy or buried desires – these are all assumed to be publicly legible, and if publicly legible, then also publicly available, to be controlled, consumed, or disciplined. What is the quest for better and more accurate surveillance technology other than a demand to remove our masks, to expose the details of our lives, to reveal what otherwise might be kept hidden? What is a society under constant surveillance other than a desire to pierce a veil, a mask, a secret, concealed behind folds of fabric? In that, the relentless desire for unmediated access to a face, or a self, bears much in common with a pornographic imagination, obsessed with peering beneath the skirt of some object of fascination. It's a dream of intimacy without the difficult work of relationality. But more than that, it's the dream of some privileged access to truth without the difficult work of interpretation.

That's an idea with a very long biblical pedigree. In fact, it's one of the most fundamental characteristics of God in the Hebrew Bible. Humans are not given to see the face of God. It always remains hidden. Jacob wrestles with an angel and lives, Hagar encounters a messenger that she later believes to be God, but no one gets unmediated access to the divine. Not even Moses. On Mount Sinai, when God approaches, the divine presence is shrouded in a thick darkness. When Moses pleads to be able to see God face to face, God refuses. He is only given to see the back side of God, which is to say, the effects of God, what comes after God, but he is never given a glimpse of God's face. It's not long before Moses does the same when he descends from Sinai. He places a veil over his own face, as if to preserve and protect from sight whatever lies beneath. One is not given to encounter the holy directly, in other words, but only through mediation, which is to say, through a mask. Put in slightly different terms, in the Hebrew Bible, God is revealed not in light, but as one veiled, always concealed, by darkness.

Much within the New Testament is an effort to repudiate that ancient insight. The writers of the New Testament were influenced by Greek thought, where the divine was understood to be found in light, not darkness – a light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, as John's Gospel puts it. In one important respect,

however, the New Testament affirms that basic Hebraic insight surrounding the darkness, and the masks of God. For when Jesus arrives teaching on the seas of Galilee, he comes as one unknown, as the hymn written by Albert Schweitzer puts it. In the years AD 1-33, Jesus is the mask that God wears, and no one, save for a Roman centurion at the foot of the cross, ever recognizes him – until after the fact. In the New Testament as in the Old, God comes to us as one masked, hidden behind a veil.

What if the face of God was always concealed behind a mask? What if we were never given to see God face to face, but were only able to discern the back side of God, the effects of God? Would that not be a theology in keeping with the best of progressive Christian thought, which prioritizes the necessity of reading, of interpretation, of argument and persuasion – where meaning isn't simply given but must be discerned and argued about through careful readings and counterreadings? Would that not be a theology in keeping with our commitment to living out the good news preached by Jesus, where we see the effects of God, the aftereffects of God, demonstrated in our passionate commitment and engagement with the world around us, even and especially when that world is in chaos? Would that not be a radical theology in keeping with an understanding of ongoing revelation, one that insists that masked divinities continue to appear in the world, even if we don't always recognize them as such right away? Finally, would the story of a masked God, which gives way to the story of a veiled person, would that not lead to an understanding that human beings are worthy of our care and reverence. Informed by such stories, we could then affirm that, in the interplay between mask and voice, face and speech, look and language, in that very gap something speaks, something that is not always simply we ourselves, something that we might name as God. What if, in other words, you were, from time to time, the mask that God wears, and what if, from time to time, God wore the mask of those you encountered in the world?

I sense all of that and more in Hawthorne's tale of the minister's veil, and how it opens toward other, wider, truths contained in ancient biblical stories. I sense all of that and more every time I tie the mask around my face in order to enter a public space. It's a way of demonstrating both self-care and the care of others in a time such as this. But it's also a reminder of so much more: that there is no such thing as a simple self-identity; that each human life is fathomless, which is to say irreducible, an unending mystery; that we become persons precisely through the wearing of masks; that something other, something divine, speaks from the space between the mask and our voice; and that if God does inhabit the world, it is only while wearing a mask.

Let me end by acknowledging one final dimension of the masks we wear. That has to do with the mask of race. The dream that many of us have held is that if only we could remove the masks of race, we would discover the same, common humanity underneath our skin. If only we could take off the mask of our whiteness, our blackness, or our Asian or Hispanic or Middle Eastern mask, if only we could remove the cultural surface that marks us, we would recover the shared dimensions of what it means to be human. No doubt we need to discover the shared dimensions of our humanity, but it won't come by eliminating the cultural or racial masks that we wear. I think this is one more ruse of power, one more totalitarian nightmare, one more fantasy of the surveillance society, where human multiplicity is endlessly reduced to a vision of the same. Instead, we need to acquire the skill not only of reading, but of celebrating the masks themselves – race, culture, gender - for they are an irreducible aspect of our personhood. But we also

need to recognize that no one is reducible to that mask, and that untold and fathomless dimensions sound in the space between the mask and the voice. And if that's true, then it's also the case that alternative performances of race, or culture, or gender, are possible, performances that enhance and amplify the performances of others, instead of smothering them, or casting them offstage. We all wear a mask, but we can choose how we perform our roles.

All that from the simple act of tying on a mask before entering a public space. I'll be glad when we don't have to do that anymore. But as long as we do, let it be a reminder of the necessary masks we wear. Instead of seeing a mere covering, let us see the play across the surface of each mask. Let us see the creative beauty of them. Let us see the lovely and irreducible difference that they suggest, and let us embrace the fathomless, bottomless depths that each of them represent. Let us see in them the trace of God.