

Date: February 6, 2005

SUNDAY: Transfiguration

SERMON: Clouded Glory

Text(s): Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

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I didn't know cold snowy winters could be so bright and sunny until we moved to Maine. We had lots of cold and snow in western Pennsylvania when I was growing up, but not as much sun. In New Jersey, we had winters that were cold, snowy and very rainy, but not very much sun. In Paris, from November to mid-March, we just had cold and rain and no sun at all. Sometimes, the gray stone of the buildings and the gray, overcast cloud-cover made it seem that we lived in a monochromatic world. We just got used to living in the clouds most of the winter.

Clouds are so much a part of the experience of just about everyone who doesn't live in a desert, that our language is full of metaphorical expressions built around them. Usually, these metaphors convey the notion of obscurity or dread. We speak of "clouds of doubt" or "clouds of war" which call to mind the obscurity of heavy overcast or the sometimes menacing clouds of an approaching storm. Someone who is suspected of wrongdoing is said to be "under a cloud."

Clouds "cloud the issue." We see that cloudiness in both of our lessons this morning. Matthew's telling of the story that we have come to commonly call the Transfiguration of Christ is influenced by his reading of our Old Testament lesson about the encounter with God that Moses had on Mt. Sinai, and that's why the framers of our lectionary have put these two texts together. Both stories rely on the imagery of clouds to describe the revelation of the glory of God. In both stories, there is the appearance of a cloud that both obscures and illuminates.

Why does Matthew tell us this story about Jesus' disciples and their befuddlement at a vision inside a cloud on the mountain? From its

immediate context, we get some important clues. Just before this story, Matthew shows us Jesus predicting of his own death and saying to his disciples that if they will have faith, they will see the kingdom of God come in power. Immediately following the vision, Jesus commands that they are to tell no one about it until after he is raised from the dead. This lets us know that Matthew understands this story of a vision in the clouds to be connected to Jesus' death and resurrection. It testifies to Jesus' ability to deliver his followers from their own fear of death. Even within the story itself, when his disciples fall on the ground in fear and awe, Jesus comes to them and says, "*Get up, and do not be afraid.*" Though the term "get up" sounds ordinary enough, in reality, it is the same term that is most commonly used in the New Testament for resurrection from the dead.

So the Transfiguration story seems to be, among other things, an answer to questions that people both inside and outside of Matthew's community were asking, "Well, if Jesus is God's Messiah, his anointed Savior of the people, why was he crucified?" "How can a dead man on a cross be the deliverer of anyone?" "How could God's anointed be overwhelmed by such an evil fate?" The even deeper question, of course, is where was God while all this was happening? If Jesus is who Matthew and his community affirm that he is, what does his crucifixion say about God's presence and power? Is God powerless to prevent such evil? It's an old and persistent question, isn't it?

Behind and in the disaster of Jesus' crucifixion, Matthew is saying, God was at work to create new life from the dead. The Transfiguration story gives us a glimpse of that sunlight behind the clouds, as it were, to let Jesus' disciples and us know that just as God did not abandon Jesus to death, so God will not abandon us either.

I suspect that I'm not alone in feeling that I spend most of my life in the gray clouds of doubt and confusion and inexplicable circumstances. God's will and God's presence is

no more apparent to us most of the time than it was to those early Christians struggling to make sense of Jesus' violent and untimely death. God's ability to deal with the problem of evil is not readily observable, is it? From our perspective, it more often looks like the bad guys are winning than the good guys. We do not live in a safe world. We live in a world where both human and random evil can and does strike, as we have had so graphically reinforced for us in the recent tsunamis in Asia and in the suicide bombings in Iraq. It is not obvious that God loves us and has our best interests at heart, and sometimes it's very difficult to believe that. This world that we live in is like Paris in February; it's very gray.

Nor have there been many times in my life when I felt really certain about what God wanted of me or felt that I understood the meaning of events while I was living through them. I suppose that the reason I feel such discomfort around those in the Religious Right who seem to be so certain that they perfectly understand God's will, not only for themselves, but for everyone else in America and the world as well, is that I've rarely felt that way myself. I'm never even quite sure how to respond when someone says, "Well I prayed about such and such, and the Lord told me that this is what I should do." Perhaps I'm just a bit thicker than other people, or maybe I'm hard of hearing, but it's never worked that way for me or been that easy. I find that I'm still working out the meaning of events and circumstances long after the fact. And as for prayer, well, I often feel like I'm inside a cloud when I'm praying, and sometimes it's only after months of prayer and cloudiness and seeking the counsel of others and acting on blind faith that I sometimes, and only sometimes, glimpse the outlines of the thing I'm seeking to understand. My sympathies are all with those three befuddled disciples in this story. They've had a vision, but what does it mean?

I take comfort from the writings of other Christians down through the centuries who have

also spoken of the cloudiness in which we live most of the time. One of the great classics of Christian spirituality, entitled *The Cloud of Unknowing*, was written by an anonymous English monk of the 14th century. He speaks of a "cloud of unknowing" above us where God dwells in obscure glory, hidden from our direct knowledge, and of a "cloud of forgetting" below us where we need to consign all our actions and our sins and our failures and even all our images and preconceptions about God. The work of prayer, he says, is the work of beating against the cloud of unknowing above us with love, pure love for God, pure trust in God, and that it is only as we batter against that cloud with love, that we ultimately penetrate the obscurity and catch a glimpse of the glory within. Faith, it seems, is trusting God even in the darkness of the clouds, and any glimpses we may get of God's glory or God's presence are glimpses that are themselves obscure and not always consoling, and often, as in the case of the disciples, unsettling.

Faith of this sort is not a certainty born of logic or a conclusion drawn from facts and evidence. Faith is essentially trust. Faith involves risk. It is not those who accept the cynicism of the world as normal who are given the glimpse of the possibility of new life, but those who dare to trust in God's goodness and power and love, even when God seems to be conspicuous by his absence. It's the attitude of Job, in the Old Testament, when in the face of inexplicable disasters, he is tempted to denounce God altogether, says, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." Dag Hammarskjöld, perhaps the greatest of all Secretary Generals of the United Nations, and a great Christian as well, understood this sort of dark faith. He wrote in his journal *Markings*, "We act in faith, and then miracles occur. The miracles don't create faith. Faith *is*, faith creates its own reality."

One of those who taught me the most about such faith in the midst of the clouds was a young Chinese woman who was the president of

our youth group during our years in Malaysia. Her name was Mary Foo, and during our years there, we became close friends. Mary was a very gifted young woman, as well as a person who was developing a very strong faith. She got her university degree in English literature and returned to our state of Sarawak to become a leader in the state department of education.

A couple of years after we returned to the U. S., she told us that she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was 28 at the time. She had a mastectomy and the usual courses of radiation and chemotherapy afterward, and for the next ten years, she waged a heroic battle against this killer disease.

During all this ordeal, Mary's faith was tested to the limits; periods of remission would raise her hopes, and then the discovery of more tumors would dash them again. In her letters, she acknowledged that at times she was very angry at God for the injustice of it all, times when she came close to falling into despair and giving up believing in God altogether. Her letters charted the course of a faith that was severely tested, but which deepening and maturing in the darkness in ways we could hardly imagine. She learned during that struggle a great deal about where and how to look for the glimpses, not of God's absence— those were all too visible— but of God's presence, God's glory.

One of those glimpses came about a year before she finally lost her battle with cancer. One of the things she had been longing for was the chance to come to the U. S. to visit Carol and me, to have the chance to talk and to say goodbye. But financially, this was out of the question. Back then, in the late 80's air tickets from Malaysia to the U.S. were very expensive, especially for someone on a Malaysian civil service salary. Almost out of nowhere one day, a woman she hardly knew approached her and asked her if she would be willing to accompany the woman's 12-year old son to the United States to visit his father. In return, she would pay

Mary's round-trip air fare. So during one of the brief periods of remission in between bouts of chemotherapy, she came to see us. Mary, having lived in the tropics all her life, had never seen snow, and one of her regrets was that she would die without having seen it. Even though it rarely ever snows in New Jersey in November, that year, on Thanksgiving Day, while she was with us, we had a very heavy snowfall, and Mary got to go outside and make a snowman, and have a snowball fight with our daughters. For her, those were glimpses, however fleeting and mysterious, that behind the clouds, the sun was shining. During that visit, we spent long hours talking together. Yet in the midst of our own sadness and leave-taking, we were conscious of a very deep and profound sense of joy, and that joy, too, was a sign to us that God was mysteriously present and at work.

Mary's faith was that God had some meaning for her life despite her losing battle with cancer. And through her persistent faith, she found that meaning. During her last year of life, she was invited to spoke to many church groups and groups of colleagues in the Education Department about her experience with cancer and about the spiritual struggle she was going through. She also organized support groups for women with cancer, which was something new in that area of the world. We heard from other friends what an impact she had all over the city, particularly on other women, as people learned of how her faith in God was giving her the ability to face her own life and death and find the ultimate meaning of her life in her battle with cancer. Not only her own church, but numerous other churches in the city were profoundly revived and strengthened by her example and witness.

When her ten-year long battle finally came to an end, a young man who had also been in our youth group, telephoned us from Sarawak with the news. A few weeks later, I received a letter from Mary's youngest sister May Ling, whom I had baptized and confirmed. I want to

read you a bit from her letter, because it speaks to me so eloquently of what it means to be a Christian in the clouds.

Mary had known that her time was near during Christmas. She had arranged her memorial service to be a celebration of life. She wrote and arranged the whole thing herself. The service was very meaningful and touching. Hundreds of friends and relatives packed Trinity Church. It was a real testimony to those who were not believers. She had instructed that her casket be carried out while we sang "Praise God, Praise God" to the tune of "Amazing Grace," because, as she said, her life was a life of praise to our Heavenly Father.

Although as a family, we grieve and miss her tremendously, we praise God that He has given us great peace . . . As her epitaph we're using Philippians 1: 21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." These were her last words, and the testimony of her life.

That, my friends, is the story of someone who has been on the Mount of Transfiguration, who has lived in the obscurity and darkness of the cloud, and yet, by faith, has caught a glimpse of what C. S. Lewis calls, "the light from behind the sun." That kind of life-affirming faith is possible for us as well. If we will trust enough to let go of the earth, to let go of our fears, our cynicism, our resentments, our compulsions, and our ambitions, and commit ourselves to following and listening to the One who has "walked this lonesome valley" ahead of us, then we too may glimpse the radiance of the glory of God, the glory that will transfigure our own lives and allow us to live in hope.