

“I’ve Looked at Clouds that Way”

When I was attending graduate school at Cornell, about one weekend a month, I returned to Baltimore. It was usually on my journey back to Ithaca that I would drive a long stretch of road that was enrobed in fog. It would start somewhere north of Frackville when Interstate 81 climbed up into the mountains. Soon, the road was treacherous. As frightening as it was, it was foolish to pull over on the shoulder. That just made you vulnerable to someone who was also blinded by the fog. It was best to find a tractor-trailer to follow. Their rear lights were bright enough to see. I figured they knew the road better than I, and that their headlights were more powerful than mine. I made it safely every time, but I am sure it took years off my life.

On other trips, the fog was spotty. It would come and go. I imagine that is what it is like piloting a plane through the clouds. One moment you can see clearly, and the next you have no idea what is ahead of you. Going in and out of the fog on Interstate 81 was just as nerve-racking as being in the solid cloud of fog. Whether you are blinded continually or just for minutes at a time, there is also no knowing what is ahead.

Fogbanks and clouds have that way about them. They take away our sight and our sense of what surrounds us. Even the dark of night lets some light in. Fog and cloud can obscure everything until it is too late. That is one reason that it frightens us.

Think of the reaction of the Hebrews at the base of Mt. Sinai in today’s reading from Exodus. The cloud surrounding the pinnacle of the mountain leaves them wondering what is up there. The narrator writes, “cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day, [God] called to Moses out of the cloud. 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. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.”

First, there is the mystery of the cloud-covered mountain. The glory of the Lord, the Kavod (כבוד), has settled on the mountain within the cloud. Now the people can see the Kavod/Glory of the Lord, and it is like a devouring fire. After six days (as in the six days of creation), Moses is called onto the mountain top and stays forty days and nights (remember Noah and the Ark). We have two numerical hints of completeness that are used throughout the Bible. That is the seven-day week and the forty-day sojourn. Plus, is it any surprise that after Moses goes up into the fire that is the Kavod of God and does not come back for forty days, the people give up on him ever returning? It seems like God may have carried Moses away.

Compare the Exodus passage to the Matthew passage. Before we begin the comparison, ask yourselves what do we know about Matthew’s agenda as he writes his Gospel? More specifically, who does he want us to see when we experience Jesus? He wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses. That is why we had Herod killing the boys in Bethlehem, like Pharaoh killed the Hebrew boys in Egypt. Or why the Holy Family goes to Egypt so he can come up out of Egypt like Moses. Or why he goes on a mountain to give the Beatitudes like Moses gave the Ten Commandments.

This time, Jesus goes up a mountain and is transfigured. Which is also a nod to Moses, whose face glowed when he came down from Mt. Sinai. The people complained so much that he had to wear a veil so that people could look at him.

Jesus does not meet God on the mountain; he meets Moses and Elijah. Why are these two figures important? Here is a question for you: What do these two figures symbolize? [listen for Old Testament, prophecy, ancient law, ancient tradition, proto-prophet, and great prophet, at the Passover seders, a chair is left open and the door cracked so that Elijah may enter and sit]. Jesus is seen consorting with these two great and revered men of Judaism. The disciples are meant to see this and understand this meeting as the passing of knowledge and prophecy from Moses and Elijah to Jesus.

Not only does this passing of knowledge happen, but something else important. A voice comes out of the cloud that has enshrouded the mountain top, and what does the voice say? “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” Where have we heard that before in this Gospel? When Jesus comes up out of the water after he is baptized by John. However, there is a significant difference between the two scenes. At his baptism, only Jesus hears God say those words. This time, the disciples hear it too. Additionally, God tacks on a phrase. God instructs the disciples to “listen to him!” He is my beloved son; pay attention to what he says.

Clouds are everywhere in today’s readings. They provide cover. They conceal God’s glory. They cause people to be afraid. They project voices. Like Joni Mitchell wrote

“I’ve looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down, and still somehow
It’s cloud illusions I recall
I really don’t know clouds at all.”

We have seen clouds do different things in these readings. God’s use for them provides mystery but also reveals glory. The glory of God, God’s *Kavod*, is sometimes revealed and sometimes concealed. Like the Hebrews at Sinai, there is the understanding that too much exposure to God’s glory is overwhelming for a human. We cannot take it in except in tiny doses.

Thus, God reveals the divine self-selectively. Those are the mountain-top experiences that we take down into ordinary life to sustain us and get us through the tough times between revelations. It is the essential spiritual nourishment that Jesus told the woman at the well that once we drank it, we would thirst no more. And the bread that he would give us would fill us up so that we would hunger no more.

A friend told me recently that when she was a child, she used to lie on her back on the golf course and look at the clouds. As she mused, the clouds blocked the sun. Then, when they opened up again, she found clarity; the solution she was seeking had been revealed. So, it goes as we seek answers in our lives. Sometimes the clouds conceal, and sometimes they reveal.

The clouds have two sides, if you will. Look into God’s cloud to see what is being prepared for you. Is it to receive commandments or a new vision? Is it to hear a revelation? Take time to breathe and muse as my friend did in her youth. There is

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more in the clouds than angel hair, ice cream castles, and illusion. Indeed, there could be where you will find God.