

Out of the Clouds
Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9
February 19, 2023

I took the picture on the front of your bulletin on January 23. It was snowing over our mountains – in fact, it was dumping snow over our mountains that evening. As the sun was setting, the rays of the sun reflected off the snow and clouds causing the picture I took. It looked like the mountains were on fire. I had never seen anything like it. I sent to my brother in Minnesota, and he said it reminded him of Moses on the mountain in the movie “The Ten Commandments.”

As I read the scriptures for today from the lectionary, I noticed the clouds in the readings, and thought about all the other places clouds were used in the Bible. Clouds actually have a prominent place in the Bible if you pay attention.

It begins with the story of Noah and the flood. After the flood, God makes a promise with Noah to never destroy all humanity with a flood again. God sealed this promise by placing a beautiful rainbow in the clouds and saying, "I do set my bow in the cloud...and I will remember my covenant" (Genesis 9:13-15). Every time we look up at a rainbow arched across the clouds, we can be assured that God is keeping God’s promises.

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness after their escape as slaves in Egypt, it was a pillar of cloud that led the Israelites as they traveled in the desert. The cloud was their guide.

In this wilderness, God instructed the Israelites to build a portable temple called the tabernacle. Whenever Moses met with God in the tabernacle, a cloud descended upon the tabernacle. The same thing happened when the permanent temple was built. When it was dedicated, a cloud descended on the temple, and it was so thick that the priests could not do their work. The scriptures describe this as the glory of the Lord.

Can you imagine what would happen if a cloud descended in our sanctuary, and it would be so thick that Pastor Craig and I and Wes and Jamie and choir could not lead worship. Part of me longs for that and part of me is terrified to be in such a presence of God.

When we look at clouds, we see animal shapes. To the Israelites, they saw God's presence in the clouds.

Clouds in the Bible, also speak of forgiveness. In Isaiah 44:22, God says, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and, like a cloud, your sins." Sins covered by a cloud so thick never to be seen again.

When Jesus died on the cross, darkness covered the land. Many assume the darkness was a heavy cover of clouds. The whole earth wept.

When Jesus ascended into heaven after the resurrection, scripture says a cloud hid him from the disciples sight. It is said that Jesus will appear with a cloud when he returns. At that time, all eyes will see him.

In the Bible, clouds represent the presence of God, the glory of God.

Take a look at our scripture passages this morning and compare them. Moses sat in a cloud for 6 days, in silence, before he heard the voice of God and received the 10 Commandments in that same cloud. In our Matthew passage, while Jesus was transfigured, a bright cloud descended and the voice of God spoke.

When the Israelites were looking up at the mountain and the clouds, the glory of God looked like a consuming fire. When Jesus was transformed on the mountain, Peter, James and John saw Jesus as he really is: His glory.

What do we learn from these clouds in our scripture passages this morning?

Out of the cloud comes a new way to live.

It took six days to prepare Moses to be alone with God on the mountain. As I mentioned with the children, it was six days of nothing happening and waiting. Yet out of that waiting, God prepares Moses to receive the vision of how different this nation of Israel was to be. Moses received a vision of how a physical people were to be in a relationship with a spiritual God.

Out of the cloud came the 10 Commandments. The nation of Israel was to worship one God, not many. This was to be a community where the Sabbath day was kept, a day of rest. Keeping in mind, the Israelites never had a day of rest when they were slaves in Egypt for hundreds of year. Now, a gracious God was giving them a break from the stress and activity of everyday life.

There was to be healthy relationships between families and neighbors and their belongings and animals. All were to be treated with kindness. This way of life was so different than anything else on earth, that it took 40 days to explain to Moses what God in mind. All in the cloud.

Out of the cloud came a new way to live. Jesus took those 10 commandments and narrowed them down to two: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and second love your neighbor as yourself. To this day, we live these commandments as we follow Jesus.

Out of the cloud came a new way to live.

Out of the cloud comes the truth about Jesus.

Colossians 1 says this: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth...¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together... ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him."

This is what the Peter, James and John saw on the mountain. They saw the glory of Jesus, the fullness of God in Jesus. Jesus transformed into a dazzling white figure, and if that was not enough, Moses and Elijah appear as well. Moses, the great lawgiver. Elijah, the great prophet.

The disciples were given an unobstructed view of Jesus as Jesus really is. Then the cloud descended. Perhaps to cover some of that glory because Jesus' clothes were as white as light and his face shone like the sun. Who can look at the sun and not be damaged?

In the Old Testament, no one could look at God and live. So God made God's presence known through the clouds, both to reveal God and to conceal God. If we were to be thrust into the immediate presence of the sun, we would be burnt to a crisp instantly. The Bible teaches the same would happen to us in the immediate presence of God. Clouds then were the clothing God wore to keep the Israelites from being destroyed in the presence of a holy and powerful God.

But in the New Testament, Jesus was the glory of God veiled in flesh. Jesus' flesh covered the glory of God so people could look on God and live. But for one moment, the disciples saw that glory, and now the cloud descends to cover the all-consuming glory.

This is who we follow. The one who contained the fullness of God and all its glory. The One who showed us what God is like. The One who still calls us today into a relationship with God. What a wonder.

Out of the cloud comes a new way to live.
Out of the cloud comes the truth about Jesus.
Out of the cloud comes a touch.

As the cloud descends, as the disciples hear the voice of God from that cloud, they fell to the ground, terrified. Then they felt a touch. And Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. Get up." It is just an ordinary verse, a transition from dazzling figures and a glowing cloud to an everyday touch.

All the fullness of God in a touch.

Do you remember after the pandemic the first time we could touch people again? We couldn't touch each other for 2 years. Remember the beauty of that first touch, the first hug. All the fullness of God in a touch.

(Pause)

Clouds come in many different colors. Before a storm, they are dark and black. On a lazy summer afternoon, they may be white as snow. During a sunrise or a sunset, they turn pink or peach or fushia or violet.

Just as life comes in many colors. One moment we may be on the mountain top of success and achievement, the next moment in the valley of failure and defeat. One moment the white clouds of joy, health, and happiness come our way, then without warning come the black clouds of sadness, sickness, and sorrow.

Our study of clouds in the Bible teach us that God is present in the clouds, no matter what kind we are experiencing. And we are touched.

One detail I haven't touched on much is the voice that came out of the cloud in both passages.

I have told the following story in my Bible classes; not sure if I have in a sermon, so I apologize if I have...but it fits here.

God speaks to us in many ways – through the Bible, through other people, in nature. In all the years I have walked with Jesus, I can remember three times when I actually heard God's voice, and in all three times, that voice came out of dark, stormy clouds. The last time was in 2017.

Rev Mark Medina came as our interim pastor 8 months after Pastor Larry's death. Mark insisted that his associate pastors sit in the congregation during worship from time to time. I was not happy about that. But when Rev. Medina said something, you did it.

Yet, the first time I sat in the congregation, in the middle of worship, without leading it, I heard the voice of God. "I brought you to this place for this time." I knew at that moment this was my call – to be here and bring this church through the suicide of Pastor Larry. And when we are called, God gives us the ability and strength to do the task at hand.

Out of the cloud comes the voice of God.

The hymn that we are going to sing is very short. I chose it because of verse 8 in our Gospel reading. After Jesus touched the disciples and spoke to them, the passage says, "When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus."

At first glance it seems like such an ordinary verse: a ho-hum transition from the miraculous back to the everyday. But it's more than that: "they saw no one except Jesus." Aren't we at our best, when we can do just that? They saw no one except Jesus. No matter what we face or go through, Jesus is still there. Thus, we keep our eyes focused on Jesus.

We will play it through once, the choir will sing it once, and you will join in the third time. Remain seated.

(sing)

Please stand as we declare our faith by saying The Apostle's Creed.