

“Cloud-Based Spirituality”

Sermon on Sunday, March 3, 2019

Based on Luke 9: 28-36

A few years ago, a new metaphor entered the ever-innovative world of communication and technology. All of a sudden, and before most people knew what it meant, everything became “cloud-based”. For those of you who haven’t paid any attention to those changes in the tech-world, which by the way impacts most of us, this is what it means in the simplest terms: cloud computing means storing and accessing data and programs over the Internet instead of on your computer’s hard drive. Sounds a little scary to me! So much of our information is “out there” in the cloud and I’m afraid it may be accessed by people with very particular skillsets. It reminds me of the 1984 book by George Orwell, describing a utopian world in which “big brother is watching you” and nothing is private anymore. On the other hand, the cloud has no doubt advantages. If you lose data because your computer gets damaged, or if the pastor loses a lap top, that data can be quite easily retrieved. I don’t want to talk more about this technical stuff, lest you discover my incompetence. You are better off talking to the IT specialists in our congregation.

What I want to focus on this morning is THE CLOUD. The cloud that overshadowed the disciples on the mountain of Transfiguration. The cloud that accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness. The cloud that took Jesus into heaven. The cloud that shields us from the pure light emanating from the Almighty. THE CLOUD as a major symbol for God’s presence in both testaments of the Bible. That cloud shows up in some of the most important stories in our Bible: Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Ascension into heaven, even the Crucifixion. In today’s reading, the revelation isn’t made until, you guessed it, the CLOUD moves in. Only at that point can Jesus’ companions hear a voice from heaven: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” In other words, God has a step on Silicon Valley. Many of God’s revelations in Scripture have always been cloud-based!

So I was thinking, maybe we should take a page from the techies and the Bible and start talking about cloud-based spirituality, a spirituality not stored on the hard drive of your soul, but somewhere out there in God’s mysterious presence. What might cloud-based spirituality look like?

First of all, it would be a spirituality with fewer certainties, I’m afraid. Because, one thing is obvious: when you’re in that thick, misty dampness of a cloud, you just can’t see very well. And you have to slow down. Most of us have driven in dense fog at some point. I have vivid memories of a car ride in a dense carpet of fog in Germany some 30 years ago. I was driving a van and could hardly see ten yards ahead of me. It was an extremely scary ride, disorienting, slow, and I was super alert the entire time. As I recall, we were taking country roads because there had been a mass-crash on the Autobahn earlier that day because of low visibility. We were young and dumb and didn’t think of stopping and perhaps continuing our journey the next day. I can still remember guys unfolding maps in the back of the vehicle. Where are we now? There was no GPS in those days... It was hard to tell where we were.

So, being in a cloud, being in dense fog, is disorienting and requiring us to slow down. And now the Bible teaches us that encountering God may well require a bit of disorientation and slowing down! I look at this story as a lesson in advanced spirituality, an example of maturing, deepening

faith. Some people have asked the following question: why did Jesus only take three disciples on the mountain? Why was he favoring Peter, James and John over the others? They show up as the chosen ones in a few New Testament stories. Well, perhaps it doesn't have so much to do with favoritism but with their level of maturity... In the beginning of our faith journey we crave certainties, religious rules, logical explanations, clear-cut teachings; and most of the time, in most churches, we are given exactly that. But as we mature as human beings, one of two things happens: we either say that what the church taught us was a bunch of non-sense (because most of the time it was age-appropriately simple) or we go deeper into the heart of God. And that going deeper, make no mistake, inevitably means losing some certainties, as God is opening up a new playbook in your life. Are you ready for the advanced playbook? Or are you scared of anything new?

Many churches and religions emphasize absolutes, often replacing faith with specific salvation formulas, old playbooks, including the famous Lutherans formulas. The cloud-based spirituality that we encounter on the Mount of Transfiguration in Luke 9 is more sophisticated than that.

If that still doesn't make sense to you, let me bring up another question. Why is it that sometimes people whose lives have been broken, whose certainties and life formulas have been shattered, people who have experienced loss or failure, become more spiritual, more open to God as a result? You know, that happens quite a bit. Some people say it's because they are using God as a crutch now that they need someone. Well, maybe that's true for a few people, very few people. But more often it's the loss of their former securities that opens them up for the sacred presence of God. In other words, experiencing temporary disorientation can be a blessing! Being under the cloud requires people to listen harder! God is under that cloud... God is in that cloud... God is there... God is here!

As a church, as a community of faith, there is much to learn for us. This ancient story speaks very clearly to us, the people who have built all those churches, temples and shrines. "Let us build three Memorial Chapels here," Peter said, excited about witnessing Jesus' encounter with Moses and Elijah. Over millennia of civilization, we have followed Peter's enthusiasm. Humans have built well over 100 million religious buildings in this world; and some of those places are breathtakingly beautiful. These sacred buildings are important, including ours, gathering people for worship and community meetings and providing a base for our faith. But as a church maybe we haven't been quite as adept in embracing the reality emphasized in this story: listening, encountering God in the midst of disorientation, hearing the voice of Christ.

Are we comfortable with our faith being CLOUD-based, maybe not entirely explainable, maybe not entirely traceable on a religious chart, something that is not centered on "me" and my logic but on Christ? Are we comfortable with "our" faith as something we don't actually "own" but something we borrow? Note that at the end of this story the disciples are quiet. Even Peter, the talker, gets very quiet. The three could not explain what had happened to them. But the effects of what happened to them could be felt by those around them for years to come: in their passion, in their courage, through some miracles, by people growing beyond themselves. The CLOUD continued to be with them wherever they went, the mystery of God accompanying them on their road, their lives becoming – a spiritual journey, a cloud based adventure. God invites you to join them, to join the CLOUD and to listen to his beloved Son. Today. **Amen.**