

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

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Exodus 24: 12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

“On a Cloudy Day”

I know there's a song that says “On a clear day you can see forever” – and it's true. I remember how disappointed our family was one summer vacation when after spending several hours hiking up a mountain in the Adirondacks and climbing the fire tower on top of the mountain we found ourselves surrounded by fog and gray skies. We couldn't see anything far away at all. It was supposed to be a spectacular view, but it wasn't. On a clear day we could have seen for hundreds of miles. On a cloudy day we couldn't see much at all.

So for long-distance views, we need a clear day. But the photographers I know always tell me they much prefer cloudy, overcast days for taking close-up pictures of people and wild flowers and trees in the forest. Why? Because they get a sharper image when the light is diffused and the sun isn't so bright. The colors stand out more on a cloudy day. The bright sun tends to wash out the colors – and the contrasts aren't as vivid. The photographers say they can see better when it's a little cloudy. A grey sky makes for a more interesting picture.

When Moses goes up the mountain to visit God, he sits in a cloud for 6 days. And on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, when God finally decides to speak to Moses, God calls to him out of the midst of the cloud.

When Jesus leads Peter and James and John up the mountain, and is transfigured before them, and while Peter is still speaking to Jesus, a bright cloud overshadowed them and God's voice speaks to them from the cloud.

Why a cloud? Why is God's glory revealed indirectly – through a cloud? Why is God's light veiled – why is God's splendor hidden?

For our protection? Because it would hurt our eyes to see God directly? Or perhaps for the sake of mystery? So that God is always more than we can ever see. Maybe God's glory comes in a cloud to scare us? So that we feel unsure and unsteady on our feet, so that we don't quite have all our bearings and thus feel more dependent on God and more awed by God?

All good reasons -- and there's truth in each one of them and all of them together. What I want to suggest today, however, is something a little different. And that suggestion is that perhaps God reveals God's glory through the clouds because God knows we can see his glory better when it's a little overcast, when there are some clouds to obscure the brightness, when there's some darkness to offset the splendor.

Doesn't it make sense that if we can see with our physical eyes the bright colors of creation better on a cloudy day, that we can also see better with our spiritual eyes if God's glory remains a little obscured? Think about it. When do you see the glory and grandeur of God? Only when you have something to contrast it with, right? If all of life is bright and shiny and glorious and splendid, how do we know we are in God's presence? Without questions, without confusion, without struggles, without darkness, how would we ever know that moment of clarity, or the transforming power of faith, or that experience of being touched by the divine? How would we know we are standing on holy ground? Perhaps God's glory is hidden in the clouds, so that when we do experience it, it stands out even more. The image is clearer. The impression is sharper. This is glorious glory we're encountering, and splendid splendor and majestic majesty. God is the real thing. Nothing or no one else ever comes close.

Again, in both the Old and New Testament stories, what is emphasized is that God's voice comes out of the cloud. God's voice. Not a face or image. Not a vision. Not a picture or photograph. But a voice. Yes, in the gospel story Peter, James and John do experience a vision. Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. His face shone like the sun. His garments became white as light. Moses and Elijah also appeared to them. And in his excitement as well as his nervousness, Peter responds impetuously. He wants to capture the Kodak moment and preserve it – he babbles on -- trying to impress Jesus with his sincerity, but then the cloud of glory settles over the mountain, and out of the cloud comes God's voice. And it is God's voice that interprets the vision. Not Peter's – not even Jesus.' But God's.

There is so much going on in these mountain top stories, that to single out just one idea or two does injustice to the whole fabric of the story – but still I want us to hear that one thing both the Exodus story and the Transfiguration of Jesus story is saying is that God's glory is revealed through God's word.

What we have as a people of faith is God's word. It is God's voice that comes from the cloud of hidden glory. To Moses on Mount Sinai the voice was God's command. The word was God's covenant, God's law. To Elijah on Mount Carmel the voice was the prophetic promise of God's presence as well as the prophetic warning to turn back to God's ways. To the disciples on the mountain of transfiguration, the word of God was God's Son Jesus. Jesus is God's word. Jesus reveals God's glory. Jesus makes God known to his people. The first verses of the letter to the Hebrews share this thought so much more eloquently:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1: 1-3).

What does God's voice declare to Peter and James and John? First of all, God confirms that this Jesus who they have been following, this Jesus who has been teaching them and who has been healing the sick and feeding the hungry, and forgiving

sinner is indeed God's own beloved Son, and that God is indeed pleased with who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing. Then God says, "Listen to him."

"Listen to him." He's doing the right thing. He knows what he's talking about. "Listen to him."

To listen is, in Scripture, more than just hearing with our ears. To listen means also to obey, to follow. So to listen to Jesus means to pay attention to Jesus' verbal instructions, his teachings, as well as to his ways, to his actions, to his example, to what he does.

And that's why it's helpful to remember where this Transfiguration story takes place in Matthew's gospel. For it's sandwiched between 2 of Jesus' predictions about his own death. Back in 16:21, Matthew writes: "From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed, and on the third day be raised." And then in 17:22 Matthew has Jesus say it again: "Jesus said to them, 'The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.'"

So when God's voice tells the awestruck disciples to listen to Jesus, in part what God is saying is that Jesus' predictions about his death are right, and that the way of discipleship is the way of the cross. But this is hard news to hear, and sometimes we'd rather not hear it. So instead we get distracted and get caught up in unimportant things. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, what did he find? The people had grown weary of waiting, and had turned to other gods. The cloud they saw on top of the mountain wasn't enough, the appearance of God's glory as a devouring fire wasn't impressive enough, they wanted something more concrete, more touchable, more direct. So they fashioned themselves a golden calf, and worshipped an image of God they created with their own hands. God's voice wasn't good enough either -- because it came through Moses, and the people distrusted Moses' leadership. He wasn't doing enough for them. They weren't as happy or well-off as they thought they'd be. So what if Moses had talked with God? What good did it do them?

Peter is so awed by the vision of Jesus and Moses and Elijah talking together on the mountaintop, he loses his head and blurts out something that doesn't make much sense. He thinks he's offering to do something helpful – to make 3 booths or tents for

them, so they can be protected and have a place to stay, but instead he comes across sounding a little foolish. Instead of just experiencing the moment, Peter starts analyzing it and trying to do something with it. So God sends in the cloud. Don't think you have this all figured out, Peter. What do you see now? A cloud? Do you want to bottle up a cloud, too? And God interrupts Peter's unimportant chatter with words that more important – "This is my Beloved Son -- Listen to him."

He knows who he is – he knows what he's talking about. You can trust him. You can find life with him. You'll suffer, yes. And I know that's distressing to you. I know you wish it were easier. I know you don't like it when Jesus talks this way. But you have to listen, Peter. Because Jesus' way is the way of suffering. And Jesus is still my beloved Son. And the glory you saw today on this mountain is a foretaste of the glory to come. You'll see his face tormented with pain, you'll see the tears he cries for you, but you'll remember that today you saw his face shine like the sun, and you'll know that my glory shines on him, even in the darkest hour, even when all seems lost, he is my beloved Son."

Listen to him. “When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Rise and have no fear.’ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.”

When all else is said and done, that’s who we have, and that’s the word we hear. We have Jesus, the one who comes and touches us. The one who speaks words of assurance and promise to us. We can keep looking for someone else. We can keep going in other directions. We can keep getting distracted, or we can focus on what we do see, and on the word we do hear. “Give Me Jesus,” the choir sang. Do we really need any other savior? Do we really need any other example to follow? On a cloudy day, the Son of God is really all the sunshine we need, you know. Because he is the light of the world. He is the one who unites us. He is the one who calls us to follow him and to tell his good news to others. He is the one who shows us what it is to live in relationship with God. He is the one to whom we belong. These are all things we have learned about Jesus this Epiphany season, from Christmas to this Day of Transfiguration. As we move this week into the season of Lent, as we head to the cross and its suffering, let us remember who this Jesus is. Let us feel his touch when we are afraid. And let us listen to him – not just with our ears, but with our whole lives.