A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki

St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine

March 2, 2025; Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Based on Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3, and Luke 9:28-36

Blame Coco Chanel.

Having a suntan was once considered low class. Working people had to be outside laboring in the sun, but the creamy complexioned upper class did no such thing. Then in the early 1920s, French designer Coco Chanel went on a cruise and came back tan. Soon, women all over the world were copying her, and being tan became the fashion.

In the 50's Coppertone was invented - Little Miss Coppertone, who appeared on the brand's bottles with her puppy and her little pale butt hanging out.

Tanning became even more popular in the 60's and sunburn – ehhh, just an unfortunate side effect of the need to get that tan. But in the 80's the more unfortunate side effect of tanning became better known; learning how UV radiation can lead to skin cancer caused better sunscreens to be developed to protect our skin from all that radiation. Despite all the warnings about skin cancer, the tanning industry is still popular. A recent study showed that up to 35% of all American adults have tried a tanning bed at least once. Did you know there are four tanning salons in the Wilton/Farmington area? I sure didn't but before you run out of church they're closed on Sunday. And today if you go to the beach – well maybe not today – but in a few months – you will find everything from people who completely cover their skin with clothing or sunscreen to, well, those who don't!

Our lessons this last Sunday of Epiphany have a lot to do with the sun, brightness and covering up. Moses was a cover-upper – he spent time with God up on Mt. Sinai and God's radiance was so strong that Moses got sunburnt – his face was shining. The belief at the time was that directly encountering the Divine meant death. Moses had a dispensation but the people were afraid that even seeing the reflection of God's glory in Moses' face would cause them harm – so Moses put on a veil.

In today's epistle, Paul uses this experience of Moses and the veil to describe how in the New Covenant Christ has removed this veil for us:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The challenge though is do we really want to give up the veil. We began the Epiphany season experiencing the light of God as it comes to us in Jesus. Just like today we had the heavens open and the voice of God express favor on Jesus. Today we also hear about the transformation of Jesus on the mountaintop just like Moses. But whereas Moses was alone, Jesus is accompanied by Peter, James and John. They will later reflect (as in meditate upon) but also reflect as in reflecting, the light of Christ to the world. Again the voice from the heavens confirms Jesus as the Chosen One.

We begin Lent in three days. Lent is all about removing the distractions or veils that prevent us from experiencing God's light and reflecting it back to others. It's serious work that requires a higher degree of self-reflection as well as engaging in the works of mercy, outreach and almsgiving. But the call to Lent is a call to turn to God, to take the veils off and experience God's presence more immediately as Moses, Peter, James and John.

Our gospel of the Transfiguration pushes us toward Lent with a few reminders:

That God's presence is available to us in Jesus, and we need no mediator like Moses to come down the mountain for us. We have all the mediation we need in God's Word and in the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ which come to us directly. That should be a cause of great rejoicing. We should sing our final Alleluia's today quite heartily.

But we also need to acknowledge that Moses, Jesus, Peter, James or John did not live on the mountaintop and the temptation is always to put the veils on – to not acknowledge the light of God in our lives – to let someone else do the work of reflecting it. While mountaintops are great, no one lives there. The challenge is to see God's light when we come down from the mountain. A master was told by a would-be follower, "I will give you one orange if you can show me where God is". The master answered, "I will give you two oranges if you can show me where God is not". The young monk, Thomas Merton, left the Trappist Monastery to go to the dentist in Louisville. At first everything of the world seemed repulsive to him. But in prayer he gradually learned to see more deeply. Later, when he went to town, he was astounded at how beautiful everything was. He stood on a street corner and it was as though the entire city glimmered with the grace of God. "How do you tell people", he asked himself, "that they are walking around shining like the sun!"

But what it you don't feel very shiny right now? What if you want to keep your veil on? Some of it of course might be time of year. Unless you've been down south or out west, our skin is really white. Why I bet you don't even know if you have sunscreen or where it is in the house since it's been so long since you used it. Others tell me, and I'm in that place myself, that they can't watch the news right now or can only take it in small doses. It's all a bit too much like a blast of really hot sun penetrating our Maine winter. Why maybe you're so down that you don't really even feel like singing, "Alleluia", perhaps the gusto got up and went? Perhaps the words of St. Augustine are relevant even more than ever this year:

So let us sing 'Alleluia', although we are not yet in the enjoyment of our heavenly rest, and so sweeten our toil in this life. Let us sing as travellers sing on a journey in order to keep their spirits up. Lighten your toil by singing and never be idle. Sing and keep on walking. And what do I mean by walking? I mean press on from good to better in this life. Persevere, advance in virtue, in true faith and in good living. Sing up - and keep on walking!"

But where are we supposed to walk to, Auggie? There is a Hasidic story of a rabbi who disappeared every Shabat Eve, "to commune with God in the forest"—or so his congregation thought. One Sabbath night the people deputed one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman, sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once he was there, the rabbi cooked for her and carried in her firewood and swept her floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue. Back in the village, the people demanded of the one they'd sent to follow him, "Did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?" "Oh, no," the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause. "Our rabbi went much higher than that."

Sunscreen, UPF rated clothing that resists ultraviolet ray, - those are your choices for when the warm weather eventually comes. But as far as the life of discipleship, drop the veils and let your light shine for all to see and see that light in all of those around you.