

“In a Fog”

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Luke 9:28-36

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.

VALENTINE’S DAY MOUNTAIN

It was Valentines Day many years ago, and my wife and I were climbing a mountain in our trusty Volkswagen Rabbit.

We had a date to eat at a celebrated restaurant at Mountain Lake Resort, and we were determined to go, despite the slick roads.

(By the way, Mountain Lake was one of the locations where they shot the film, Dirty Dancing, and this night the resort was offering a special valentine celebration based on that movie.)

Anyway we made it up the mountain...barely.
And it was worth the trip.
The food was great.

(I still remember the French onion soup as being some of the best I've ever had.)

Since the weather was bad,
we almost had the place to ourselves.
Very romantic...and kind of eerie as well!

But, after the meal, as we went down the mountain, the weather got worse.

We ran into thick fog;
the temperature dropped
and the roads were even slicker than they were on the hair raising ascent.

It seemed like it took forever to make it down that mountain.

I had a death grip on the steering wheel, as I struggled to see around the next curve.

All the while my wife helpfully advised me to slow down every few minutes.

Climbing the mountain that night had its rewards,
but going down the mountain was a frightening experience.

When the cloud descended on that mountain,
the familiar landscape changed.

The gray mist cast an odd shadow on the trees.
Since our vision was limited, we listened more closely. We were hyper-vigilant.

It was disorienting not knowing what might lie just ahead of us.

Have you ever had an experience like this?
Have any of you climbed the foggy mountain at night?

Perhaps, you've been on the water and the fog settled in making it hard to know where to go.

I think of those huge cargo ships in the fog blowing their horn so that others might be warned of their presence.

It's always amazed me how something so big could be totally hidden.

There's something about the fog that creates a sense of mystery and wonder...and fear.

THE CLOUD OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Our lesson for today is about another mountain climb that ended in the fog.

But, this disorienting cloud was more than just a fog bank. It was the cloud of God's presence.

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray.

And while Jesus is praying Jesus begins to be transfigured before the disciples.

They see Jesus as they've never seen him before.

His face changes.
His clothes shine like the sun.
Heavenly glory comes down to earth.

But, that's not all.

Two long dead representatives of the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah,
also appear in glory.

They speak with Jesus about his "departure"

which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

The word translated “departure” can also be translated “exodus”.

It’s another way of speaking about Jesus’ death and resurrection. Karoline Lewis (who, by the way, will be speaking at Presbytery next Saturday) wrote,

“The Transfiguration account in Luke is a transfiguration of glory itself.”

She said that we find glory in the elevated, the enlightened, the important and the powerful.

But, Luke tells us that God’s glory is seen in the quest for freedom. God’s glory is seen when the oppressed enter the Promised Land. God’s glory is seen when the Lord says, “Let my people go.”

Like the Exodus from Egypt, Jesus’ death and resurrection is a departure that will lead to salvation for all God’s people.

No wonder Moses and Elijah are present with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration.

The history of God’s liberating power is repeating itself.

SLEEPING

But, the disciples have no clue about all this. In fact, as we’ll learn later, they aren’t really listening.

I have to take issue with our anthem for today. The refrain suggests that Jesus and the other disciples, Peter, James and John, were “praying, praying, praying.”

Not exactly.

Yes, Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray.

But the text tells us that only Jesus praying.

In fact, Jesus was transfigured while he was praying.

But what was going on
with Peter, James and John?

The Scripture tells us that they were
“weighed down with sleep”.

Maybe the choir should sing,

“High upon a mountain Peter, James and John
... they were sleeping, sleeping...sleeping.”

This won't be the last time this happens.

Remember what happened in the Garden of Gethsemane?

Jesus asks Peter, James and John to pray and “keep watch”.

And what do they do?
They fall asleep.

Often the disciples are in a fog,
and it's not the cloud of God's presence.
It is the fog of misunderstanding.

Over and over again, they are asleep.
They are truly oblivious to the importance of the moment.

But, in this instance they stay awake
because of what they see.

They witness heaven come to earth.
They see the glory of Jesus' transfiguration.
They catch a glimpse of long dead figures from the past.

That'll wake you up.
Adrenaline floods their body.

Their senses are heightened.

SPEAKING OUT OF TURN

And yet, despite the glory,
their minds are still clouded.
As Moses and Elijah are about to leave,
Peter throws up his hands and says,

“Whoa, Jesus, not so fast.
Let’s stay here longer.

This place of glory deserves a monument or three.

Let’s put up tabernacles,
one for you,
one for Moses,
and one for Elijah.”

Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah about his departure, his death and resurrection in Jerusalem.

This would be the new Exodus for God’s people.

But, Peter wasn’t listening.
Instead, Peter wanted to talk
about staying on the mountain.

The Bible says that Peter said this
“not knowing what he said”.
Peter was like many of the folks
who communicate on Twitter.

He was never at a loss for words,
even when he had no idea what he was talking about.

THE CLOUD OF GOD’S PRESENCE

And that’s when it happened.
Peter’s speech was interrupted

by the descent of a cloud bank.

The voice from heaven must have been as unnerving as a cargo ship's horn coming to dock on a foggy morning. I can almost imagine that loud horn sounding before the voice speaks.

Honk!

"This is my Son, my Chosen;
listen to him!"

They couldn't quite see, but they knew.
Something big was out there.

Nothing like a voice from heaven to wake up sleepy disciples!

God proves to be a lot closer than Peter, James and John could ever have imagined.
God is right there with them.

In one church I served the choir started every service with the same hymn.
They sang,

"God himself is with us.
Let us now adore him.
And with awe appear before him.

God is in his temple.
All within keep silence..."

I really like starting each service with that hymn.
It reminded me that there was more going on than what we could see and hear.

In the fog of life, God is close.

That was true for Peter, James and John.
And that's true for us.

God is present with us today.
And our job is to glorify God and listen.

HAND OVER MY MOUTH

We have a plaque in our home that reads,
 “Lord, put your arm around my shoulder
 and your hand over my mouth.”

I wonder sometimes if we should get that tattooed on our wrist so we could see it every day!

Like Peter, we say too much.
 We speak when we should listen.

We act like we know what’s good,
 but let’s be honest.
 Often, we don’t have a clue.

How can we find wisdom when we are generally so clueless about everything?

The Psalmist tells us that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”
 (Psalm 11:10)

There’s nothing like an experience of the divine
 to shut up disciples who want to speak about things that they don’t understand.

That certainly happened with Peter, James and John.

Luke tells us that they “kept silent and in those days
 told no one any of the things they had seen.”

SPEAKING IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

But, of course that doesn’t mean that the disciples kept silent forever.

If Peter, James and John didn’t talk about this story later, how would we know about it today?

I think that later they were able to understand the true meaning of this encounter on the mountaintop.

Jesus' death and resurrection would herald a new Exodus, a new hope that would bring salvation and glory to the whole world.

Before the resurrection the disciples lived in a fog.
The very power of God resided in Jesus, but they didn't understand it.

And they didn't always listen to his voice.

But, after the resurrection their life was different.
They lived in the power of the Spirit of the risen Christ.

What was hidden became a bright light of divine revelation for the rest of their life.

After the resurrection, they knew the truth.

God was in Christ.
And now the Spirit of Christ was in them.

MYSTERY AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

When I was being trained to be a minister,
one day our professor took us to the chapel,
and we practiced doing communion.

We took the bread and said,
"This is my body...broken for you."

We took the cup and said,
"This my blood shed for you."

For most of us, this was the first time we had taken the elements in this way and had spoken those words.

We were nervous, even afraid of "doing it wrong"
or "saying the wrong thing".

We were standing on holy ground.

Our professor took note of this and said,

“You know sometimes we who have done this for so long forget the sacred nature of the Lord’s Supper.
It all becomes routine.

You have taught me today to once again think about the sacraments with a sense of mystery and awe.”

I think my professor had a good point.
Often our relationship with Jesus can become routine.

We talk about body broken and blood shed
without really appreciating the cost of salvation.

We hear the words, but we don’t really listen.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN WITH JESUS

And so from time to time Jesus invites us to climb the mountain with him
and pray.

And sometimes, when the sacred cloud overshadows us...
we get a glimpse of glory.

For one startling and overwhelming moment we realize that God is closer
to us than we had ever imagined.

The fog horn sounds
and the voice speaks from the cloud,

“Jesus is my Son, the Chosen One.
Talk less. Listen to what he says more.

Take off your shoes.
You are standing on holy ground.”

Sometimes the first step on the road to faith is to recognize that we don’t
know anything.
We have to step into the uncertainty of the fog on the mountaintop to truly
find our way.

When the cloud comes,
it's not possible to approach our faith
with a sense of "been there, done that".

Instead, we are on high alert.

The familiar landscape is transformed by the glory of God.

When we read Scripture, the prophets of the past speak to us in a way that
is fresh and new.

They point us toward a future that we could not imagine.

And how do we respond to this holy moment?

What do we say when we learn
that God himself is with us?
What can we add to the voices of Jesus
and the prophets?

Nothing.

Like the disciples who have gone before us,
all we can do is keep silent and await further instructions.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

When I look back on my life, I realize that have often been like Peter.

My words betrayed the fact
that I had not really listened to Jesus.

God was near.
And yet my heart was far away.

But, from time to time the Lord sounded that fog horn from the cloud.

The sound startled me,
and I was no longer able to sleep walk through life.

The words from the cloud reminded me that it's not about me and what I
want.

It's about God and the salvation God brings in Christ Jesus.

What I didn't see became as plain as day.
And the voice that I had ignored for too long
now sounds as clear as a bell.

A DIM MIRROR

If you are going to drive in the fog,
you must put your headlights on low beam and proceed cautiously.

If you put your headlights on high beam in an effort to see farther, it will
only impede your sight further.

It occurs to me that our faith journey requires a similar approach.

We want to switch our life on the high beams
and see far down the road.

But, that's not possible.

Nor is it possible to build a monument to the past and stay on the mountain
forever.

Instead, the voice of God reminds us that it's time to go carefully down the
mountain,
guided only by the dim light of what we know today.

We travel cautiously, always listening for the voice of Jesus along the way.

I've never had an experience like the one Peter, James and John had that
day.

I've never seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus.
I've never heard the voice speak from the cloud.

And if I ever did have such an experience,
I would probably (like the disciples) keep it to myself
lest people think that I was a crackpot.

But, I do know what it's like to be terrified by an uncertain future.

I do know what it's like to be overcome on the mountaintop.

The apostle Paul once recognized the uncertainty and fearfulness of life when he wrote that we "see in a mirror dimly". (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In Paul's day, mirrors were imperfect.
The images reflected in them were dark and distorted.

In the same way our journey is often uncertain.
We don't have a clear picture
of what lies around the bend.

We don't know what the future holds.

But, we do know who holds the future.

Paul continues in that verse,
"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."

GOD IN THE CLOUD

Are you like the disciples, weighed down by sleep?
Are you tired and barely able to function?

Do you find it hard to pay attention to Jesus
because you are overwhelmed
by the uncertainties of life?

All of us feel that way at least some of the time.
None of us see clearly when it comes to the future.
We are all in a fog.

But, the promise of this passage is this.
The fog contains more than just water vapor.

God himself is with us in that cloud.

We might not be able to see that now.

We might not be able to hear God's voice clearly now.

But, one day we will see face to face.

In the meantime let us go up the mountain to pray with Jesus.

Let us trust in the fact that in his life
and the words he speaks to us,
we will see glory.

We will see the power of God in the flesh.
And we too will be transfigured by that power.

Amen.