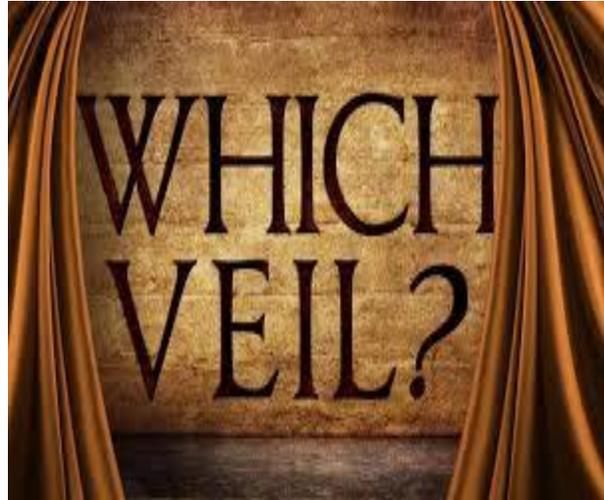


Do you remember *The Phantom of the Opera*? The main character wore a half-mask because half of his face was so disfigured that he frightened people. With even a half-mask, people can't see who you are. In one of the wonderfully lavish scenes of *Phantom*, the cast is at a "masquerade" ball where the criteria is that everyone wear at least a half-mask. The Chorus reveals the purpose:

Masquerade  
Paper faces on display  
Masquerade!  
Hide your face  
So the world will never find you.



We continue the tradition of masked balls at Mardi Gras Krewe balls and Carnivale in Brazil, Italy and elsewhere. The idea is that being masked makes it easier to act however you want without fear of being unmasked and held accountable for behavior out of the norm.

Masks are more often used to hide than to reveal. Exodus tells us that Moses veiled his face after talking with God because the people were afraid to look upon the glory of God. Moses, however, took off the veil when he talked with God. Paul reminds the Corinthians that in Jesus Christ "we have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God."

We all wear masks. We are careful about how much we reveal of ourselves to others and, sometimes, even to ourselves. Taking off the mask leaves us vulnerable, open to hurt and open to misunderstanding. Perhaps you've had the experience of being with someone who seems not to know – or perhaps not to care about – the social boundaries. Someone who steps too close to you during conversation. Someone who asks personal questions that you find intrusive. We even have an acronym – "TMI" – for those situations where someone gives us too much information. Or perhaps you've been at the airport waiting for your plane and the person sitting next to you is talking rather loudly on their cell phones about things you would rather not know about them – TMI.

In our daily lives, boundaries are important. They are a way of enabling us to live in community according to certain norms. They give us comfort because they make life easier, in many cases.

But God is no respecter of our masks – of our attempts to place boundaries around where we will let God into our life and where we attempt to keep God out. God is ever-present. It is we who do not see God everywhere we look, in everything we do, and in everyone we meet. For us, like the people of Israel in Moses' time, looking upon someone who lives in the presence of God can be frightening. A mask may be needed to give us some distance from the glory of God, that which is too wonderful to behold. A mask may be wanted to put some distance between what we are

called to be and to do and how often we fall short of that goal. We put barriers between us- we make excuses for our failures. We make excuses when we do not follow a doctor's recommendations: it's too hard; I'm too busy; it doesn't really matter. A mask or barrier that can have life-threatening results physically and emotionally.

The Transfiguration as related in the Gospel of Luke is another story of masking and being unmasked. At the beginning, Peter, John and James are unable to see Jesus for who he is. The cloud comes and through the cloud- the mask, if you will, God reveals to Peter, John and James that Jesus "is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him." And the cloud dissipates leaving the disciples to ponder what has happened and what their role vis-à-vis Jesus is to be.

Being in the presence of someone who literally as well as figuratively glows because of his or her relationship with God can also be awe-inspiring, in the best sense of the word. That person is probably the most genuine person you know. The one who lives a life of integrity. The one to whom you turn with questions about what to do. The person may be an "icon" – someone you "look through" to see God.

When you are with that person, you likely feel peaceful and comfortable being with them. This is not to say the person is boring, or dull, or not likely to have fun and a good sense of humor. Rather, the person who knows God is most likely to be a role model. Someone you seek out because there is just something about them that draws you to them. At the same time, because such a person has put aside their own mask and challenges you to do the same, such a person is not always easy to be around. They will call you and me to account when we fall short of how we are to live.

Azar Nafisi, author of Reading Lolita in Tehran, tells of the moments when her students took off their outer robes and head scarves. It was safe for them, once they reached her house and were behind walls that prevented the outside from seeing in, to take off the outer garments required by the political regime. It was safe for these young women to begin to learn who they were apart from who the regime told them they were. Not without danger, mind you. In more than one case, males in the family listened in on phone calls, followed them to Ms. Nafisi's house, and otherwise continued their efforts to control all movement and all thought. The desire to have no one stick out and thus potentially be a threat to those in power.

Sometimes a student didn't return because the family said "no." But what struck Ms. Nafisi is that when the outer black, navy or brown robes were discarded, and when the head scarves were removed, underneath were bright pink t-shirts, or a jacket with a bright yellow butterfly on the pocket. Faces that seemed drawn and haggard when surrounded by the head scarf now showed color and brightness of spirit. The veils removed, the young women began to learn who they were and what they were capable of. When we remove **our** veils, when we trust God enough to let down our guard, when we understand and accept that God loves us – and indeed God knows our veils for what they really are then we, too, are free to learn who we can be, basking in God's love for us. We can, as the Army says, "Be all we can be" because underneath everything is God's love for us.

As we enter Lent this Wednesday, take time to think about areas of your life where you have chosen to veil yourself from others – or perhaps even from yourself. Where might the removal of this veil result in a closer relationship with God? Where might your life change if you take the chance to let the colors show through? Where might you learn to be more authentically you if you took the chance to open up to others that you trust? Where might those growing edges be less painful if you had someone to walk with and explore the changes as you grow more fully into the love God has for you?

God already knows you – remember the passage from Jeremiah last week: I knew you before you were formed. God knows us – each and every one. A veil is not impenetrable to God. Loving God and safe in the knowledge that God loves you, take off your veil. Lift your face to the sun and make your colors shine.

In the finale of the musical *Les Miserable*, based upon the book written by Victor Hugo, Valjean, Fantine and Eponine sing:

Take my hand  
And lead me to salvation  
Take my love  
For love is everlasting  
And remember  
The truth that once was spoken  
To love another person  
Is to see the face of God.

Moses and Jesus loved God. Their faces shown with the radiance of that love. Tear off your masks and then may our faces also reflect the glory of God. **Amen.**