Sermon – In the Clouds
Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2025
Scripture – Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36
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On this Transfiguration Sunday, our first scripture reading is Exodus 34:29-35. Five times Moses ascends and descends the mountain in the Exodus story and today's reading is his final journey. The Ten Commandments have been given by God, broken by the people, and given again. Moses' encounter with God in the clouds is so powerful his face is radiant, so much so that the people are afraid of him. Following Moses descend, he leads the Hebrews on a 40-year sojourn through the wilderness to the Promised Land. As the church begins Lent this Wednesday commemorating the number of years the Israelites journeyed and the number of days Christ spent in the wilderness, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God in the face of Moses. Hear now God's word to us.

29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. 32 Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. 33 When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; 34 but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with God, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, 35 the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with God. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Luke 9:28-36. On this last Sunday before the season of Lent when the church remembers Jesus' suffering and death, the story of the transfiguration is a pledge to God's commitment to resurrection, to the promise that the various roads to Jerusalem that faithful disciples take will lead to life. The presence of Moses and Elijah on this mountain connects Jesus with a long history—a history of God's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, and of God's sending prophets to call people to grace. And so, transfiguration is also a fulfillment of an ancient tradition. Once again, the disciples remind us that being in the presence of God is not casual, but an awesome and terrifying experience. Hear now God's Holy word.

28 Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. 29 And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. 30 Suddenly they saw two men, Moses, and Elijah, talking to him. 31 They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. 33 Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not knowing what he said. 34 While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" 36 When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen. Amen.

The title of the sermon: In the Clouds

The Text: … While Peter was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Luke 9:34

Let us pray: Loving God, thank you for descending into our world to meet us and for inviting us to accompany your Holy and bright presence upon the mountain in the clouds. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A distinct memory I have of experiencing a revelation in the clouds was on a flight home from Fort Myers, Florida in March of 2018. It was apparent during our brief visit with my mom that her health had deteriorated, and she was not receiving the medical care she needed. Responsibilities at Westminster and St. John's Hospital beckoned both Peter and me home that Friday afternoon. As we ascended into the blue sky above, my ambivalence, fear, and anxiety were so elevated I found myself in tears. As I gazed out the window in the midst of surrounding clouds and prayed, I experienced with great certainty that we needed to bring home my mother: the woman who provided a home for me through great uncertainties on journeys up and down mountains and whose face always reflected the brightness of her belief in me, even during those times she could not protect me from the condescension, disrespect and belittling that came my way.

On Friday evening after Peter and I celebrated our wedding anniversary with dinner in Chicago, we turned on the news before going to sleep. Once again there was a story about condescension, disrespect, and belittling of others, this time on the world stage. I no longer had my head in the clouds following a romantic evening. As I tried to fall sleep, the Chicago wind blowing outside the window reminded me of the strength of God's spirit to affect change through ordinary men and women who live just and compassionate lives. May we each find ways to be a voice of encouragement to those facing darkness and to be a shining face that reflects the brightness of our belief in those who are suffering injustices on journeys up and down mountains. Thank God for the great cloud of witnesses who speak truth to power, who show kindness amid cruelty, who respect others despite bigotry, and who chose love in the midst of pain. Let us not lose heart that we may run with perseverance the race set before us.

When Moses descended Mount Sinai following a life changing experience with Yahweh that was both exhilarating and terrifying, his transformed life was reflected in his shining face. Moses treated the people with such respect that he put a veil on his face when he spoke to them because he understood they were frightened to be in the presence of one who encountered Yahweh. Moses didn't come off that mountain in the spirit of condescension, disrespect, or belittling. He brought the spirit of Yahweh and the covenant of the ten commandments to sustain the Israelite community on their forty-year sojourn through the wilderness into the Promised Land.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus in many ways echoes the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. Both are encounters with God on a cloud-covered mountaintop; in both, God's voice is heard from within the covering cloud. Jesus' face shines as Moses' did on his descent. Perhaps most poignantly, in both, being in the presence of God is not casual, but an awesome and terrifying experience.

Peter, John, and James, who have the privilege to witness the transformation of Jesus on this mountaintop and who later become major figures in the early church were *terrified as they entered the cloud* of God's presence and heard God's voice. Luke tells us they *kept silent*.

In Matthew's gospel *the disciples fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.* Jesus doesn't respond in a spirit of condescension, disrespect, or belittling. Rather, *Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"* None of the three are judged or berated for their fear and uncertainty. When the cloud and the voice terrify them, Jesus does what he has done, time and time again in his ministry… to the leper, to Peter's mother-in-law, to the two blind men, to the sojourner, to the hemorrhaging woman. Jesus touches them and then he speaks tender words of encouragement. Jesus' face shines with the brightness of his respect and belief in them. It is another of the countless vignettes in the scriptures of incredible grace and of divine fortitude shown to humanity. It speaks to the loving kindness and mercy of the God who is willing to embrace us in all our peculiarities and foibles, the God who is willing to touch our lives and encourage us on our journeys up and down mountains, in and out of clouds, and through the wilderness to the Promised Land!

Several years ago, on one of our family ski trips to Lake Tahoe, as we were on top of the mountain and in the clouds, a sign caught my eye, which read "The Promised Land." Right next to the proclamation was a large black diamond –indicating this was an expert, steep, narrow, and dangerous slope. It was a poignant moment for me, not because I was tempted to find my way down a black diamond ski run, but because that sign captured the truth about our faith. The children of Israel were not told that their journey into the wilderness would be without risks. Peter, James, and John came down that mountain aware that suffering would be a part of Jesus' journey and theirs as well if they chose to follow him. For men and women of faith, we can have confidence that we do not pursue this difficult and sometimes fearful journey alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and yet we are called individually into the wilderness toward spiritual maturity.

I paused for a moment on that mountain to thank God for the beauty of creation, the clouds around me, and the richness of our faith that announces the Promised Land requires courage, proficiency, and perseverance.

When we find ourselves up the mountain in the clouds, may we have the courage to face our fears, may we have the proficiency to treat others with respect, and may we have the perseverance to live lives that reflect the radiant light of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. So be it. Amen.