Since I know all of you are fascinated by my observations about Biblical Commentaries, I will regale you with another one: Biblical Commentaries can be like politicians in that they frequently answer the question they want to answer, not the question actually posed. Meaning you often get a lot of words like, hermeneutic, pericope and eschatological. What this means in reality is that sometimes when you come across a particularly odd sounding bit of scripture and go to the commentaries for clarity, you find that they don’t really tell you much about what the passage means, but instead give you a lot of information about things like how many times a particular Greek word occurs elsewhere in the writings of Paul. And I tell you this to let you know that I did not get a whole lot of help this week in regards to the odd sounding bit of scripture I wanted to look into and so what follows is a lot of Father Phil freelancing (try saying that ten times fast).

The bit of scripture in question comes from Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians and reads, “Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.” The passage is an obvious reference to the Old Testament lesson we have today and it was probably chosen because it is a reference to the Gospel lesson. That is those who put the lectionary together probably started with the Transfiguration and Jesus’ face changing in Luke’s Gospel; then went on to select Moses’ face shining in Exodus and ended by picking Paul talking about the veil that Moses would wear to keep people from seeing his shining face. And while selection process is fairly straightforward, the part that I found curious, or at least difficult to understand, was the reason Paul ascribes to Moses for putting a veil over his face. As we just read the reason was “to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.” So, what is this end of glory that was being set aside and why did Moses not want the people of Israel to look at it?

Well, here is what I have figured out. It seems that in many ways the glowing or shiny face that Moses possessed was a revealing of God’s glory and in Paul’s telling the face of Moses was really a precursor to what happens in the person of Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the Son of God, which he is, when we look at him, we see God. But since Moses was not the Son of God then how exactly did this work? How did the shiny face of Moses reveal the glory being set aside that would be revealed in Jesus? Well, here is Father Phil’s theory: I think it can be understood in the same way we understand Icons. Here is what I mean. In the Eastern Orthodox Church and some in the west use Icons in their worship of God. Many across the years have had issues with these images because of commandment number two and its prohibition of graven images. The defense of Icons is that those who employ them do not worship the physical image, rather the physical image is like a window through which they see God. In gazing at the image, they see God who is behind the image. I think something similar happens today with Moses, according to Paul. In seeing the face of Moses, the people of Israel would see through to God and the glory being set aside. So, while Moses is not Jesus, the end result of looking at him would produce the same end result as looking at Jesus. Therefore, Moses employs a veil so as to not allow for a sneak peek at what is to come.

Which of course raises the question of why where the people of Israel, at that time and that place, not ready for the soft opening? Why, in Paul’s telling, was it imperative that Moses employ a veil to prevent them from seeing this glory that was being set aside. Part of the answer is one of the great Church answers and that is it is a mystery. We do not fully understand the ways of God. And this is certainly a reasonable part of the explanation. We do not know why God chose the moment he did in time to send Jesus to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. But the mystery answer only covers the timeline. That is, it only tries to answer why it happened then and not at another time. But to answer why they could not see what God had in store the answer is because God had not done it yet. Let’s recap: Moses goes up to the mountain and is changed by his encounter with God. Part of this change happens to his face and this change, if people are to gaze upon it, allows them to see God. It allows them to see what will happen when God is made man and dwells among us. But God has, as yet, not become flesh and dwelt among us, so the people of Israel cannot look upon it. It must be veiled. And the reason it must be veiled is because they are not ready to experience it. This is probably a dumb example, but when have I let that stop me in the past. Let’s say you stopped in Fleet Farm and picked up a time machine. There was a sale and so you got one that was big enough for you to take something extra along with you on your journey. When you get the machine home you decide you want to go back to the stone age and in order to better see the sights you decide to take along your Nash Metropolitan. Now here is the question: If on your journey you met some nice stone age people, would you show them your car? You might, but the question is, would people who had not yet discovered the wheel have any ability to comprehend what they were looking at? It would kind of be like discussing particle physics with your dog. And furthermore, after you leave it’s not like the cavemen would be able to build one for themselves – I mean Nash had enough trouble doing it. Like the cavemen and the Nash Metropolitan the people of Israel simply were born at a time when they were not prepared to see or be able to do anything about what was to come – either comprehending or participating.

Now there are two takeaways that I can think of for this. The first is an objection and it goes like this: God is unfair because he did not let those nice people of Israel see the salvation found in Jesus that was to come. And that is a fair objection but there is a solution to it. The solution is found in various places, but we are probably most familiar with the version found in the Apostle’s Creed. After saying that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried we say, “He descended into hell.” The idea is that between the death and resurrection, Jesus did something known as the Harrowing of Hell. In this action he brought all of those who had been born too soon with him into heaven. It is a subject for a lengthy sermon but let’s leave it at that for now. The second takeaway is that we are not ones untimely born and so what are we doing about it? There is no veil for us, we can see the Son of God and therefore we can see God. So, are we excited, are participating fully in the life that God has made available to us or have we put on our own veil? A veil can be most anything that we place between ourselves and God. It is anything that we make more important than God so as to not fully see what has been done in Christ Jesus. As we approach Lent it is a good time to reflect on our self-imposed veils and find ways to remove them so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.