

Last Sunday After the Epiphany, Year C

- If you were to ask me my favorite work of art, the answer would vary on any given day, but one of the many answers I'd likely give is Michelangelo's sculpture of Moses
- It's a masterpiece in marble, and part of the joy of it is that it's tucked away to the side in a church in Rome that's rarely extremely crowded, called St. Peter in Chains
- It's an exquisite work of sculpture, one of the more breathtaking depictions in a medium that, when done well, always manages to surprise me with how delicate and light artists can make solid rock look
- But it's not one of my favorites only for the artistic prowess of its maker, one of the masters of the medium
- It's my favorite also because it serves as a visual reminder of one of my favorite stories/cautionary tales about Scripture
- If you're familiar with the Sculpture at all, you may already know what I mean – Michelangelo's Moses, you see, has horns
- There's a perfectly good reason for this, and it's not at all Michelangelo's fault
- You see, when St. Jerome translated Scripture into Latin, creating the text we now know as the Vulgate, he came upon the passage we just heard read from the book of Exodus
- And while what we heard was that, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" – Jerome had something a lot more confusing – a Hebrew word that could mean Moses did not know his face had horns, or, more likely, was a related word, almost idiomatic, that meant 'shining with rays of light' – after all, rays of light shining from one's face could look like horns
- Now Jerome himself probably wasn't confused by this – we have commentaries of his that reference this passage, where Jerome says that Moses' face had "become 'glorified', or as it says in the Hebrew, 'horned'."
- And it was clear, at least to theologians and scholars at the time and for a while after that Jerome was translating this in a way that preserved the original Hebrew idiom but wasn't meant to mean that Moses literally had horns growing out of his head just for that one moment as he descended from the mountain after seeing God and receiving the tablets of the Commandments
- But as time went on, people got further and further removed from Jerome and from this sense of the Hebrew, and eventually people, at least some of them, didn't realize that this expression was idiomatic – they thought that Moses, in this case, actually had horns

- And eventually, artistic depictions of Moses with horns began to be commonplace, including this masterpiece of Michelangelo's
- And I don't mean to impugn Michelangelo, but it seems relatively clear in hindsight that he was reading Scripture in a way that was a bit too literal, that he didn't realize the original meaning or even what its translator Jerome was intending for it to convey
- He only knew the words, and in this case, the words said that Moses had horns
- It's especially worth noting that this depiction was, unfortunately, coincident with one of the many regrettable periods in the Church's history where anti-Semitism was rampant – Moses having horns not unlike the devil's may not have been an intentional part of this anti-Semitism, but it goes without saying that this image couldn't have helped
- So this is quite a cautionary tale about Scripture, and its translation and interpretation, because this was something that began clear and then became less so, and likely had real-world consequences in the form of reinforcing anti-Semitic biases for medieval and Renaissance era Christians
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- And this tale, this Sculpture of Moses, tells us something important today, I think, about the way we ought to read Scripture, which is, in a word, "carefully"
- I'd even go so far as to say that this highlights where the Protestant Reformers, and most everyone who follows in their footsteps, get it wrong about Scripture – while they had the noble goal of wanting Scripture to belong to the people, to be read by the people, the idea that we can read the bare text, especially in translation, and come away with sense of its meaning without context, without tradition, without a little bit of help, is the height of arrogance
- Don't mean that we can't gain something from simply sitting down and reading Scripture, and I don't mean that experts are the only ones with valid insights, but that we should always recognize that there's more to the text than we are capable of picking out on our own
- This is true, incidentally, even of "experts"
- But the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ is not a story unto itself – it is meant to be read in light of Moses coming down from the mountaintop, where he's seen God and been given the Law
- Jesus is a new Moses, a new lawgiver, a new person who has unique experience of and insight into God, and comes to share that with us – that isn't the only message of the

Transfiguration, but the Transfiguration is almost meaningless without it

- And Scripture is full of such images, such echoes of the past being brought into the present, such a sense of the continuity of what God is doing, has always been doing
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- So I always think of Michelangelo's Moses as an example of what happens when we don't question our assumptions – don't interrogate the text and what biases we might be bringing to it
- What happens when we read Scripture too simply
- I hope to stand forever opposed to easy definitions, to any reading of Scripture from which we come away with the sense that in it God is saying exactly what we want to hear
- That's not to say that God never tells us comfortable things – sometimes Scripture comforts us, and always Scripture tells of God's great love for us
- But Scripture should always unsettle us a just a bit, too
- How can we be anything but unsettled when Scripture points us, imperfect humanity, towards a perfect God? How can we be anything but unsettled when the mirror it holds up shows us how we're loved but also what we lack?
- Sometimes Scripture should make us ask questions with no easy answers, or with unsettling ones
- Questions like, "How much do we love God?" "Who is our neighbor?" "What then should we do?"
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- Part of the reason I look forward to the season of Lent, which begins Wednesday, is because it's a recognition that our lives are wilderness, our lives are spent wandering in the desert, knowing that God is with us there, too, but waiting for the day when we will make it to the mountaintop
- So I hope this Lent you'll join me in complicating our view of Scripture – one chance to do so is in a Bible Study we'll be having on Tuesday evenings, talking about sin and our imperfection – about what Scripture says and how we can understand it and struggle with it, and we'd would love to see you there
- Or you could join us for the adult forum at 9:30 on Sundays in Lent, when we'll talk about what we know about Jesus's last days, and the liturgies of Holy Week that allow us to walk with Christ, all the way to the cross, the grave, and beyond
- Or if neither of those are possible or interesting for you, you could simply dig a little

deeper into Scripture – whether it's by picking a book of the Bible to read during the season or just sitting down with the Sunday readings each week, and studying them, listening to them, so that through them, God can speak to you

- There are so many ways to dig into Scripture – to work at removing our blinders about it, and with them our easy understandings of just what truths God is speaking to us
- Because Holy Scripture is just too important for easy readings, for casual reinforcement of what we think we already know
- Holy Scripture is the word of God, the powerful word that brings us to the mountaintop, where with Moses and Elijah and Peter and John and James, we too see God's glory, shining unmistakably