

# *Clouds of Glory*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
the Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet

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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>5</sup>While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But

Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”<sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

#### Exodus 24:12-18

<sup>12</sup>The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”<sup>13</sup> So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God.<sup>14</sup> To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”<sup>15</sup> Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain.<sup>16</sup> The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud.<sup>17</sup> Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.<sup>18</sup> Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

I have noticed something that I do not remember experiencing with such intensity among so many different people at the same time before. It comes up in conversation about all manner of things - whether it be the evening news, or stories shared about the stress people feel, or even the weather. It seems I cannot walk across the campus of this church, or go to a casual, friendly gathering, or talk to a friend on the phone without this intense feeling coming up in some way or another.

It seems to have invaded so many arenas of life: from work, to home, to the ministry of the church, to conversations about what is going on in the community and in the world. And while it is expressed in various ways, what I am talking about is – the sense of being *overwhelmed*. I cannot tell you how many people have told me recently that they cannot watch the news anymore, because so much is coming at us, new everyday. It's overwhelming. The church keeps pouring resources into doing good and yet – in the city and among our global mission partners – there is so much need, we can seem barely to make a dent in it anymore. It's overwhelming.

This early arrival of spring weather has become cause for concern, triggering fears either of global warming, or memories of huge snow storms that came before in March, and might come again and kill every bloom. Even this week's discovery of seven potentially life-supporting planets revolving around a distant star, sparked a conversation about stress – when a preacher friend of mine suggested that maybe God is way out there for a while, hovering over another earth and thereby doesn't have time just now to create order out of our earthly chaos.

People are overwhelmed; overwhelmed by the persistent signs of division in our country, overwhelmed by the uncertainty our international relations, overwhelmed by the demands of home and work, overwhelmed with concern for another, you name it.

I have a good friend with whom I keep up by periodic long distance phone calls, and her whole life has become overwhelming. She is dealing with an aging parent in decline, and an adult child who is in a really bad place. She needs to make a vocational shift

and is trying to figure out the finances. On top of all of that, which would be plenty enough for anyone to bear all at once, she has also been diagnosed with an odd autoimmune illness, which has a name, but not a clear treatment protocol until it progresses a little further. So she stands at a kind of cross roads, wanting to move forward but not knowing which path to take. When I asked her, “how on earth are you coping with all of this?” she said “I feel like I am in a cloud, like I am driving through a very heavy fog...I have no idea what the long view looks like. All I can do is take it very slowly and pay attention to the thing that is right in front of me at any given moment.”

I would hazard to guess that, if not now, at one time or another, all of us know what that feels like, of being completely overwhelmed. And most of us, I imagine, can relate to my friend’s description of driving through a dense fog; when you can barely see a few feet in front of the car, when all you can focus on is what is fight in front of you, the taillights of the car ahead, or the lines down the center of the road, or the flashing sign at the mountain pass that says “dense fog ahead” as if you had to be told!

Maybe, just maybe, this universal human feeling of being overwhelmed, as if surrounded by fog, is precisely why God often appears in the clouds. Because when we are in a cloud, when our visibility is very limited, God can appear to us so that we see only what is right in front of us, what is most important, what is life-saving even, and what will help us navigate on the far side when the cloud goes away.

Both of our scripture readings are pivotal moments of God appearing in a thick cloud. Moses goes up the mountain and God comes down; the text tells us “the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai.” Glory is a word of many meanings; fame, honor, beauty, distinction, splendor. In Hebrew it means weight and importance, and when it is a word applied to God, it means presence, it describes God’s *weighty importance* revealed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Achtemeier, ed., *Harpers Bible Dictionary*, p. 349.

To say that the Glory of the Lord was on the mountain means that the full presence of God was there. Moses entered the cloud when he was overwhelmed. He had led his people out of slavery in Egypt, they had been wandering in the wilderness, complaining there wasn't enough food, not enough water, and they had no idea where they were going. *Even slavery in Egypt was better than this!* they complained. God called Moses up into the cloud, so that he could not see the people down below, or hear all their grumbling and discontent, and he could focus solely on God, and attend to God's instruction for their next steps.

So too, Peter, James and John were overwhelmed. Jesus had just told them that he was heading toward terrible suffering and death, followed by some confusing notion about being *raised from the dead*. What were they to make of that? They had left everything to follow Jesus with bright hope, and now he was talking about their following him down a path of doom and gloom. There was no way they could see all of that, and take it all in, and make sense of it for themselves.

So Jesus takes them up the mountain, and a cloud descends so that they can see only the thing that is right in front of them. And what they see is Jesus himself, shining like the sun, revealing the presence of God in a moment of such splendor that it outshone everything else. They are enveloped in the glory of God. The great God of all creation, who once appeared in the fiery cloud to Moses, and who swept up the prophet Elijah in a cloud, is there on the mountain of Transfiguration. God's glory is revealed in Jesus himself. And then shrouded in a cloud so thick it is hard to imagine what might lie ahead, or how they would navigate their way forward, a most amazing and tender little thing takes place. Matthew says: *Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."* Jesus, who embodies the glory of God in his person, placed a hand on their shoulders, and he said to them, "Get up and do not be afraid."

In our seasons of being so overwhelmed that we cannot see the way forward, that is how God comes to us. As one biblical commentator writes: "God comes to us not simply in the brilliant

cloud of mystery, not only in a voice thundering from heaven, but also in a human hand laid upon a shoulder. God comes to us quietly, gently, that we may draw near and not be afraid. God's glory is majestic and so far beyond our capacity to receive it that we can take just as much of God's glory as a human hand can hold... God's glory and magnificence are surpassed by God's willingness to shed them all in order that we might finally recognize God's love and gentleness. The measureless power that made the heavens and the earth concentrates in a hand reaching out to us.”<sup>2</sup>

A hand on the shoulder and voice that says, “Do not be afraid,” may not feel like enough right now, in whatever it is that feels so overwhelming. But I wonder if we block out everything else for a moment, and pay attention to that hand, and that touch, and the gentleness of a voice that is saying – there is something good out there beyond this overwhelming cloud that is so much greater than what we fear. Then maybe, it will be enough for now. Maybe it can be enough for now.

In a few minutes, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper. A hand will reach out and offer you a piece of bread, and a sip from a cup, small, visible things that are right in front of us to remind us of a presence that is close up, tender, gentle, and powerful, far beyond the clouds. Remember what Augustine said when he presided at the Communion Table some fifteen hundred years ago: “Receive who you are. Become what you have received.”<sup>3</sup>

Receive and become the touch of Christ. Amid all that overwhelms us, we receive from God's hand, and are invited not to fear. “Receive who you are. Become what you have received.”

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick Willson, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 1*.

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, *Lectionary Reflections*, 2/20/11.