

Transfiguration Sunday: Hearing Voices in the Clouds – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

One of the questions I would someday like to ask God is “why clouds? Why were you always hiding in a cloud?” I can understand staying on the top of a mountain. Mountains are beautiful. You can see out across the world from the top of a mountain. Now don’t get me wrong. I think clouds can be quite beautiful from a distance, but they can also obstruct our view. They can interrupt blue skies, they can hide the tops of mountains, and as residents of the Midwest like us know too well from this past week, they can also bring with them destruction.

I saw a lot of clouds while we were on our last sabbatical. We lived for a year about two-thirds of the way up a small mountain. Some days we couldn’t see the tops of the mountains around us because there were clouds between the house we rented and the mountain tops. Some days we could see the mountain tops but we couldn’t see the city below us because the clouds had settled lower than our house on the mountain. On a few days the clouds settled at about the same height as our house, and we couldn’t see more than a few feet in our yard. It was on those days that I found it difficult to look out the window. It’s the same way I feel when I’m flying through the clouds in an airplane. No matter how many times I wipe off the window or blink my eyes or squint really hard, my vision never clears. I still can’t see what I want to see—something to reassure me that the plane is headed safely in the right direction or that the world is still in its proper place.

In our Scripture passages today we find God on a mountaintop hiding in and speaking from clouds. Exodus 24 begins the story of Moses meeting God in a cloud on Mt. Sinai for what will be forty days and forty nights. During this time God plans to give Moses the “tablets of stone” with the “law and the commandment” for the people of Israel. God clearly directs this meeting, giving Moses instructions about when he should come up the mountain and who he should bring with him—Joshua and about seventy elders. But it is only Moses who God invites into the cloud, into God’s holiness and majesty.

The last time I hiked up a mountain by myself I got lost in clouds that had settled on the mountaintop. My goal had been to hike across the top of a mountain ridge and descend another nearby mountain, but without a compass in the dense clouds, I kept losing my way and more than once I discovered myself going in circles. I could only see three or four feet in any direction. It was frightening. I wanted to hear God speak to me audibly in a deep voice from the clouds to tell me the direction I should go, but instead all I heard every so often was the clanging of bells around the necks of mountain sheep.

I was only lost in the clouds for a few hours that day, but Moses had to wait several days in the cloud before God spoke to him. Like me, I imagine Moses may have been frightened. The cloud hid God's splendor and glory and added mystery and foreboding to their meeting. It placed God beyond his reach. Moses, like me, may have longed for some assurance that he and the world were still in their proper places. In the cloud all Moses could do was wait in silence for God to act. On the seventh day, God finally "called to Moses out of the cloud." In this passage we don't get the details of what God said or how Moses responded. We only know that God spoke and Moses obeyed. He stayed in God's presence, apart from his community, for "forty days and forty nights" or what seemed like a really long time. If we look beyond chapter 24 in Exodus though, we know that when Moses did finally descend from the mountain his community was in crisis, and he responded in anger by destroying the stone tablets that God had given him to deliver to the Israelites. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday in the season of the church calendar called Epiphany. Since early January we have been on the mountain celebrating God's glory, but with Ash Wednesday this week we will descend from the mountain as Moses had to do and we will enter the foreboding season of Lent. We don't have to think about that too much yet though. In our Exodus passage for today, we only know that Moses met God in the cloud and God spoke to Moses there.

Our other scripture passages for today echo this "voice in the cloud" motif. In fact it's really difficult not to make connections between today's passages. Moses appears in three of them; there are mountains in four, clouds in three, and God speaks in all four. The compilers of the lectionary want us to see some definite patterns here. Psalm 99 alludes to God speaking to Moses "in the pillar of cloud" as the psalmist extols the righteousness and sovereignty of God.

In our epistle and Gospel readings, God speaks words of affirmation from a cloud at Jesus' transfiguration. In Matthew's account, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him, and Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. His face shines and his clothes dazzle. Moses and Elijah then appear and talk with Jesus. Moses and Elijah don't actually do very much in this vision, but their simple presence should remind the apostles and us today of Jesus' connection with a long history, a history that includes Moses' reception of the law from God on Mt. Sinai and Elijah's prophetic tradition. While the transfiguration links Jesus with this ancient heritage, it also provides confirmation of Jesus' identity and a promise of the resurrection to come. God's words of affirmation and instruction from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!", echo back to Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry. In this passage as well as in the earlier baptism accounts, God confirms Jesus as Son and affirms him as teacher. Like Moses, Jesus must also eventually come down the mountain. As he and the apostles do so, Jesus points to his future resurrection as he instructs them to "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Jesus seems to be saying that Peter, James, and John as well as those who hear this story later won't understand its significance until after the cloud of his passion and death has lifted. Some things can only be understood in the light of Easter.

Aren't you a bit jealous of Peter, James, and John? Aren't there times when you want to hear God's audible voice and witness his transfiguring power even if you're only an observer? The author of 2nd Peter claims to have been an "eyewitness" to Jesus' transfiguration. In his words of instruction and perhaps correction for the people to which he writes, he emphasizes "hearing" God's voice "from heaven" bestow "honor and glory" on Jesus when they were together with him on the "holy mountain." The scholars' interpretations that I examined as I studied this passage for today don't seem to agree in their readings of the author's tone and intent here. Is the author correcting his audience for their incorrect interpretations of who Jesus is? Or is he defending himself against accusations that he has "cleverly devised myths"? Do they doubt his true knowledge of the Christ or of Christ's return? Whatever the author's intent here, I understand the difficulty of doubting what you haven't witnessed. Over the past weeks more than once I have wanted to be a mouse in Tunis or Cairo or Alexandria to see firsthand what was transpiring. For Moses who stood in God's presence and Peter, James, and John who witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, seeing was believing. The apostles were filled with fear, but they believed. For the people of Israel who waited anxiously for Moses to return from the cloud with instructions for them from God, the wait was more than they could bear, and they turned back to idolatry. When they finally witnessed the "transfiguration" of Moses face as it is described later in chapter 34 of Exodus, they were afraid and weren't able to look at Moses face to face any longer. So it's understandable to me that the recipients of 2nd Peter might be skeptical as well. If we're honest, don't most of us have moments when we doubt what we haven't heard or seen for ourselves?

Thanks to Ann Zahniser, a few months ago I reread one of my favorite short stories for discussion in our book group—"Parker's Back" by the southern fiction writer Flannery O'Connor. "Parker's Back" literally tells the story of "the back" (this part of the body) of a man named Parker. On a basic level most of O'Connor's characters can be classified as either misfits or religious hypocrites. Parker is in the misfit category. For most of the story you have no sympathy for him. He is an ignorant, selfish man who purchases tattoo after tattoo for his body until the only empty piece of real estate on him is his back. Then one day he is thrown from his tractor as it crashes into a big tree and bursts into flames. This near-death experience changes Parker for what I believe is forever. O'Connor might call it Parker's "moment of grace." He is very visibly thrown out of his "self," and he struggles to find an appropriate way to respond to this grace he has received. In the end Parker chooses to have a large tattoo of "the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes" tattooed on his back. Once this final tattoo of Christ's head is installed on his body, Parker rushes home to show it to his wife. Sarah Ruth considers herself very religious, so Parker is anxious to share this symbol of his new-found faith in God with his wife. When Sarah Ruth sees the tattoo on her husband's back, she growls about him "putting some more trash" on himself. When Parker challenges her to look again and asks her who she sees, Sarah Ruth responds "'It ain't anybody I know.' 'It's him,' Parker said. 'Him who?' 'God!' Parker cried. 'God? God don't look like that!'" Then Sarah Ruth accuses Parker of idolatry and beats the tattooed Christ on his back violently with a broom. As I read this story again a few months ago, what stayed in my mind this time was not Parker's transfiguration, but how Sarah Ruth responded to it. She didn't recognize that Parker had

changed. Sure she saw the visible tattoo on his back, but she didn't recognize the "all-demanding" eyes of her God. Her God couldn't possibly be on her husband's back.

As I think about Parker and Sarah Ruth in light of what our scripture lessons tell us today on Transfiguration Sunday, I wonder how many times I have failed to recognize and acknowledge God's transfiguring power in those around me and in myself. How do I limit God? When haven't I heard God's voice in the cloud? Whose transfiguration have I denied? Today as we celebrate Transfiguration Sunday and begin Lent on Wednesday, let's watch for God's transforming power at work in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Let's remember this great paradox of our faith: in Christ's suffering and death we also find life and glory, darkness and light. The Transfiguration gives us hope—hope in the resurrection, hope in life now, hope in life to come. Amen.