

Under all the dust: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36

by [Adam Thomas](#) in the [February 9, 2010](#) issue

When I was in the fifth grade, I took an old shoebox from the hall closet and wrapped it in construction paper. Then I glued a triangular prism inside the box and positioned a penlight to shine toward the prism's edge. I cut a slit in the side of the box, and my science fair project was finished. When I arrived at the cafeteria with shoebox in hand, however, I blanched at the visual spectacle. How could the simple, subtle beauty of refracted light compete with the fury of the baking soda and vinegar reactions that were erupting from papier-mâché volcanoes all around me? With sweaty palms, I directed the judges to stoop down and peek through the slit in my shoebox. The white light struck the prism and broke into every fifth grader's mnemonic friend: ROY G. BIV (red, orange, yellow, etc.). ROY shone on the inside wall of the box, a rainbow in miniature, while I chattered away about the properties of light.

In the end my science project fared poorly. I didn't get a blue ribbon. But I realized that the color of my ribbon didn't really matter. I had learned in my research that the blue ribbon only appeared blue because it reflected a certain wavelength of the visual spectrum. Receptors in my eyes perceived blue when a certain amount of white light was reflected by the pigment in the ribbon's dye. In a dimly lit room, no one could tell which ribbons were blue and which were red or yellow! Besides, I already had all the colors of the rainbow inside my shoebox.

We see because light breaks open when it shines on objects. Light reflects and refracts and absorbs in ways that allow us to discern shapes and movement. God created light first because without light the rest of creation would have no definition or vibrancy. We humans see only a tiny fraction of all the light that God made, yet we persist in the presumptuous notion that only what we see exists—that only a 300-nanometer piece of the spectrum is real.

Jesus negates this presumption when he ascends the mountain with Peter, James and John. In the moment of the transfiguration, Jesus doesn't change his form or shape or hue, but he does change the disciples' perception of his appearance. Jesus gives the disciples the gift of seeing him as God sees him—a glorious being of

dazzling white light. Instead of reflecting the blues and reds and yellows of the visible spectrum, Jesus reflects God and shows himself to be luminous.

When Jesus opens the eyes of the disciples, they see another person, one who had a similar encounter centuries before on another mountain. In Exodus, Moses comes down from Sinai after talking with God and has no idea that his skin is shining. His brother Aaron and all the Israelites are afraid to come near him because of his dazzling appearance. Today we know, from another part of this story, that Moses—tucked away in the cleft of the rock—only saw God’s back. “You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exod. 33:23). So Moses isn’t shining because he saw God on the mountain. *Moses is shining because God saw him.*

Moses and Jesus show us that God sees us, not through the limited visual spectrum, but through the shimmering expanse of the glorious spectrum. We may be visible to one another simply because we reflect and absorb various quantities of white light, but God made us to do much more; God made us to shine.

Over the years, however, our luminosity tends to fade. Every inhospitable word spoken, every neighbor mistreated and every resource hoarded layers grime over our radiance. Every hand unextended, every gift squandered and every road not taken leaves layers of apathetic dust. The world tells us that the radiant things out there are things we purchase: “When you wear the shiny stone or drive the shiny car, you will shine.” Too often we cede our light to the glossy detritus of the world and forget that we are the ones God made to shine.

But God hasn’t forgotten. God sees us shining despite the grime and dust. God knows that we have buried our radiance beneath layers of stuff. God offers us the gift of transfigured eyes, in order that we might see as God sees. When we see ourselves struggling to shine, we can start scraping off the grime. With God’s help, we can become radiant again.

There are radiant people in our lives who seem to exist somewhere between the visible and glorious spectrums. Their grime and dust are gone (or were never accumulated), and they shine just the way God made them. An elderly woman at my church is one of these special people. Every morning she greets me with a gentle handshake and a slip of paper with that day’s readings on it. She prays the same way she talks, because for her praying and speaking are the same thing. On Fridays she plays piano for the altar guild while they clean the brass.

God made us to shine just as Moses and Jesus shone. There are those among us whose radiance bursts from them because nothing covers it up. Call them saints or luminaries. God sees us all, but these people reflect God's light better than most, and they see God's light in others with the strength of transfigured eyes. I pray for such eyes so that I might see myself as God sees me—a luminous being in need of a good scrubbing.