

Sermon for Sunday, March 3, 2019

IN THE CLOUD

Exodus 34:29-35 / Luke 9:28-36

When I was a teenager, I used to make fun of my parents who would regularly fall asleep in front of the television, and I would tease them mercilessly by asking what had happened in the show they were watching which, of course, they could never tell me. The reason why my parents fell asleep was because they both worked very hard just to make ends meet. When they finally got to sit down at the end of the day, they didn't have much energy left, not even to make it through their favorite TV shows.

I did not have the where-with-all then to notice why they were so tired and I probably didn't care. After all, I was a teenager and I had better things to do with my life than to pay attention to my parents. But now, I do try to pay more attention to what's going on around me. Thus, I wonder why the disciples in our story today were weighed down to the point that they slumped over in sleep. Were they physically wiped out because they had helped Jesus feed a gazillion people? Were they emotionally spent because Jesus's told them that he was going to be tortured, die, and be raised on the third day? Were they exhausted from hiking up the mountain? Or perhaps all of the above?

Whatever the reason, they simply could not stay awake and they fell asleep. When they snapped to it, they rubbed their eyes in disbelief at what they saw. There was Jesus, glowing, and with him were Moses and Elijah, which was definitely spooky because they had not been around for a few thousand years. And rather than taking it all in, Peter, as was his custom, blurted out something just to say anything: "Wow! Awesome! Let's build three memorials, one for each of these guys."

Neither the gospel writer nor Jesus reacted to Peter's outburst. Instead, the mysterious and chaotic scene all of a sudden becomes hushed when a cloud rolls in. As the disciples are being buried in this cloud, they lose eye contact with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and with one another. All they hear and can rely on is a voice. Robbed of sight, they become deeply aware of God, who says to them: "This is my Son, the Chosen. Listen to him!" When the cloud lifts and they can see again, they see Jesus standing there all by himself. And they are speechless.

I remember skiing once as a boy with friends when we were caught by surprise by the changing weather on the mountain. A sunny day with clear blue skies turned south in a hurry. Clouds and fog appeared out of nowhere, and the fog was so dense, we could not see beyond the tips of our skis. We had to make a terrible choice: stay motionless on the mountain and freeze, or take our chances and somehow inch our way down. Since we had no idea when the conditions would improve, we chose the latter. The way we decided to proceed was by holding on to the pole of the person in front of us so we would not lose contact. And we would shout periodically to

assure ourselves we didn't just hold on to a pole but that there was actually somebody attached to it.

I think it is significant here that the movement of our gospel text goes from sight to sound. Sight, it turns out, can distract us and be deceiving; especially when we consider all the things that weigh us down, all the things that blur our vision of life, of one another, and of God. Are we, like the disciples, physically tired because we are working too much? Are we emotionally tired? Are we tired because we can neither fathom nor control the changes with which we are confronted every day, be it the changes in our country, our relationships, or our church? Are we tired because we wish things *would* change and they don't? Are we tired because of all of the above? No matter the source of our tiredness, it distracts us from seeing God and, more importantly, it distracts us from listening what God might have to say to us. What we need, then, is not clarity but obscurity. What we need is to stop or be stopped in our tracks so we cannot go any further. Or at least, we need to be slowed down. Only then, our text seems to suggest, are we able to listen. Only then can we become deeply aware of God.

I also think it is significant that the lectionary places this text at *Lent's* doorstep. Before we enter the liturgical season of *Lent* this coming Wednesday, which is *Ash Wednesday*, the gospel writer shifts our focus. Up to this point, Luke's emphasis was on Jesus's ministry. All the healing, feeding, programming, challenging the authorities, ... it's been a whirlwind. The disciples are exhausted, and so are we. But now, Luke tells us, it is time to set all our frantic activities aside and listen to what God has to tell us. In verse 51 of this chapter we learn that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, to his suffering, his death, and his resurrection. This is an unimaginably hard road. And before this journey begins, God reminds the disciples of Jesus's baptism and of their own baptism. In the cloud, when all is still, when the disciples and when we cannot see anything, we can clearly hear God's voice: "You are my beloved child. And I will go with you, no matter what lies ahead."

Last week, we celebrated the baptism of Charlotte Catherine "CeCe" DeLucia, and we handed her a t-shirt, like we always do at each baptism. It was made by Sarah Duncan and it read, "I am a beloved child of God." It is my prayer for all of us that we remember our own baptism as we are about to enter the cloud of Lent, the forty cloudy days and dark nights in the wilderness where we once again have an opportunity to set our frantic lives aside and listen for God's voice. And it is my prayer that at the end of that journey, as we will celebrate once again the day of resurrection, we will, our sight regained, see only Jesus, standing there all by himself.

But that's all for next week and for the weeks thereafter. Today, Jesus invites us to come to his table so he can prepare us for the journey ahead; to give us the bread that is his body and the cup that is his life poured out for you and for me. Today, he bids us come and rest before we will find ourselves in the cloud of *Lent*, together, all of us beloved children of God.

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