

Homily Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 14, 2021

(Mark 9:2-8)

This is without question my favorite scene in the entire New Testament.

There are of course *many* powerful and emotional moments throughout the gospels, epistles and other writings, each of which undoubtedly resonates with different individuals in many varied and wonderful ways. Along those lines, let me be clear: I'm not discounting other powerful moments – the glory of the resurrection on which our entire faith is built, for instance, or the power of Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, or the incredible gift of thousands being fed with just a few fish and loaves of bread, or the inherent love in the many healings and miracles performed.

I simply want to begin this morning by saying that *this* mountaintop moment shared by Peter, James and John with Jesus is *my personal favorite*.

In reading it this time, however, something different rose to the surface and captured my attention. In many previous encounters with this passage it's been other things I noticed: the incredible brightness; the appearance of Moses and Elijah; the voice of God; Peter's desire to commemorate the event by building shelters so that the moment could continue. This time, it was something I found I've almost entirely overlooked.

*The cloud.*

As quickly as the three disciples – and by placing ourselves in the scene, each one of us – is given a glimpse of the total glory of Jesus, that glimpse is just as quickly obscured by the cloud that overshadowed them. Imagine for a moment that you're standing in front of a set of heavy drapes hanging at a window, and someone pulls them back just long enough for you to catch a glimpse of a brilliant sunny day outside. Then, just as quickly, the drapes are closed. In a sense that is what Peter, James and John experienced in this moment with Jesus: the veil dividing heaven and earth pulled back for the briefest of moments before being closed once again. But instead of a veil or drapes, their sight is obscured by *this cloud*.

For the earliest followers of Jesus, those who would have known the texts of the Old Testament quite well, the appearance of the cloud would have been a clear sign to them – something they recognized even before the voice of God spoke to the disciples. There are two ways in which they might have seen the significance of the cloud in this passage. On one hand there is the importance of clouds to a people who lived in a largely agrarian society. John Donahue and Daniel Harrington have noted that “In an area such as the Holy Land where much of life depends on the regular cycle of rains from October to April, the cloud was a symbol of life and hope.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond that, though, there is a deeper theological meaning to the presence of a cloud. As the scholar James Brooks wrote in his commentary on Mark, clouds are signs of God's presence, protection and authority in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark*, p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> James A. Brooks. *The New American Commentary, Vol. 23: Mark*, p. 143.

There's a word from rabbinic literature, *shekhinah*, that means the presence of God in this world ... the presence of God settling ... a revelation of the holiness of God. *Shekhinah* does not appear anywhere in the Bible, found instead in the commentaries and stories of the Talmud and Midrash. Even without being mentioned in our text though its meaning serves as the very foundation of this scene.

*Shekhinah*. God among us. The cloud.

When considering the presence of Moses in this moment of transfiguration, and indeed in considering Jesus as the embodiment of the Law received by Moses, it's particularly helpful to consider the presence of God in clouds in the Exodus narrative. Listen as I share just a few of these times, moments when the presence of God was made known in a cloud:

- “The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and night.”<sup>3</sup>
- “And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.”<sup>4</sup>
- “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.’”<sup>5</sup>
- “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.”<sup>6</sup>
- “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the 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 he called to Moses out of the cloud.”<sup>7</sup>
- “When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses.”<sup>8</sup>

Clouds in moments of exclamation and moments of conversation. Clouds in times of fear and times of awe. In each instance, these clouds prefaced moments of wonder ... moments of revelation. *Shekhinah*. God among us.

Living here in the middle of this beautiful farmland, we share something with those followers of Jesus from 2,000 years ago. In the critical months of growing season, clouds herald rain ... they preface new growth ... they herald new life springing from the earth. Bright white clouds can bring us moments of joy and wonder. On a deeper emotional and spiritual level, however, dark clouds can mean something else. They can be symbolic of difficult times or representative of grief. Dark clouds might reflect moments of darkness in our lives. Dark clouds might represent our own inner discomfort and storminess or that in the lives of those we love.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 13:21 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 16:10 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:9 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:16 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 24:15-16 (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 33:9 (NRSV).

Many prefer to fly when the sky is cloudless, for clouds mean turbulence. Many times we climb mountains – much as the disciples did on that day with Jesus – only to find that their view of the valleys and rivers below are obscured by clouds. In the words of Shakespeare from one of my favorite plays, spiritual and emotional turmoil might feel like “all the clouds that lowered upon our house.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, dark clouds may seem to obscure from our eyes the very God we are yearning to see.

But what if we were to take this morning’s Gospel reading and shift our view of clouds; how might that feel? Think about *shekhinah* ... the presence of God ... the revelation of God. Hold to that, and consider that the dark clouds we might think block God from our sight may actually be God moving into our sight. Consider that the presence of clouds might not be something preventing revelation but instead delivering something new to us. Consider that in those moments when life and circumstances are bringing the most noise into our lives ... those moments when we feel like we don’t hear God ... the clouds are in fact bringing the voice of God to us. Consider that the clouds in those moments when things may seem to be the least clear to us are in fact the moments of the greatest clarity when we discover that God is right there with us.

When you may feel like the clouds of this world are making you an exile in your own life, think of God in the clouds: the cloud who led the Israelites through the desert by day; the cloud standing at the door of the tent enabling Moses to speak with God and the one that enshrouded him on the top of Sinai; the cloud revealing the glory of the Lord. Remember the words of God speaking to Peter, James and John out of the cloud, telling them to listen to Jesus.

Don’t be afraid of the clouds in your life, for within them you will find God.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Opening monologue of the Duke of Gloucester (1.1). *The Pelican Shakespeare: Richard III*, p. 5.