

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 30, 2007)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

A Transformed YOU in 2008

(2 Corinthians 3:12-18)

Introduction: Jesus' Transfiguration - and ours...

The 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel is a collecting point for momentous events. Within the space of a few verses, the apostle Peter makes the Great Confession. That's followed by Jesus' Great Prediction.

Jesus, having heard some of what people were saying about Him, turned to the apostles and asked, [15] ***"But who do YOU say that I am?"***

Ever the spokesman for the group, Simon Peter instantly declared, [16] ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"***

A few minutes later, Jesus pulled the twelve into a huddle with a sobering message. [21]...***Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.***

After this prediction of His coming passion, Jesus called the apostles to the most radical discipleship,¹ and followed that with a promise - [Matthew 16:28] ***"Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."***

¹ Matthew 16:24-27 - ***Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. [25] "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. [26] "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? [27] "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds.***

Some six days later, the Lord took three of His disciples - Simon Peter and the brothers James and John - up on a high mountain.²

While on the mountain, Matthew tells us that something amazing happened to Jesus. [Matthew 17: 2] ***And He (Jesus) was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light.***³

Frequently, when we pay attention to the Transfiguration (as this event is called), we notice such details as Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus, Peter (not knowing what to say - so Mark) telling Jesus that they will make three tabernacles - one for Him, one for Moses, and one for Elijah,⁴ God speaking from Heaven to tell Peter to stop talking and just listen to Jesus, and the disciples falling to the ground in abject terror!

Today, I want us to focus for a bit on the event itself. The Bible says that Jesus was ***"transfigured"*** before them.

In Greek, the word we translate "transfigured" is *metamorphow*. Pretty obviously, it is the word from which we get our English word "metamorphosis."

It describes the process of something changing from one form into another form. This word is frequently used to refer to an outward change. Certain insects go through metamorphosis.

There on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' appearance changed. He was transfigured into what He was, really, when He was not veiling His identity.

² The traditional scene of the Transfiguration is Mount Tabor. 1800 feet above sea level, it is not that tall, but is a prominent feature of the landscape, rising above the area around it by several hundred feet. Mount Tabor is steep, nearly symmetrical, with a rounded top.

³ Mark's Gospel describes Jesus' transfiguration almost identically. Luke records the episode, but tells us that ***"the appearance of His face became different."*** Luke 9:28)

⁴ Mark's Gospel tells us, essentially, ***"Peter, not knowing what to say, said..."*** It would have been so much better had Peter just not said anything. Believe me - I've been there and done that!

He was still recognizable as Jesus. But He was different. Far different.

This Greek word we are considering - the one we translate “transfigured” in Matthew 17 and Mark 9 - is an uncommon word in the New Testament.

The Apostle John never used the word, nor did Peter or Luke. Outside of the transfiguration account, only Paul uses the word, and he only uses it twice.

And we are going to spend the rest of our time this morning looking at one of those uses, the one found in 2 Corinthians, chapter 3.⁵

Our time in Scripture this morning is something of a follow up to last week’s meditation on the theme of **hope** and (I desperately hope) will make for a tremendous New Year’s message!

What follows comes with my hopes and prayers for a 2008 marked by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in your life, in my life, and in the life of our church.

Changing Administrations, Changing Policies - in the 21st century

In November⁶ Americans will go to the polls to vote in national, state, and local elections.

In those elections where an incumbent wins an election, we can be pretty sure that policies that have been in place will remain in place.

Same administration leads to the same priorities and the same policies.

⁵ The only other occurrence of “transformation” (metamorphow) in the New Testament is found in Romans 12:1-2. Paul writes, *[1] Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. [2] And do not be conformed to this world, but be TRANSFORMED by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

⁶ Can you believe that we are still eleven months away from the elections!

When an incumbent loses and there is a change in the office holder, there also comes a change in administration. And with that change in administration will come a change in policies.

Speaking of November, we all wonder who will win the major elections in front of us, and what kinds of changes those wins will bring.

To be sure, most of the time, the changes are relatively minor. A tweak here and a subtle change there. Sometimes, though, the changes are revolutionary. Most administrations will leave a few of each kind of change in their wake.

Two thousand years ago, there was a change in administration that radically changed the way God related to humanity. And in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he explains how this new administration (called The New Covenant) works.

Changing Administrations, Changing Policies - in the 1st century

In order to understand The New Covenant, we have to first understand the Old Covenant.

The Old Covenant began with Moses and continued through the rest of the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament era, God operated under a certain administration called “Law.”

God’s people lived under this administration from Exodus through Malachi, and then until the coming of Christ. During this whole time, “Law” reigned supreme. It was the way things were done.

Then, fifteen hundred years after Moses, Jesus was born. He came to usher in a whole new administration.

He lived His entire life under the old one, but kept talking about new ways of doing things. He spoke of “fresh wineskins.”

On the night before He died, He spoke with His disciples as they shared the first Communion cup and said, **“This cup is THE NEW COVENANT in My blood.”** (Luke 22:20).⁷

⁷ The New Covenant is predicted in Jeremiah 31.

Today, as we prepare to launch 2008, we are going to do so by thinking about the metamorphosis God wants to accomplish in each of our lives - and in the life of our church - as we lead New Covenant lives.⁸

Thinking about the New Covenant brings us to third chapter of Second Corinthians, because it in this passage that Paul deals more thoroughly with the New Covenant than in any other section of his writings.

To begin with, I'm going to read the first eleven verses of this great chapter, making just a few comments along the way. The major thrust of what we need to see today, though, comes in the last few verses.

As I read the opening verses, you'll hear Paul defend his apostolic ministry, affirm that his adequacy is from God, and tell us that Jesus' New Covenant is vastly superior to Moses' Old Covenant.

A New Covenant Primer (2 Corinthians 3:1-11)

Evidence of Genuine New Covenant Ministry (vv. 1-3)

[1] Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?⁹ Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? [2] You are our letter,¹⁰ written in our hearts, known and read by all men; [3] being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone¹¹ but on tablets of human hearts.

⁸ In chapter 2 of this letter, Paul described the New Covenant as it played out in his own life. He personally experienced: UNVARYING SUCCESS because He always got to participate in the triumph of Christ (not necessarily his own triumph!); UNFORGETTABLE IMPACT FOR CHRIST (not that everybody responded positively to the message, but all responded, one way or another); and UNIMPEACHABLE INTEGRITY (because he remembered that he lived in the sight of God).

⁹ "Again" makes us think that his opponents in Corinth may have accused him of commending himself previously in an arrogant manner.

¹⁰ Earlier, he had written in 1 Cor. 9:2 - "you are my seal of apostleship in the Lord"

¹¹ Note Ex. 31:18 - "two tablets written by the finger of God" on Mt. Sinai.

Evidently, there were people in Corinth who were questioning the genuineness of Paul's apostleship. These detractors were telling the Corinthians to ask Paul for reference letters the next time he visited, to validate his message and ministry.¹²

Paul says, "*I don't need to bring letters proving that my apostleship is genuine. YOU are my letters!*"

The proof that Paul was the real deal was the church established in Corinth and the changed lives of the Corinthians through his ministry.

God had engraved His message on the Corinthians' hearts. Paul hadn't done that engraving. God did it.

But their salvation and their Christian growth, prompted by the Gospel as it was unleashed through Paul's ministry, was the irrefutable mark of the genuineness of his apostleship.

Near the end of chapter 2, Paul had asked the rhetorical question, "*And who is adequate for these things?*" - as in, "*Who is adequate to deal with issues of eternity, Heaven and Hell, judgment, God?*"

Paul reverts to that adequacy question in verses 4-6 of our chapter.

New Covenant Adequacy (vv. 4-6)

[4] Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. [5] Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, [6] who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

¹² Ray Stedman writes, "*I have often wondered how the apostle Paul would rate in modern ecclesiastical circles, whether he would be considered a success or not if he were carrying on his ministry today. It is hard to believe that a man who spent much of his time in jail, who never made enough salary to buy a home of his own, who never built a church building (to say nothing of the fact that he never spoke on television, or even had a radio broadcast!)... "who frequently had to get another job to support himself, who admitted both that he was a poor speaker and that he had a very un-impressive appearance, could ever be considered much of a success as a Christian leader. From Stedman's commentary on 2 Corinthians "Power Out of Weakness" p. 36, Word Publishing.*

There was a time when Paul considered himself adequate - in and of himself - before God. He thought that he could justify himself before God.

Possessed of a keen mind and a powerful personality, Paul was extremely zealous. He had high energy for God. He had an impeccable Jewish pedigree (cf. Philippians 3). He was orthodox. He was moral.

BUT, when he was finally confronted by Christ, he saw that he truly was NOT adequate.¹³

He came to understand that in and of himself he had no power to work change in the hearts of others, no adequacy for making spiritual impact in his world.

Observers might have said that Paul was a successful apostle because he did his best to use his abilities to serve God. Paul would never have said that!

For Paul, adequacy for life-changing impact came when he learned to present himself to God in such a way that God's power flowed through him. That's what New Covenant living is all about.

- The **Old Covenant** said, "*Here is a standard. Now, do your very best to live up to it.*"
- The **New Covenant**¹⁴ says, "*Present yourself as an available instrument for God to use. He will work through you. Admit your inadequacy. God's resources, not yours, are the critical element in bringing about life-changing impact.*"

If you and I would be adequate for New Covenant ministry, we have to reckon with our INadequacy.

¹³ He called that whole collection of self-commending works nothing but "*barnyard dung*" (that is the word he used in Philippians 3) in comparison with the glory of knowing Christ.

¹⁴ Not that the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is totally fulfilled now (that will have to wait for a future time for a complete fulfillment). But that we are experiencing some of the first fruits of the New Covenant now.

Today, Paul wants you and me to learn how to "unleash" the power of Christ. He wants us to live on the basis of the New Covenant.

And to draw us toward a New Covenant orientation, he draws three dramatic contrasts between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

New Covenant Superiority

[7] But if THE MINISTRY OF DEATH, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, [8] how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? [9] For if THE MINISTRY OF CONDEMNATION has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. [10] For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. [11] For if THAT WHICH FADES AWAY was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

Death vs. Life

This is quite a statement coming from a Jew! First, Paul calls the Old Covenant¹⁵ (The Law of Moses!) "*the ministry of DEATH.*" (v. 7)

Not that it was intended to kill. In fact, it was given to Israel to produce life for those who obeyed it.¹⁶ Leviticus 18:5 says, "*So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, BY WHICH A MAN MAY LIVE if he does them; I am the Lord.*"

The Law was not and is not bad. But, it proved lethal because it was inflexible and the heart of man was bad. By contrast, the New Covenant is a ministry of life. It is life-giving.

Condemnation vs. Righteousness

Next, Paul calls the Old Covenant the "*covenant of CONDEMNATION.*" That's because no one could perfectly keep its requirements.

¹⁵ Specifically, the system of Laws; the sacrifices are not so much in view.

¹⁶ Romans 7 teaches that the Law is neither evil nor inglorious. It is holy and righteous and good.

Under the New Covenant, though, not only is there no condemnation (Romans 8:1), but those under it are declared **righteous** in the sight of God.

Finally, Paul says that the Old Covenant is one of fading glory.

Fading Glory vs. Eternal Glory

Did you have a chance to enjoy the moon last week? It was pretty spectacular! But no matter how bright the moon looks, it is always outshined by the sun.

In the same way, viewed by itself, Mt. Sinai is a scene of glory. The thunder and lightning, God speaking and Ten Commandments is all very impressive. But, compared to the New Covenant, its glory is puny.

The Law was a transient phenomenon belonging to a past age. Its administration was on the way out from the moment it was established.

The New Covenant, though, is permanent. There will never be another “New Covenant.” God will never inaugurate a “*New, Improved New Covenant!*” This Covenant under which we live could also be called the Last Covenant.¹⁷

And now, having seen the superiority of the New vs. the Old Covenant, you and I are ready to explore what it will look like to live under this New Covenant.

This is Paul is telling us what it means to lead a distinctively Christian life. He starts out on a hopeful note.

New Covenant Power Is Available To You! (vv. 12-18)

A Vision for Openness (v. 12)

*[12] Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech...*¹⁸

Because of Jesus, we are hopeful. The “hope” Paul speaks of here is the hope of being able to apply New Covenant truth to our lives. This hopefulness leads to **boldness**.

Variouly translated in the New Testament, the root meaning of the word we translate here “**boldness**” can also be rendered “**openness**” or “**freedom**” or even “**transparency**.”

Christians who are living on the basis of the New Covenant are living **openly**. That is because they aren’t counting on themselves to make a difference in their world. They know that’s God’s job.

New Covenant people have *nothing to hide, nothing to prove, and no reason to fake it or pretend things are better than they are.*

They know that they are not “adequate” - so they rely on God’s super-adequacy to make life-changing, earth-shaking, soul-touching impact.

First things first. To live as a Christian involves admitting personal inadequacy. Let’s all just admit that now, OK.

We are all adequate for some things. I can give a sermon without stuttering. You can perform to a professional level in your career. You can study and pass a test.

BUT, none of us are able to accomplish, in and of ourselves, what we most long to see. We cannot touch a soul. We cannot change a life. We cannot make someone receptive to the Gospel. Somewhere on the road to maturity, we come to admit that the things we care about most in life are the things we are impotent to effect.

No Christian makes progress in the Christian life without coming to this point of admitting inadequacy.

And then, Paul tells a story. This is a story about someone who refused to admit to inadequacy.

¹⁷ Hebrews 10:6-13 - it is better because it is last; also 13:20

¹⁸ “παρησια.”

Moses' Veil Violated Openness (vv. 13-15)

Moses veiled himself (v. 13)

[13] and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face that the sons of Israel might not look intently at the end of what was fading away.

Moses' veil (from Exodus) - the veil *protected*

Maybe you have never heard this story from the Old Testament. If you haven't, it's a great story and it is found in Exodus 34.

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, he didn't know that his exposure to the presence of God had caused his face to literally shine.¹⁹

Understandably, his 100 watt skin frightened the Israelites. They wouldn't come near him.

So, Moses accommodated himself to their fears by covering his face with a veil.

Whenever he went to speak with the Lord, he would remove the veil.²⁰ But, then he would put the veil on again when he went out to speak to the people.

In reading the account from Exodus, we understand that Moses was acting to protect the people.

Here in 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us there was more going on when Moses put on the veil than a simple desire to protect his fellow Jews.

¹⁹ Fascinating that Moses' face shone, just as Jesus' face shone on the Mount of Transfiguration.

²⁰ This would (so to speak) "re-charge" his face so that it shone bright again.

Moses' veil (from Paul) - the veil *concealed*

The veil, Paul says, concealed the fading nature of Old Covenant glory. Moses didn't want the Israelites to see that the glory of the Old Covenant faded. Interesting...

Why didn't Moses want the people to see that the glory of the Old Covenant didn't last, as was illustrated by the fading sheen on his face?

We don't know, exactly.

It might be that Moses suspected that if he took it off and the people saw the glory fading away, they wouldn't pay attention to the Law? Or, he might have been trying to preserve his own status as someone special in the eyes of the people.

Which of these possibilities is the case is not clear (although I lean toward the second), and it might have been something else entirely.

But, clearly, he was not being "open." (see verse 12) Moses was hiding the fact that the Old Covenant glory was a temporary glory.

He may have PUT the veil on to protect the people. But he KEPT it on so that the people wouldn't see the glory fade.

And Moses' action resulted in a devastating loss for the Jews!

Others are veiled, too... (vv. 14-15)

[14] But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. [15] But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart²¹

Moses' veil wearing ways hardened the hearts of the Jews of the Old Testament AND the Jews of Paul's day into thinking that the Old Covenant - the covenant of Law - was God's final word. And that made them closed to the Gospel of Christ that Paul proclaimed.

²¹ Paul even says (vv. 14-15) that the reason Jews of his own day don't respond to the Gospel/ New Covenant is because the veil is still in place.

Now, I wonder what would have happened had Moses NOT put on a veil?

Well, pretty obviously, the Jews would have been bowled over by the glory of his face when he came out from meeting with God. They would not have been protected. They would have been frightened.

BUT - and here is the important part - if Moses had not worn a veil, they would have seen the glory fade.

And in seeing Moses' face become less and less shiny, they would have understood that the Old Covenant of Law was only temporary.

I think that if they had seen the Old Covenant glory fade, they would have been drawn to look for something else, something MORE, something permanent to follow Law.

They would have looked for a New Covenant!

To put it bluntly, Moses' veil cheated the Israelites out of understanding that the Law was temporary and preparatory. It kept them from being receptive to the New Covenant message of Jesus' Gospel.

So why is Paul telling us the story of Moses' veil? It is because "veiling" can be a way of life Christians choose, too.

And just as Moses' veil cheated the Jews, so when you or I put on a "veil" we cheat those around us, too.

Now that we are believers in Jesus, God wants us to live according to the New Covenant - not the Old. And what does "living according to the New Covenant" involve?

It involves **TAKING OFF THE VEIL** of self-adequacy and admitting to personal weakness. It means living in such a way that we are not the point and not trying to prove that we have our stuff together.

We can live openly, transparently, boldly! The main thing is not ME. It is HIM! THAT is New Covenant living.

And that approach unleashes God's life-changing New Covenant resources through us to bless others.

As Paul goes on to say, that kind of living is best described by the word "LIBERTY."

Transformation Comes When We - UNVEILED - Look to the Lord (vv. 16-18)

The veil is gone - and that means liberty! (vv. 16-17)

[16] but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

When we first turned to the Lord, it was because (at some level) we understood that we could never measure up before God. We became convinced that it is only what Christ has done that is of any merit, not what we can do for God.

And so, we came to God, trusting, confessing our inadequacy. We came to God without the veil. We owned the idea, "Everything coming from God; nothing coming from me" even if we had never heard of the New Covenant.

On the day that we were eternally saved from our sin, we believed that. We accepted the idea that it is not what we do that will save us, but what Christ did.

We came to Jesus veil-less. And every day we are each confronted with the choice of living with the veil off or putting the veil back on!

We either believe that God works through the Old Covenant, "I'll do the best I can to measure up to the standard. After all, if I try really hard, I am adequate."

OR

We throw off the veil and approach God in our weakness and inadequacy so that His strength and adequacy can flow through us.

In the last verse of this chapter, Paul puts before us a final vision for what New Covenant living promises. It promises personal transformation.

Transformation into Christlikeness (v. 18)

[18] But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being TRANSFORMED into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

There is our word. Transformed is *metamorphow*. Just as Jesus was changed physically on the Mount of Transfiguration, so we are changed internally when we approach life on the basis of the New Covenant.

We remove the veil, which means we throw away the thinking that says, “*It all depends on me, how well I do, how hard I try...*” - and admit that we don’t have what it takes to make a difference in the stuff that matters most. We depend on Him working through us.

We look to Him for adequacy.

BUT, as we continue to look to Him, something amazing begins to happen.

We actually begin to morph into powerful, loving people. We are **transformed** - because there is something about looking at God the way He really is while realizing who we really are that unleashes His life-transforming work in us.²²

The most urgent question before any of us this morning is this:

Have I put on any sort of a veil?

Today, when I mentioned “veils” you might think of the burkha-clad women of the Middle East, a bandana that covers the face of a Stop-n-Go robber, a bridal veil or a Halloween mask.

Different veils have different functions. Scripture warns us only about a certain kind of veil.

It isn’t one that you can see, and that makes it harder to identify. But it is just as real - and just as deadly! - as the veil Moses wore.

It is the veil of pretending and inauthenticity.

When we pretend that we’ve really got our stuff together (and none of us do), or when we pretend that we are adequate in-and-of-ourselves to make great impact for God (and none of us are), we succeed in getting people to think the best of us, while failing in the one thing necessary - to direct people to think the best of Jesus!

The daily temptation of the Christian is to put the veil back on that we willingly allowed God to rip away at the moment of salvation. The New Covenant says that we are to continue on the track we began when we trusted Christ in the first place.

The New Covenant says that if we will admit our INadequacy, we can have God’s adequacy, given at the point of our need.

We can become change agents in the lives of people we know and love - but only if we are willing to live transparently, only if we are willing to get off center stage, only if we are willing to stop faking it - and agree that it is all about Jesus.

May the Lord bless us each with the grace to live according to the New Covenant in 2008.

²² This exact thought is found in 1 John 3:2, “...*We know that, if He should appear, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.*”