

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“A Voice Came out of the Cloud”

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“And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him’” (Mk. 9:7).

At the transfiguration, a cloud overshadowed the disciples. That detail about the cloud may not seem all that important, but we know God does not inspire empty or superfluous words. Everything in Scripture is deliberate. So, what meaning does the cloud hold in our text?

By definition, a cloud is “a visible mass of droplets of water or frozen crystals, suspended in the atmosphere.” They sometimes bring rain or snow; sometimes not. But one thing a cloud will always do is impede the light of the sun.

In the Bible when God surrounds Himself with clouds, it’s an act of mercy, actually. Sinful men cannot survive the sight of One so pure and holy. Remember how God told Moses, “You cannot see my face, for no man shall see me and live” (Ex. 33). And Hebrews 12 refers to God’s glory as a “consuming fire” (v. 29). So, what does God do? He masks Himself with clouds.

In Exodus 13, God led His people out of Egypt using a pillar of clouds (Ex. 13:21). In Exodus 19, Yahweh came down upon Mt. Sinai in a cloud (v. 9) to give Moses the ten commandments. In Exodus 33, Moses asked to see God in His glory. God consented, but also tucked Moses into a cleft in the rock and then passed by before him, covering over his glory. Afterwards, when Moses returned to the Israelites, they could not stand to look at Moses’ face. He had to use a veil – a cloud made of cloth, if you will—because even when the glory of God was only reflected and vastly dimmed, it was still too much for the people to bear (Ex 34:29-35). In 1 Kings 8 at the dedication of the temple, a cloud filled the temple, indicating God was present and mercifully masking His glory.

God is always having to take steps to protect sinful humanity from His consuming glory. In Deuteronomy 5, the people begged not to be confronted anymore by God’s presence. Even the cloud and the voice were still too much. God heard their prayer and turned down the dimmer way down. When Jesus was born, no one fled the manger scene. In Jesus, God clouded over His glory with human flesh. As an adult, were it not for His miracles, most would never have known they were brushing up against the glory of God in the person of Jesus. They might have thought Him a great teacher, but certainly not God’s Son.

That’s where we are today. God has mercifully used the clouds of water and wine and bread to cover over and mask His presence. God has used preachers and teachers to put a mask over His deafening voice. God has so dimmed His glory that we can ignore Him altogether. If we want, we can live unmindful of Him, as practical atheists. Many do. So, what is He to do with us? We cannot tolerate His glory, but when He masks Himself then we ignore Him, or we praise Him with our lips while our hearts are far away or pretend He doesn’t exist.

That’s why this text is so important. When Jesus was transfigured, He gave us just a glimpse of His divine nature, a peek beyond His humanity, as if to say, “Do not forget who you

are dealing with, especially when you see me dying on a cross, or masked under Word and water, bread and wine. So, His “clothes became radiant, intensely white”, Mark says (v. 3). Moses and Elijah are there. Peter doesn’t know what to say, so he says something about building three tents. (Side note: when you’re at a loss for words, the trick is to stop talking.) The voice from the cloud invites Peter and us to do the same. “This is my Son. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard it “they fell on their faces and were terrified” (Mt. 17:6). This was not a disciplined bow of the head. No, this is survival instinct. They are hitting the deck.

Remember, in Jewish thought, the presence of God is regularly connected with the cloud. The descent of the cloud here, with the voice saying, “This is my Son” is another announcement that the Messiah has come. Jesus is the Christ. But He’s not going to round up the troops and drive out the Romans. No. It would be something of the opposite.

In the verses immediately preceding the transfiguration, Jesus is foretelling His death. Mark 8:31, “He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this. Peter, at a loss for words, starts to rebuke Jesus. That’s the risk when we get a little too comfortable in the masked presence of God, a little too chummy and relaxed. We forget who we’re dealing with.

I wonder if that ever happens to you and me. For instance, how often do we miscalculate the Lord’s Supper and just sort of slide through the motions. Yet, ready or not, we receive the very body and blood of the One whose glory is consuming. On the one hand, it can consume our sin and make it white as snow. On the other, Paul says, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself . . . for anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:27ff). That is, not everyone who receives the sacrament is receiving it to their forgiveness. Some parade back to their seats with far more guilt on their heads than when they approached.

In the Old Testament, the presence of God is mercifully masked by the cloud. In the New Testament, the presence of God is mercifully masked behind the skin and bones and weakness of Jesus on the cross. Today, the presence of Holy God is mercifully hidden behind the bread and wine and water. Moreover, we no longer have a cloud leading us. We have His Word, available to people all around the world, not just to a tribe in the desert, so that God can guide *you*, as an individual, with the specific circumstances of your life. God has clouded over His glory so that you can receive Him, be led by Him, be forgiven by Him, be saved by Him.

Today, he covers over His glory but also covers over the guilt of our sin. In a wonderful text, God says in Isaiah, “I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud; return to me, for I have redeemed you” (44:22). It makes me think also of the robe of Christ’s righteousness with which God has covered us in Holy Baptism. When God looks at us, He sees Christ.

One last thing. The ultimate goal of the Christian is to stand in the nearer presence of God, in heaven, with His glory unmasked. Paul writes, “Now we see in a mirror dimly. But then, face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12). In the book of Revelation, John concurs: “They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 22:4). No clouds. No dim mirrors. No cleft in a rock. No veils. No means of water or wine or Word. Just Jesus . . . in all His glory. Amen.