

“Look for the cloud!”

Sermon on Sunday, Feb 23, 2020

Based on Exodus 24: 12-18

There is no easy way out of this Sunday, is there? The readings give me three choices. Either I go up with Moses and Joshua to the smoking mountain to receive God’s commandments and disappear for 40 days in a cloud. “Pastor is gone. We don’t know whether he is coming back!” Or I take up Jesus’ offer and join him on the mountain of transfiguration where my eyes get blinded by the mere reflection of Christ, despite the best sunglasses in the world. Or I go watch the burning of St. Polycarp on the stake, one of the earliest martyrs of the church. Where am I going to go this Sunday? Given those choices in our readings, I would prefer to pass, to be perfectly honest. Sometimes religion can be so ridiculously intense, and this transfiguration business ranks up there on the intensity scale, right below the crucifixion of Jesus. On this Sunday God comes close to us, too close, wanting to transform us, but realizing at the last minute that we can’t endure exposure to pure godliness and giving us Ten Commandments on two tablets instead. “Hey, it’s a start,” God says. “I’ll teach you more when you’re ready!” The scene is so intense that God is hiding behind a cloud. And the cloud becomes a symbol for God’s presence - in the Exodus story, in the transfiguration story and in many other places in the Bible. Look for the cloud, it’s where God is hiding from you, protecting you!

Of course, that could be our entry way into these fiery narratives. We can deal with clouds alright. In fact, until this recent break in weather, we were dealing with clouds almost every day and some of our parishioners were fleeing to Florida, not because of the cold up here but because of sun depravation. Can you imagine living in Alaska or in Iceland in the winter when the sun barely touches the earth? Metaphorically speaking, we know a thing or two about those sun blockers in the sky. We are familiar with times in life when it’s raining and hailing and stormy. When I talk to people and you get past the small talk to the real stuff, it sometimes comes out, people suffering physically, mentally, spiritually. Clouds, lots of clouds hover over their lives, and it’s hard to find the sky!

Among us are people who know the dark days of terminal illness, parents worried about the future of their children, individuals realizing humiliating failure; there are those who deal with the ongoing challenges of addiction, the exhausting toll of caretaking, the terrible void left by fast aging and dementia, and hidden things that we don’t even want to talk about but carry with us quietly. Clouds, lots of clouds. They don’t make up our entire experience, thank God, but they are part of the life in our community. And now Holy Scripture says that God frequently hides behind clouds because we could never take the intensity of direct exposure to the brightness of his presence. Let us ask this question: what if God is hiding in that cloud that is so annoyingly situated right above your life, darkening your view right now? What if God is in that same cloud you are praying to disappear?

The angel said to Mary in the Christmas gospel: “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will over**shadow** you.” The shadows, the clouds, they seem to be places where

God is hiding and doing his most important work for us, and more often than not we cannot quite make the connection.

We are all familiar with another celestial symbol. We all know about the rainbow, perhaps the most beautiful phenomenon in the sky, spectacular colors layered in an arc at the intersection of rain and sun. We know it as a spiritual symbol for hope and a modern symbol for diversity. We know it from the story of Noah in the Book of Genesis. It's easy to relate to the rainbow and attach yourself to its colorful beauty. Rainbows are rare beauties; but clouds are grey and common. Rainbows are the royalty of the sky. Clouds are ordinary. Yet scripture says: when you notice a cloud in your life, watch out, God is near!

But how does that make sense? How can God be near us when we feel darkness enveloping our lives? And just so you know, on most days I prefer sun over the clouds, both physically and spiritually and in every sense of the world. I lived in a basement room once for one year, in my first year of college. The room had a few small openings on the top. They were called windows, but it was mostly a dark place. It was a nice room, but I didn't like it, not enough natural light! How does it make sense that God would come to us in the darkness?

At our most recent winter youth retreat we showed our kids the Harvard commencement speech given by Harry Potter bestselling author J.K. Rowling a good number of years ago during the height of the Harry Potter mania. I realized then and there that our confirmation students grew up after those years and may not have even read one of the books. But what Rowling had to say spoke to them nevertheless. She talked about the clouds in her life – the clouds of failure, the clouds of poverty, the clouds of unfulfilled dreams and of being on the brink of homelessness. And at no point did she romanticize it. It wasn't pretty, she insisted. Yet, there were lessons learned and blessings bestowed through those very difficult and painful times. She talked about the empathy she developed for people on the edge. She talked about the appreciation she has for all her success, precisely because things didn't come easy. As she spoke, she was regarded as one of the most successful and wealthiest writers in the world, speaking at one of the most prestigious colleges in the world. And she said in so many words: "The cloud of failure taught me a lot."

I don't know about Rowling's religious persuasion. Maybe she believes in wizards, above all. But I can tell you, what she was saying there at Harvard intersects with the teachings of our religion about the cross and about the clouds in our lives. We sometimes wonder where God is and God is sitting in the cloud right above you. We sometimes wonder what God will do about certain things when God may well be **in** those things. God is still difficult to see and feel and recognize during those times. But, scripture says, God is there. Trust, that the cloud can lead you to the brighter days ahead if you. As we enter the season of Lent next Wednesday, we will encounter a God who is hiding in the suffering of Christ and yet saving us at the same time. Do you know why? The mystery of the cross is so dark because it protects us from the intensity of the light called God's love. Look for the cloud. God is there. In your cloud. **Amen.**