

March 2, 2025
Luke 9:28-43a

Transfiguration
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Clouds of Grace”

“Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’”

Last April, we experienced the phenomenon of a partial solar eclipse. While we were only a short distance from the “zone of totality,” it was still a spectacular site that happens rarely in our area. On that day, I was driving home from London after having a root canal. As I drove along in the countryside of Middlesex County, I began to notice that what had been a sunny day was growing mysteriously darker – not like darkness that happens when clouds roll in, but an almost indescribable, eerie darkness that was slowly descending across the landscape. I noticed that a few cars had pulled over on the side of the road and people were using their special viewing glasses to safely look at the eclipse. When the moment of partial totality happened, it was as if the world had been transformed into a strange form of darkness, the likes of which few of us had experienced. While the day grew brighter as the moon moved away from the sun, the experience of driving through that eclipse was one I will always remember – along with the pain I experienced when the Novocain finally wore off!

While we were not able to experience a total eclipse, some people in that “zone of totality” were also denied the opportunity to experience this phenomenon because, unfortunately, clouds obscured the site of the moon blocking the sun. In places like Niagara Falls, thousands of tourists were disappointed when they were only able to experience a slight dimming of daylight on a day when those clouds obscured what many were anticipating being a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It recalled the words from Joni Mitchell’s *Both Sides Now*:

- “Rows and floes of angel hair, and ice cream castles in the air, and feather canyons everywhere – I’ve looked at clouds that way. But now they only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone; so many things I would have done – but clouds got in my way.”

There are times when clouds can be a welcome sight, such as when rain clouds appear to alleviate a drought, or when we lie on a grassy hill and look for shapes in white, fluffy clouds in the summer sky. But clouds are usually not a welcome sight,

especially on days when we are planning outdoor activities or taking beach vacations when we look forward to basking in the warm sunshine. As we continue to endure this harsh winter, we may go several days without seeing any sunshine, enduring day after day of cloudy weather that can make it difficult even to accomplish the simplest of tasks. Clouds may bring the necessary rain and the snow that covers the ground and brings enjoyment to skiers and snowmobilers; but clouds also serve to obscure the sunshine and starlight, preventing us from experiencing astral phenomena and enjoying the sunny days that always give our spirits a boost.

While clouds may not be a welcome sight in our daily lives, they play a critical role in the Bible in being means of revelation for God's people. In the Old Testament, the appearance of clouds was the sign of a *theophany*, an appearance of God that would be accompanied by a word of revelation or instruction. In Exodus, God appears to the newly liberated people of Israel to assure them of God's presence and to bless them with the gift of the Torah, the instructions on how they were to live as the people of the covenant:

- “And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.” – Exodus 16:10.
- “Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.’” – Exodus 19:9.
- “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.” – Exodus 19:16.

The prophet Daniel foresees that the Son of Man will come to the Ancient of Days with the clouds of heaven (*“As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.”* – Daniel 7:13). In the New Testament, Jesus is presented as being taken up in a cloud at his ascension and returning on the clouds:

- “When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.” – Acts 1:9.
- “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will be with the Lord forever.” – 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

- “Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.” – Revelation 1:7.

The presence of a cloud of revelation plays an important role in the Transfiguration of Our Lord, which we observe on this last Sunday of the season after Epiphany. The Transfiguration plays an important role in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), appearing in each after Jesus’ first passion prediction as the focus of his ministry shifts toward Jerusalem. The Transfiguration *“is one of the quintessential mountaintop experiences in scripture: a glimpse of divine glory, a word from God, and an experience that changes all who are present.”* (Troy Troftgruben). After informing his disciples that *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priest, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised”* (Luke 9:22) and that *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (9:23), Jesus invites three of his disciples – Peter, John, and James – to accompany him *“up a mountain to pray”* (9:28). Prayer plays an important role in the life of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel; it is while Jesus is praying after his baptism that *“the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”* (3:21-22). It is after Jesus has prayed his disciples ask him to *“teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples”* (11:1), which results in Jesus giving his followers the Lord’s Prayer along with his encouragement that they *“ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you”* (11:9). In the final hours before his arrest, conviction, and death on the cross, Jesus prays at Gethsemane *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.”* (22:42). Prayer is essential in Jesus’ life and sets the stage in the gospels for major events, decisions, and ministry moments that will continue in the lives of the apostles after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension:

- “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” – Acts 1:14.
- “When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” – Acts 4:31.
- “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” – Acts 13:2-3.

It is while Jesus is praying on the mountain with his three disciples that *“the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white”* (9:29). Like Moses, who was so radiant when he descended from Mount Sinai that the Israelites could not look on him (*“When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”* (Exodus 34:30)), Jesus’ appearance confirmed his presence with God and may also be understood as a further disclosure of Jesus’ divinity as God’s Son, the one who is *“true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary”* (Small Catechism).

Jesus’ transfiguration is accompanied by the appearance of Moses and Elijah, who appear *“talking with him”* (9:30). These two major figures from the Old Testament, who may represent the Law and the Prophets, also *“appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”* (9:31). The word for “departure” (*exodos*) is directly associated in biblical tradition with the great liberation from Egypt, the great salvation story of the Hebrew Bible; *“this characterizes Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension – events soon to happen in Jerusalem – as a New Exodus within the larger story of God’s saving purpose.”* (Troftgruben). The Transfiguration, therefore, also serves to confirm the last part of Jesus’ passion prediction; *“the story will not end with Jesus’ death; on the third day he will be raised and enter into his glory.”* (Alan Culpepper).

- “Moses and Elijah are two of the most famous leaders from Israel’s history. They both saw God’s glory, had revelatory mountaintop experiences, came to the end of their lives at God’s bidding, and came to be associated with traditions that never died ... The presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration clearly affirms Jesus’ ministry as consonant with their legacies and fulfilling the purpose they shared.” – Troftgruben.

Peter, John, and James had been *“weighed down with sleep”* but were sufficiently awake to witness both Jesus’ Transfiguration and the appearance of Moses and Elijah. As the two figures from Israel’s history are departing, Peter speaks up and on behalf of his colleagues proclaims *“Master, it is good for us to be here”* (9:33); he then goes on to offer to build three “dwellings” for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. This may be a reference to Peter’s understanding of the event as the fulfillment of Israel’s celebration of the wilderness wandering at the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (*“You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens of Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”* – Leviticus 23:42-43). Peter may also be seeking to honour the reverence of the occasion’s

sacredness, hospitality to guests, or simply to prolong the experience. But whatever his motive, Peter only partially grasps the significance of what he and the other disciples have witnessed; *“he wants to freeze the moment and commemorate the place, but faithfulness will require following Jesus to the cross, not commemorating the place of the transfiguration, which -fittingly – is not named in any of the Gospels.”* (Culpepper).

While Peter is making his offer of constructing three booths, *“a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud”* (9:34). As people were once terrified when they experienced a solar eclipse, not understanding this astral phenomenon and fearing it was a sign of judgment or retribution, so people were often terrified when the cloud of a theophany descended upon them (*“... all the people who were in the camp trembled”* – Exodus 19:16). As God spoke to Moses through the cloud at Mount Sinai, giving him the Torah for God’s people, so now does the voice of revelation come from the cloud, proclaiming that *“this is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”* (9:35). The pronouncement echoes the words of the Hebrew Scriptures from both the Psalms and Isaiah in identifying Jesus in words like what is heard at his baptism: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (3:22).

- “I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’” – Psalm 2:7.
- “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” – Isaiah 42:1.

Jesus is identified as both the unique Son and the chosen Servant in whom God is delighted and through whom God would bring salvation to the nations. This identification is accompanied by a command to all who would be his followers: *“listen to him!”* “Listening” in the New Testament is distinguished from the passive act of hearing, receiving audible sounds through one’s ears; “listening” involves actively hearing the words of Jesus as the very Word of God and walking in obedience to his words. Jesus’ teaching in last Sunday’s Gospel lesson was addressed to *“you that listen”* (6:27); in John’s Gospel, Peter proclaims that Jesus *“has the words of eternal life.”* (John 6:68). As those who heard Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount were *“astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes”* (Matthew 7:28-29), those who follow Jesus know that he is the very Word of God that *“became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.”* (John 1:14).

- “For all of Luke’s insistence on the continuity of Judaism and the Christian community, Jesus is not just another in a line of prophets; he is preminent. He is to be heard, over against Moses and the prophets, but as the proper interpreter and fulfillment of what had been preserved in the Scriptures. – Fred Craddock.

As soon as the Transfiguration experience begins, it comes to an end when after “*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.*” (9:36). Unlike Matthew’s account of this episode in which “*as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, ‘Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead’*” (Matthew 17:9), the disciples do not need anyone to tell them to remain silent about what they have experienced. What they had seen was too overwhelming, or they were still contemplating what the sight of the transfigured Jesus, the presence of Moses and Elijah, and the cloud from which spoke the voice from heaven all meant. As they all came down the mountain, they were plunged back into the demands of Jesus’ earthly ministry when from a large crowd came the shout of a man who pleaded with Jesus to help his only son who was suffering from “*convulsions until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him*” (9:39). Even the disciples, who had earlier cured diseases (9:6), were not able to help him. While Jesus laments over what he sees as a “*faithless and perverse generation*” (9:31), he rebukes the unclean spirit that has possessed the boy, heals him, and gives him back to his father, so that “*all were astounded at the greatness of God.*” (9:43). Jesus will continue to offer signs of his divine power and compassion throughout his upcoming journey to Jerusalem, the fullness of his glory will be revealed when he is crucified at Golgotha on a day when, like a solar eclipse, “*the sun’s light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two.*” (23:44-45). It is through his death, resurrection, and ascension that Jesus accomplishes God’s Will so that all who believe in him may live in the comfort of a holy and certain hope that through his death and resurrection Jesus has destroyed the power of death and brought the assurance of life eternal to all who listen to his words as the Word of eternal life.

- “The transfiguration emphasizes that God has been revealed through Jesus and that the essence of Jesus’ identity and work cannot be understood apart from the cross and resurrection. Only in their light do we ever understand the character of God or the significance of Jesus ... The view from the overlook may be majestic, but the road beckons, and there will be other vistas and other transforming experiences ahead.” – Culpepper.

I've looked at clouds from both sides now.

Clouds can serve to block our view of the sun and other wonders in the skies above them; but clouds can also serve as means through which God's gracious word comes to us. Through the cloud that appears at Jesus' transfiguration, we join the three disciples in beholding Jesus' full identity and hearing the voice proclaimed that he is the Son of God and God's Chosen One, and the command to every generation of disciples to listen to him. In this cloud of grace, we hear the word that we know is the Word of God, the Word of Hope, the Word of Eternal Life. May this cloud of grace give us the eyes to see, ears to hear, and mouths to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord, and through him we have the blessed assurance of eternal life through what is revealed and accomplished through him. It is through this cloud of grace that we may clearly see the hope that is ours in the one revealed to us as our Lord, our Saviour, our hope of everlasting life!

Amen.