

Head in the Clouds

Feb. 27, 2022 | Rev. Cader Howard

First Presbyterian Church, Stillwater MN

Reading: Luke 9:28-36

This is one of those handful of Biblical stories that comes around again every single year in the liturgical year—We have Christmas, Palm Sunday, Easter, and Pentecost, of course...I think we're all used to those...but then nestled in there right before the season of Lent, we have this wild fever dream called the transfiguration. As strange as this story is for us, it's never going to be as strange for us as it must have been for Peter, James, and John. Come on, Jesus says, let's go for a little hike. "Okay Jesus. I'll grab a few granola bars and my Nalgene water bottle. This should be fun." But Jesus' friends have no idea what they're about to experience.

When they reach the top, Jesus begins to pray. This is not one of those perfunctory, short blessings you utter before a meal when you're hungry at the end of a long day. This is prayer as an ongoing activity, prayer as an active encounter with God that involves silence and speaking and listening...and more silence. We don't often take the time to engage in this kind of prayer—with no real time limit. We're usually in too much of a hurry, partly because it takes time to settle in to this type of prayer and establish a connection.

It reminds of trying to connect to the internet in the late 1990's—you couldn't just sit down at your computer and open a web page, you certainly couldn't pull out a phone and check the weather in 2 seconds. First you had to make sure nobody else was using the phone line. Then you had to turn on your desktop computer and wait for it to boot up. Five to ten minutes later you'd finally be able to click on a program that would activate your modem to dial-in to your internet service provider. And then you'd listen for that familiar set of beeps and buzzes—the handshake of your modem connecting with a modem on the other end of the telephone line. And after your 28.8 modem finally connected, it would still be a while before you could open Netscape and browse the web. And even then, you'd press enter after typing a web address, and you'd still wait an eternity sometimes before the page would slowly load. Now—I'm all for quick prayers throughout the day.

It's wonderful to have a fast connection to God. But sometimes I think we need to take the time to connect the old 28.8 way...to take our time and slowly enter into a state of prayer, clearing our minds and establishing a good connection so we can send and receive. Try it this week—spend 10 minutes just settling into the prayer, and then see what happens.

After a while, Jesus begins to glow, and then suddenly the three disciples also see Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus. There's a lot going on in this story—Luke, like the other synoptic gospel writers Mark and Matthew, is trying to convey several truths at once about who Jesus is. Many commentators point out that Luke is showing us the continuity of faith between Moses, the prophet Elijah, and Jesus. That's it's the same thread of faith and tradition that runs through all of them, that Jesus stands in this same tradition. And because he is glowing, the disciples catch a glimpse of Jesus' divinity hiding beneath his humanity. It's a theological emphasis that reminds us Jesus is both human and divine at the same time. He's not just an ordinary human teacher. But he's also not just God wearing a human disguise. Jesus is the unique combination of both in the same person who experiences human life just as we do. This is what we call incarnation—God in the flesh.

What struck me this time as I read this story is actually the cloud that suddenly envelops the top of the mountain and completely surrounds Jesus and the three disciples. Peter is standing there rambling about building three houses for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah when...all of a sudden, they can't see anything at all. The cloud descends, the fog just rolls in on top of them. And I imagine they can't even see each other anymore. They can barely see a hand in front of their own face.

Two years before my family and I moved to Minnesota, we moved to a mountain in Tennessee. My wife Cameron was taking a one-year position teaching Old Testament at the Episcopal Divinity School that is part of the University of the South, known as Sewanee. Sewanee sits in the middle of a beautiful forest on top of the Cumberland Plateau in central Tennessee. It's relatively flat on top, but we lived at an elevation of 1900 feet with a steep drop off on two sides of the University's 13,000 acres. One of the favorite sayings at Sewanee, which

happens to be printed on a lot of t-shirts, is *Fog Happens*. Yes it does. I've driven my kids to school in Stillwater on plenty of foggy mornings when I couldn't see the stop sign until I was half a block away—but it's nothing compared to Sewanee. Many times that year, the fog would be so thick you could barely see the car in front of you. The cloud just landed on you and stayed there.

Several times, the thick fog was present on a Sunday morning when we were heading an hour east to the little Presbyterian church we attended in Chattanooga. The exit for Sewanee off I-24 is right at the top of the Monteagle Grade—which is a 6% grade that drops 1100 feet in 4 miles. It's mentioned in the theme song for the old movie *Smokey and the Bandit*. We would have to merge onto the interstate in the heavy fog with 18-wheelers cresting the Monteagle Grade and getting up to speed again right as we merged. We'd have to give our Honda accord all the gas and prayer we could muster to get up to speed fast enough, and just seconds before the actual merge, we'd suddenly drive out the bottom of the fog and everything was 100% bright and clear. And only then could we see if the lane was clear.

But that wasn't the worst fog we experienced. One evening, I was driving my three-year old son Isaac home from seeing a kid's movie at the old movie theater on campus. It was so foggy that even my low beams were reflecting back and blinding me. I ended up driving only with my parking lights on, with my head sticking out the window as I navigated the turns from memory driving 2 mph. I remember three things vividly from that experience:

- 1) how everything looked completely different in the fog—it was like I was in an alien land.
- 2) how the fog hid everything but also revealed things slowly one at a time—I'd see a mailbox appear, then a fire hydrant, then my own house. And I was able to focus on each thing, one a time. Each one appeared almost miraculously.
- 3) How the fog made me rely upon what I already knew—I had to drive home almost from memory and start making the turns before I could even see the road. I had to navigate narrow, curvy roads and park next to my house that I couldn't even see, trusting that my memory would keep me from driving off the edge of the plateau.

More than a dozen times in my life, I've climbed Lookout Mountain in Montreat, NC, which is a little slice of Presbyterian heaven nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Asheville. I hope our youth will get to climb Lookout at Montreat this summer while we're attending the youth conference. Sometimes when you reach the top and stand up on the big rocks and look back down the valley, you can see clearly all the way down to Assembly Inn, where we'll be staying. But other times, the clouds are too low, and there's a fog between you and the town of Montreat. And it feels like you're in a vast wilderness on the top of the world. Honestly, both outcomes are wonderful. Sometimes it's good to see where you came from, and other times, it's good to feel separated from all the busyness of the conference—and to just be up there with God and the bears. It's on those foggy days when I feel God's presence the best.

As the cloud and fog surrounded Peter, James, and John...and Jesus...suddenly they are completely cut off from the valley and their busy lives below. They can't even see each other. All they can hear is God's voice speaking clearly to them, saying "This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him." Or in Matthew's version—"This is my son, my beloved. Listen to him." In our story, God uses the cloud and the fog to get the attention of the disciples. To force them to focus only on God's voice. They're standing there, enveloped by the mystery of God, and God reveals to them what they already know in their hearts, but what they still need to hear: Jesus, their friend and teacher, is the chosen one, he is God's son. And they should listen to him, and follow his teachings, and follow the path he is on. Even when it gets dangerous. For when the disciples go back down the mountain, things are going to get real, and they're going to be chaotic. But now—they need to have their heads in the clouds.

From time to time, we all need to dwell in the mystery and imagination of God. We all need to spend some time separated from the chaos, some time when God can reveal things to us in scripture and prayer and through the voices of other people...truths that we, perhaps, already knew, but that we couldn't accept.

God's voice in the cloud reveals to the disciples—and to us—what they already knew. What we already

know. Jesus is the One. He is the one we were praying for, he's the one we were waiting for. He's the one who redeems us. He's the one who brings light in the midst of the darkness and hope in the midst of pain. He's the one who brings peace in the midst of war and violence. Don't listen to the hypocrites who use Jesus to divide people, to exclude people, to attack others, to marginalize or shame children of God. Jesus came for all, to welcome all, to love and heal and embrace all. The world will try to reject him and silence him again and again. But the love of God shared with the world through Jesus Christ will prevail. Love wins, it always does, eventually.

When the cloud suddenly lifts and we're merging back into regular life at 70 mph trying to avoid the 18 wheelers....when the cloud suddenly lifts and we're right back in the middle of complicated relationships and situations...when the cloud suddenly lifts and we're confronted with our pain again. This is when we need to hold tight to what God revealed to us. Hold tight to what we know. Hold tight to the knowledge that we are loved and known by God who created us, by Christ who redeems us, and by the Spirit who is with us for every step of our journey.

Thanks be to God. Amen.