

SMOKE AND MIRRORS**Genesis 3:4-10; I Corinthians 2:1-12**

It is one of the most famous scenes from one of the most famous movies in the history of the cinema. The dialogue from the scene is familiar to most in our culture, even when taken out of the context of the film. You will probably recognize these words immediately: “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.” Is that line familiar to you? Tell me what movie it is from! Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion stand before the awesome presence of the Wizard to receive their rewards for destroying the Wicked Witch of the West. They are cowed by the fiery and awesome mechanics that surround the Wizard’s image and voice, but their timidity turns to anger when they realize that the Wizard is stalling on fulfilling their wishes. Dorothy’s dog Toto leaps from her arms and runs to a curtain in the corner of the hall. Pulling back the curtain, Toto reveals an elderly man manipulating the controls of a machine. When Dorothy confronts the man, he admits that the power of the Wizard is all smoke and mirrors, an elaborate fraud played upon the people of Oz by an old carnival con artist. In anger Dorothy declares that the Wizard is a very bad man, to which he responds, “No my dear. I’m a very good man. I’m just a very bad wizard.”

In making our judgements about each other, it’s so easy to get the roles we take in this life confused with who we really are as human beings. This is particularly true for our American culture. To put it another way, our overexposed culture has

come to the conclusion that no one can ever be all they claim to be, and this has made us a people who expect less of each other.

Once upon a time, being good in life's various roles was not only considered important, but essential, and the culture held up models of expertise before our eyes. In some ways, it still does. Every parent should be an Arthur or Molly Weasley from the Harry Potter books. Every leader should be a President Kennedy. But fictional parents rarely address the reality of being a parent in our complex age, and we know about Kennedy and his personal excesses. The same is true for us- our ideals can never match our realities, but we yearn so much for the ideal that we accept nothing less. We want to have the ideal marriage; we want to be perfect parents; we want to be the brightest and most popular among our friends; we want physical prowess and absolute expertise in our field; we will do anything to protect the images we project, but behind our curtains are all the usual human frailties, and our greatest fear is that the curtain will be lifted.

The life of Dr. Joseph Ransohoff was a projection of the best that life could offer- physical prowess and absolute expertise. A world renowned Tampa Neurosurgeon, Dr. Ransohoff had created the first neurological intensive care unit, and was the model for the television doctor Ben Casey in the 60's. Ransohoff continued to perform surgery in Tampa Florida into his early 80's; at 83 he jogged four miles and did 100 push-ups a day. He had an attractive 44 year old wife, two children, and a 7 million dollar fortune; but I'll never forget seeing the headline in the St. Petersburg

Times that read, “A Life Unravels”. Having fallen into a relationship with a 26 year old woman, Ransohoff became a victim of extortion. He did everything, tried everything, and paid everything to stay behind the curtain of his life. When the police arrested the extortion ring, Ransohoff and his family did everything they could to keep his name out of the papers, but it didn’t work. His wife sued for divorce to protect his millions, and the great doctor was soon hospitalized with severe depression. Two years later, this brilliant medical mind died from stress and despair. Our hearts cry out with the Wizard of Oz, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” But our cry falls on the deafened ears of human judgment and the world’s curiosity.

Adam and Eve cried the same words when they fell from God’s grace: “Pay no attention to that couple behind the tree!” But God is not to be fooled. The smoke and mirrors of our lives cannot hide from God’s discerning presence, but in God’s case, this discernment is not a matter of curiosity. Instead it is a discernment based on God’s absolute knowledge of us. The creator who numbers the hairs on our head can easily number our sins

Hiding from God is a natural act, as natural as the way we hide from each other and from ourselves. Hiding from God takes many forms. Adam and Eve crouched behind a tree. Sometimes we crouch behind our egos. We believe ourselves to be so strong, so smart, so capable, so wealthy, so well-adjusted that we need not depend on anything or anyone, much less any god. Sometimes we crouch behind our religion.

The church, which should build a bridge to the Holy, becomes an impenetrable barrier. We make the stones our God; we make the rules and rituals our God; we make numbers, traditions, philosophies, theologies, or personalities our God, and we rest comfortably behind our curtains, believing that we have found the truth and the truth has set us free.

Some hide from God in the realm of science. Others crouch behind worldly pleasures and the fulfillment of human desire. In every case, and wherever we choose to hide, God becomes a welcome mystery- a mystery not because God is unknowable, but because we do not want to know God. God can see behind curtains. God can discomfort our comfort. We prefer a God akin to the Wizard of Oz- a God who hides behind the smoke and mirrors of religious paraphernalia or mysterious and unintelligible wisdom.

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.” Weakness...fear...trembling...in human culture I cannot think of three qualities less desirable than these, yet the Apostle Paul says this is how he presented himself to the church and to the world.

At the end of their journey, the four pilgrims in the Wizard of Oz discover that they had always possessed what they were seeking- they simply did not know it. Paul declares the same is true for those who seek God. God is hiding in plain sight. The

Wizard has pulled back the curtain and revealed himself in the words and the life of a man named Jesus, but smoke and mirrors are much more attractive and thrilling than a cross, just as beautiful temples are much more comfortable and pleasing to the eye than soup kitchens, hospitals, and ghettos. It is so much easier to recite prayers than to speak words of comfort to a grieving heart, or words of witness to one who is seeking God. It is so much easier to follow the rules than to follow your conscience. A God behind a curtain is much less threatening, much less demanding, much less disrupting than a God who pulls back the curtain and reveals a face to the world that teaches and heals, that suffers and dies, that rises up and sends forth saying, "Go out and make disciples of all nations." But God did pull back the curtain once and for all because God doesn't want the children of Adam to live their lives crouched behind the bushes. God pulled back the curtain because God is love, and love breaks down barriers, lifts veils, and opens doors. In Jesus we can look behind the curtains and filters of our own lives because no matter what sins we see there is forgiveness; no matter what pain we feel there is healing; no matter what disappointments are uncovered there is hope.

There are many gods and many messiahs just as the human heart has many sins and the great lie from both echoes through the world like the Wizard's desperate plea: "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain." But the voice of the one true God breaks through the smoke and the mirrors, calling us to pay attention to the man upon the cross and know him in all of his love. If we obey that voice, open

our hearts to Christ, and look behind the curtains of our own lives, we can, at last, begin the journey home. It is not an easy journey, for there are no hiding places along the way. It is hard work, sacrifice, and absolute commitment. But where else can we go? Dorothy was right after all- there's no place like home; there's no place but home; and there's no home, but God. Amen.