

Last Sunday After Epiphany

Luke 9:28-36

February 7, 2016

St. George's Bolton

Fr. Chris

[How does Moses make tea in the Wilderness? Hebrews it!]

"The Cloud"

"Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him."

Jesus, looking like a ghost talking with two very dead guys! Yeah, I would be scared. And Peter, John and James: they were also very sleepy, tired after their long walk up to the top of the mount of the Transfiguration, a walk that today is usually begun hours before dawn, ending at the top shortly before sunrise. It is not hard to imagine that Peter, John and James would have sought some rest when they reached the top, while Jesus was saying his prayers and later conversing with Moses and Elijah. And it is not hard to imagine they would have been scared and a little dumbfounded by the apparitions they viewed.

But imagine waking up to this scene: seeing their friend and leader changed into the appearance of a glowing countenance and also seeing Moses and the great prophet Elijah speaking with him. We all know about Moses and the Promised Land. He did not reach there with the Israelites, but his leadership got them there.

Elijah is known for the works of wonder he did in Northern Israel, where he fought the establishment of the religion of Baal. In a famous scene before the priests of Baal who had been praying for a drought to end, Elijah set up an altar before them, and pouring four jars of water on the sacrifice and the altar, a blaze of light came from heaven and consumed the sacrifice and some of the stones on the altar. Elijah, who departed this world riding on a chariot, is to return as a harbinger of the coming Messiah. To this day, at many a Jewish Seder, an extra place is set at table and a chair left empty for his return. Many believe John the Baptist to be the embodiment of the returning Elijah, the prophet who prepared the way of the Messiah to come.

The point is that both of these gentlemen, Moses and Elijah had been dead for almost a thousand years before they joined Jesus on the mountaintop. By now, even the modern day Elijah, the forerunner, John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod, so we are talking about a very frightening scene on top of that mountain!

Faith in their Jesus lead them beyond their fears. How would we react to such a vision? Their reaction was to try and preserve the moment, making three shelters: *"Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' (He did not know what he was saying.)"*

As the text indicates, it was the wrong response, but a very human one. Haven't you had a least one mountaintop experience in your life? When you are on the mountaintop, you want to just stay with it, stay right there, as long as you can. However, *this* experience merely foreshadowed the crowning glory of Holy Week, which was yet to come. Jesus glowing a bright white on top

of the mountain is one bookend at the beginning of the Lenten season, with the other being the resurrected Jesus also glowing brightly on Easter morning at the conclusion of Lent. Both mountaintop experiences. Sometimes God leads us to the mountaintop so we can look over on the other side to see where God is leading us. And whether we arrive is not as important as the journey is to get there. Ask Moses. Ask Martin Luther King Jr.

Their fears are dispelled and calmed, as they realize something very special is happening before their eyes, something not to be missed, but something they will treasure as a privilege of witnessing for the rest of their lives. They have been to the mountaintop and they have seen the glory of our God.

However, there's more. Here they are on the mountaintop, and a large cloud overtakes them. The text describes it this way: *"While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.' When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone."* The text says, *They were afraid!*

I would be afraid too. When you are in a pea soup thick fog, you can't see where you are going and what is going on around you. You feel vulnerable. It is terrifying. I have experienced this when I have been driving—I assume you have also—and I have experienced this when hiking out in the Rockies. That was probably more similar to what happened to the disciples this morning. When you enter into a cloud-bank in the higher elevations, it is very fearsome. You are no longer sure of your footing or where you are heading, or even if you're still on the trail. And then there is the possible peril of wild animals looming

in the mists of the cloud, unseen to you. It's like flying through the midst of a cloud on an airplane: you hope the instruments are working right. The disciples were rightly terrified as the text relates. But this was no ordinary cloud. God was in the midst of it.

Now clouds have been a big part of religious experience in our history. They impart a sense of mystery, leading us to consider how much is truly unknown. In some forms of Christian worship, clouds of incense create this sense of mystery. Mystery leaves us with a question mark, instead of with black and white answers. We discover instead a grey like the shading of the clouds themselves. Clouds leaving us with a sense of mystery is a good thing, because it humbles us and makes us realize how little we know and how great God is. I do not control God. I am not God. God lets me in on what God knows my small mind is able to grasp in any given moment, only by God's grace and mercy.

But clouds in the sky have also captured the imagination of believers over the centuries. How many of you realize that our small town of Bolton played a big part in the religious history of our country and our wider Christian Community? In the 1700's, a Congregational clergyperson by the name of the Rev. Jonathan Edwards was looking up at the sky here in Bolton and was overcome by the shape of the clouds and the sunlight coming through them and was himself converted in his thinking and believing. It was here that so called "Great Awakening" took place and began a revival movement. All of this followed from that moment of Edwards with the clouds on a hill in Bolton to move throughout New England, a movement that led thousands to be baptized and become Christians. And all this from a few clouds floating in the air above our humble town. I believe there are markers in stone set up here to commemorate the event, someone told me.

Haven't you ever looked up to the clouds and been amazed by their fascinating shapes and beauty? When I was young I used to look at them and wonder at their beauty and the sense of mystery they portended. It is easy to picture heaven as existing there, especially after viewing some of the pictures I saw in Sunday school showing Jesus walking on clouds. And yet as an adult, I see a beauty in the clouds, especially at a sunset or a sunrise, and I feel close to the God who created this beautiful world, just as Jonathan Edwards did 300 years ago when he went for walks in the woods and gazed up here at the clouds to be close to God.

If I haven't put you to sleep yet, consider the connection of clouds with a great rest. How many mattress manufacturers name their products after clouds? Why? Because the image of clouds imparts a sense of an amazingly comfortable, light as air, peaceful and blissful rest: almost like heaven. Clouds are not the enemy. Their very nature imparts a bliss that removes the cares of this world and all the stress. They transport us to a place of rest, refreshment and restoration. They are like going off on a brief retreat to restore us.

Consider the clouds as you enter this Lent. Let them remove you from the stress and worries you have been experiencing. Let them reveal the beauty of God's creation. Let them lead you to a realization of the reality of God's great mystery. And realize they are harbingers of God's presence to you. Listen carefully in the quiet of their presence. You might hear the voice of God speaking to you as God did with Peter, James and John. Yes even here in Bolton: ask Jonathan Edwards! AMEN

