

The View from Cloud Nine

Luke 9:28-36

We as human beings have always been fascinated by clouds. Looking upward, how many of us have spent time lying on our backs on a grassy bank staring at the clouds. As children we've looked for shapes in the cloud formations and have imagined what it would be like to soar to the clouds, to touch their seemingly "fluffy" nature, to lie down in their soft, wispy warmth. In cartoons, we wistfully imagine sitting in the clouds, soaking up the view, as though they were a luxurious bed of soft, billowy cotton.

In fact, clouds are anything but light, soft billows. Clouds are heavy, water-filled accumulations. When they saturate to the maximum of what they can hold, gravity causes the liquid to fall in the form of rain, ice, or snow, depending upon the temperature and conditions. Fog and clouds are made of the same water-logged atmospheric "stuff." "Clouds are simply elevated fog!"

But whether fog or clouds, the manifestation of this state of weather taps into our metaphorical imagination, infusing us with a sense of fascination, mystery, and a sense of the supernatural.

Watch a suspense movie, a ghost story, or any story with an air of mystery, and you're likely to find fog, clouds, or storms. There's nothing like a cloud and fog filled marsh to stimulate our sense of supernatural anticipation.

But movies aren't the only place we revere the clouds or use their metaphors to signal our sense of intrigue. Religious art, prominent in the time of the Renaissance, and present from the most ancient of days, has employed clouds and fog to illuminate the presence of the divine.

In fact, the Hebrew scriptures are filled with depictions of YHWH as cloud cover. One of the most prominent is Moses, descending from the cloudy mountaintop after encountering God, his face shining. But we see many other instances in scripture as well –the cloud that led the Israelites through the wilderness and across the sea, the clouds in Ezekiel's vision, the imagination of Job, the prophecies of Joel, Nahum and Jonah and the whirlwinds in the storms, the descriptions in the psalms, the coming of Revelation. And in the gospels, many more.

To view God within the "clouds" gives us a sense of God's transcendence and yet imminence. God both hidden and revealed –the knowledge of God we can't ever hope to understand and yet the depictions of God that descend into our everyday lives in the form of "supernatural" phenomena, signs, experiences, and spirituality.

In 1818, German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich, created his iconic portrait called "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog." With symbolism of mortality, transcendence, mystery, and the sublime, the painting taps into the experiential feeling we have when we contemplate our interaction with God, or God's intervention in our lives. We feel it. But we cannot understand it. For God is not rational, but God's glory and presence can only be experienced through media such as prayer, meditation, revelation, worship, communion, and in dynamic experiences of nature. God's theophany helps us describe the nature of our faith. Far from "fluff," these experiences can have truly transformative experiences for us. They can elevate our trust and expand and deepen our faith.

Personal experiences of God have been the primary sources of spiritual sustenance, change, healing, and joy for as long as we've been on earth. Although we can learn about God through our minds and education, repentance and renewal erupt in us from a very emotional and spiritual place –and often from a state of overwhelming joy.

Just as clouds remain our "go to" metaphor for the presence of God and a higher, intuitive experience that lies beyond our control and knowledge, the popular phrase, the "view from cloud nine" maintains that metaphor in terms of the feeling evoked by our "cloud-soaked experiences. The phrase for us means to experience a perspective of extreme happiness, joy, bliss, or euphoria.

Linguist Suzanne Arnold notes also that the Oxford English Dictionary additionally merges this definition with meanings, such as "obscure, mystical, fanciful, and unreal, [along with] notions of obscurity and elevation."

While our euphoric, transcendent feeling of divine revelation originally began with the phrase “cloud seven,” it later advanced to “cloud nine.” But no matter which “elevation” of cloud you prefer, the phrase describes an experience of God that we find hard to explain in terms of ordinary life. And for most of us, it has changed our life! The “idiom” may be descriptive, but the experience we have is real.

In our scripture for today, we see this very kind of experience happening to Peter, John, and James on a mountaintop with Jesus. And this was no ordinary cloud cover but a cloud of divine presence that descended upon Jesus. Within it they experienced a vision, a voice, and a prophecy about Jesus, who he was, and the power he had within him. It’s no mistake that the very next day, Jesus heals a boy with a power that transcends both reason and the forces of evil.

For God does not merely convey divine will in the mystery of the clouds but descends upon us with a “reign” that is powerful, active, and very present in our lives and in our world.

On this Day of Transfiguration, as we celebrate God’s mystery entering the world in power and glory, let us commune together in the knowledge that the most important and stunning things we “know” about God exceed our understanding. And that the most vital forces in our world remain the powers of hope and healing.

May your communion experience today be a transformative moment in which your heart is stirred and your spirit moved. May your soul be infused with the peace and joy of God that goes far beyond our understanding. For where Jesus is present, “the view from Cloud Nine” is always within our reach.