

Radiate
United Church of Broomfield
February 23, 2020

Exodus 24:12-18

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there. I'll give you the stone tablets with the instructions and the commandments that I've written in order to teach them."

13 So Moses and his assistant Joshua got up, and Moses went up God's mountain. 14 Moses had said to the elders, "Wait for us here until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur will be here with you. Whoever has a legal dispute may go to them."

15 Then Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The Lord's glorious presence settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from the cloud. 17 To the Israelites, the Lord's glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain. 18 Moses entered the cloud and went up the mountain. Moses stayed on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. 2 He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

3 Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. 4 Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Lord, it's good that we're here. If you want, I'll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

5 While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!" 6 Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

7 But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Don't tell anybody about the vision until the Human One is raised from the dead."

Twenty-one years ago, John F. Kennedy Jr. died when his airplane crashed into the Atlantic Ocean. He was flying a small plane off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, with his wife and sister-in-law.

His death shocked the nation, in particular because he was the celebrity son of President John F. Kennedy. His plan was to fly from New Jersey to Martha's Vineyard, drop off his sister-in-law and then continue to Hyannis, Massachusetts, where he and his wife were attending a family wedding.

That night over the Atlantic, Kennedy probably felt as though he were flying in a cloud. He could not see a thing. Over the water it was dark and hazy, and the airport lights were not visible. “Night flying is very different from day flying because of the lack of outside visual references,” says pilot Sylvia Wrigley. In addition, crossing large bodies of water at night is hazardous, “because depth perception and orientation are affected.”¹

Kennedy had only a few hours of experience flying at night, and he may not have been comfortable flying by instruments alone. At some point, he lost his sense of which way was up. He crashed the plane into the water at such high speed that the wings were torn away in the impact, and he and his two passengers died immediately. The causes of the accident were found to be “spatial disorientation,” combined with haze and a dark night. Flying can be dangerous, up in the clouds.

In our reading today from Exodus, God invited Moses to climb Mount Sinai and receive “the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment,” which God had written for the instruction of the people. These tablets contained the Ten Commandments, which would become foundational for the lives of the Israelites. So, Moses climbed the mountain with his assistant, Joshua, and said to the elders of the people, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again.” When Moses went up the mountain, a cloud completely covered it. Moses and Joshua waited for God on the mountain in a dark and hazy space.

But being trapped under a cloud is not always bad. “When it rains, I feel the heaviness of the presence of God,” writes an Episcopal priest named Suzanne Guthrie. In such a setting, she feels surrounded by God’s love and God’s power. She describes deep prayer as a “winter prayer, when the rain comes, the clouds darkening the valley like a hand over a cup and covering the mountains, rain beating steadily at the pavement, the plants, the dirt, and the roof just over me. I am absorbed in this prayer and I breathe God.”²

Moses was stuck under a dark cloud on Mount Sinai, and his vision was certainly limited. In the darkness and haze, he couldn’t see God clearly or figure out what God was doing. We know what that feels like, don’t we? At times, we are in situations that make us feel disoriented and vulnerable and scared. But, like Suzanne Guthrie, we can turn those cloudy situations into an opportunity for deep prayer, one in which we can actually “breathe God.”

The good news is that God’s presence can be experienced on cloudy days. We don’t need to wait for sunshine to feel God’s love and power — they are available on days of rain and haze as well. The challenge is to be patient and to wait for God to come to us. As God said to Moses,

¹ Sylvia Wrigley, “Which Way Is Up? John F. Kennedy, Jr., Plane Crash,” Fear of Landing, November 20, 2015, <https://fearoflanding.com/accidents/accident-reports/which-way-is-up-john-f-kennedy-jr-plane-crash/>.

² Suzanne Guthrie, *Grace’s Window: Entering the Seasons of Prayer* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 66.

“Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there.” When we wait for God during cloudy times, God shows up — sometimes when we least expect it.

Exodus tells us that the cloud covered Mount Sinai for six days, and on the seventh day God called to Moses from out of the cloud. Six days of overcast weather would be hard on anyone, but Moses endured it patiently, waiting for God to meet him. Finally, God called to Moses and invited him to enter the cloud. Moses disappeared into the darkness, went up the mountain and remained on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights.

From the valley, the people of Israel looked up and saw both the cloud and the “glory of the LORD.” This glory was “like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain,” says the book of Exodus, one that marked God’s presence but also blocked people from any direct sight of God. It was a kind of envelope of light that obscured God’s being.

This passage reminds us that the presence of God is not always clear. In this story, God was shielded by a cloud — shielded even from Moses, the great lawgiver of the people of Israel. And while it is true that God’s glory was revealed to the people of Israel, God’s own self remained hidden. “No one has ever seen God,” says the Gospel of John — no one except for Jesus, that is (John 1:18; 6:46.). About the best we can do is catch sight of the glory that marks God’s presence.

Our challenge is to find God’s glory in the middle of the dark clouds of daily life. A pastor in Virginia tells of spending an entire day at his desk, mostly pushing papers for his association’s committee on ministry, the committee that supervises seminarians as they prepare for ordination. Forms had to be studied, copied, routed and filed for some of the 60 local men and women who were preparing for ordained ministry. Across his desk came letters of reference, seminary transcripts and psychological evaluations. While he knew that each document was important, he sometimes found his vision getting cloudy.

Like many people, this pastor finds it hard to see God’s presence in paperwork. It is not always clear how God is involved in pushing papers, no matter how well it is done. But on that particular day, he worked on a long letter to another association, advising them of some problems that his committee had with a seminarian coming under their care. God’s glory, he realized, is seen in a church that evaluates its ministerial candidates carefully, making sure that those who become pastors are well qualified and emotionally healthy.

That same night, he chaired a meeting of the committee and he heard the statement of faith of a woman about to be ordained. Her words revealed a great deal of understanding, grace and truth. God’s glory, he discovered, is seen in people who take their faith seriously, and who can share it with others through word and deed.

Most of our days will be at least partially cloudy. But up in the clouds, God's glory can be experienced. Most days will not include a clear view of the face of Christ. But in the faces of people around us, the love of Christ and of God can be seen.

"No one has ever seen God," says John in his first letter, but "if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us" (1 John 4:12). The challenge for us is to keep our hearts open to the presence of the Lord, and to keep our eyes open to ways in which God's love and power appear in the lives of people around us.

Today is called Transfiguration of the Lord, another day in which God spoke out of "a bright cloud" (Matthew 17:5). On this day many years after his Mount Sinai expedition, Moses appeared on a mountain once again, this time with Elijah and Jesus. The appearance of Jesus changed in the presence of his disciples, and Matthew tells us that "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Matthew 17:2). The Transfiguration "is as strange a scene as there is in the Gospels," writes minister Frederick Buechner. In it the holiness of Jesus was shining through his humanness, his face so afire with it that the disciples were almost blinded. And yet, says Buechner, "even with us something like that happens once in a while." It may be the face of a man walking his child in the park, or the face of a woman picking peas in her garden. "Every once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing."³

<video clip>

Whether we are up in the clouds, or down on the earth, our challenge is to open our hearts and our eyes to the presence of God. We may not always see God clearly, and at times we may become dangerously disoriented. Darkness and haze are always going to be a threat to our well-being. But if we wait for God patiently, God will show up. Sometimes in prayer. Sometimes in paperwork. Sometimes in the face of a baby tasting ice cream for the first time. Even on the cloudiest of days, God's love and power can break through the darkness and assure us that God is with us.

Amen

³ Frederick Buechner, "Transfiguration," Frederick Buechner Website, August 6, 2017, www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/8/7/transfiguration.