

“I Believe In(side) the Clouds”

Luke 9:28-36

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I’ve lived in quite a few states in my young life. Born in the state of Ohio, moved to the state of New Jersey, and then back to Ohio. Lived in the states of Georgia, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota. I’ve traveled, I believe, to 44 states. I think I’m only lacking the states of Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, Colorado, Nevada, and Arizona. But the state I’ve spent the most time in, as perhaps have many of you, is the perpetually nearby state of confusion. I’ve been to a lot of state capitals too, usually the headquarters of confusion, but the state of confusion is the only one with a moveable capital, and I’m beginning to worry that no matter where I go, I always seem to be in it!

Turns out that the state of confusion was also lurking around in Biblical times, and God’s people were frequently residents in or travelers through it. Today’s stories about the shining face of Moses and of the Transfiguration of Jesus are part of the evidence. In Luke’s story, we too get a little confused when Peter, James, and John are invited by Jesus to go on a little prayer retreat up the mountain. Whether the disciples were on the verge of sleep because they were tired from climbing the mountain, or because it was night, we’ll never know. How they could have seen Jesus’ face and clothes shine so brightly during the day, or

experienced the cloud if it was night, we'll never know. But that the poor disciples spent some time in the state of confusion that day is crystal clear.

Before we dwell further on the disciples' confusion, let's clear up what we can about this story Luke has told us. It takes place just before the pivotal point in Luke's Gospel, the moment when Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem," in other words, when he began his rendezvous with his destiny, the Passion. Though there are a couple of little healing stories between this story of the Transfiguration and that major turning point in the Gospel, it seems clear that Luke is using Jesus' mountaintop experience with Moses, Elijah, and three of the disciples, to declare that Jesus is now fully prepared to do what he needs to do. You see, Jesus' transfiguration is a bookend to his baptism. What was revealed to Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, in good, second person, direct address language at the baptism, "*You* are my Son, the Beloved," has become the proclamatory, third person statement aimed at the disciples, "*This* is my Son, the Chosen (or the Beloved)," and adding, "Listen to him." Jesus has made his own claim to be the bringer of God's reign, going back to that scene in the synagogue where he shares his mission statement, and now it is confirmed by a voice in a cloud. He's ready, and the disciples are instructed to get with the program; they are to listen when he says he will "be killed and on the third day be raised" which he has told them eight days earlier and which he will tell them again soon.

This is a lot clearer to us with hindsight, of course, but the disciples had no such luxury during their day traveling through the state of confusion. Beyond the very unusual series of events, things that don't happen to you every day, there are a number of confusing elements, a few mixed signals. One of the most interesting is about time and history. The message that seems to come through is that the past is important, symbolized by Moses and Elijah, heroes of the faith. But at the same time, there's a message that says you can't stay there, symbolized by the rejection of Peter's idea of capturing and preserving the moment with his little booth building project. There is a sense of the value of the present, symbolized by the need for the disciples to stay awake, so as not to miss the revelation of God. But at the same time, the present is always becoming the past, symbolized by Jesus being found alone, the ancients gone, when the cloud passes by. And of course, there is an importance placed on the future, represented by Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus about his own future, his "departure," as it is called. And yet the future is hard to comprehend, as the disciples find when they are not able or willing to tell anyone about what happened.

When you put all that together, it seems to suggest the following about living in the state of confusion: Honor the past but don't live in it. Enjoy the present but don't think that's all there is. Hope in the future even when it's hard to see. Repeat after me:

In addition to time and history, there is the confusion of the mixed media of the natural world in the story, the dazzling whiteness of Jesus and the dark coverage of the cloud from which the voice of God speaks. When the disciples saw the transfigured Jesus, everything seemed clear, it all made sense, it all fit. But then when Peter takes action, he finds that the situation is murkier than he has given it credit for. And when he and the disciples are thrown into real terror and confusion, as they are overshadowed by the cloud, they are given an unmistakably *clear* message about Jesus' relationship with God. It's no wonder they didn't tell anyone about anything!

As confused as the disciples must have been, we certainly cannot fault them for acting the way they did. Hey, when you happen upon what seems like perfection, what makes the world make sense, it is only natural to want to hold onto it. After all, it's perfect. How much better could it get? Maybe it was an age at which you feel you peaked. Maybe it was the moment just when your hairline began to recede and you knew you'd never look that good again. Maybe it was a sense of peace and tranquility you'd never known before. Maybe it was another person who complemented you so perfectly. Maybe it was a job that matched your skills effortlessly. Maybe it was a mountaintop religious experience so powerful it was lifechanging. Maybe it was a church family that truly reflected the body of Christ. Maybe it was a place of such brilliant beauty that you never wanted to leave. Whatever it was that was perfect, and I hope each of you has experienced

something like that in your life at least once, whatever it was, it may have tempted you to try to hold onto it, to make it last, to keep it perfect and unchanging, and you may have tried, but how many of you ever succeeded? Since there may be only a few of you who have not yet read “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” or seen the movie, I will not have to explain the entire story to remind you of how Harry found the magic mirror that showed him what he longed for the most, the living image of his dead parents, and that he sat there for days until Professor Dumbledore moved it to another part of the castle with the reminder that greater men than Harry Potter had gone mad in front of that mirror, unable to tear themselves away.

We live in the state of confusion all the time. Sometimes when things seem clear, we find ourselves confused, even led astray. And sometimes when we are confused and confounded, as if in a cloud, God speaks to us and makes all things clear! It can be a maddening way to live. But that is where faith comes in. The trick to faith is, on one hand, raising our level of skepticism about our own experience of the glory of the Lord, that is, not dwelling overmuch on our powerful experiences of God, and on the other, lowering our level of fear of being in the cloud, that is, trusting that God is leading us even when our way seems directionless. We need to make sure we can live in the valley as well as the mountaintop, to have our spiritual trees planted near streams of living water. Maybe you’ve come across the words of that famous inscription found on a cellar

wall in a place where Jews who ultimately perished hid in France during World War Two, words which I think get to the heart of believing in the state of confusion: “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when he is silent.” Listen again to these words written by people holding their breath for the day of discovery they hoped would never come. “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when not feeling it. I believe in God even when he is silent.” For this anonymous poet, to see the light of day and to hear the words of the Torah, as perfect as he or she knew them to be, were a death sentence. In a darkened cellar, as terrifying as it must have been, was, we hope, salvation and the perseverance of faith.

You will remember that one of the messages of this passage speaks to a faithful understanding of time and history. Honor the past but don't live in it. Enjoy the present but don't think that's all there is. Hope in the future even if you can't see it. In all these things, we are called to do as the disciples were told that day or night on the mountain: “This is my Son: listen to him.” It will be the voice of Christ that helps us to honor the past without living it, who helps us to celebrate our accomplishments and history as a church or to remember our spiritual birthdays, or to say again the creeds of our ancestors in the faith, but it will be the same voice of Christ who calls us to go beyond what we have experienced as the spiritual high points of our lives or the dazzling experiences of the divine, to live in

the present and to meet contemporary needs and to greet each new day's possibilities with open arms.

It will be by listening to the voice of Christ that we will be able to enjoy the present without thinking that is all there is. There are some Christians who work as if there were no tomorrow and often fail to appreciate the wonderful gifts God gives us each day. There are others who are in such a great hurry to get to heaven that they don't see it all around them. There are others who are so busy planning for tomorrow that it arrives before they know it and they are stuck with regret at not having lived the life God put before them. But even as much as our salvation is for the here and now, it is also for the future. And as good as this world and our lives may be, there is always more, better, and deeper, not for the sake of more, better, and deeper in and of themselves, but because God desires for us a fuller relationship with God and with one another. I don't know about you but even though I experience God's love and grace, I can always do with more, better, and deeper where those divine attributes are concerned. The same grace that allows us to rest comfortably in the present, knowing we are loved impels us to seek it for others and for the future.

There are, of course, times when we need to follow Christ's voice into a future we cannot clearly see, a future of uncertainty in our personal lives, our church, our community, our culture. God may have a fully formed, 3D plan but we can only see around one corner at a time. But the good news of the Gospel is that

Jesus Christ is always a few steps ahead of us, calling to us like the sheep that know the shepherd's voice. God didn't put the pillars of cloud and fire behind the Israelites as they escaped Egypt and Christ didn't send us anywhere he wouldn't go himself first. No, the pillar of fire went before the Israelites, leading them, and Christ touched so-called unclean people before he asked us to do so, and spoke the truth to power before he asked us to, and died for the reign of God before any of his disciples. In First John, it says that God is love and that is true enough, but God is also hope. In the same book it says that no one has ever seen God and that is true enough but that hasn't stopped us from believing in God. We may not always be able to see hope, but it's worth believing in.

I imagine the disciples were a little quiet after coming down from the mountain because they were try to come to terms with the creative tension of what they learned on the mountaintop. It would be nice to live comfortably with God all the time, but we usually only get that luxury for short time, and we should probably thank God for that really. I'm not sure we'd really want to that comfy. Our ongoing challenge, my friends, is to have faith both in those moments of absolute clarity *and* while we are inside the clouds of confusion, when we can't see where we are going. May we all have more experiences in the sheer presence of God's glory, but may we also become comfortable with living in the state of confusion no matter what state of the union we reside in. Amen.