

Reading the Cloud

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
August 14-15, 2010 ♦ Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15)
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

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***Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith,
did not receive what was promised,
since God had provided something better
so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.***

Hebrews 11:39-40

I spent my first year of graduate school at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, which is located just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, in Marin County, California. It was a delight to stop by there a couple of weeks ago while Dan and the kids and I were in the bay area for a little summer vacation. It is good to revisit places so full of memory. When I was at the seminary, the hallways in the faculty office building were lined with framed comic strips of *Peanuts* by Charles Shultz. Charles Schultz was a neighbor of the seminary and supplied some of his original drawings to be framed and displayed there. If you have paid close attention to the *Peanuts* comic strip over the years, you may have noticed that Charles Schultz was a quite good theologian. Many of his comics pick up on theological themes and ideas.

In a classic *Peanuts* cartoon, Charlie Brown, Lucy, and Linus are lying on the ground gazing at the sky. Lucy says, "If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in the cloud formations...what do you think you see, Linus?" Linus says, "Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of British Honduras on the Caribbean...that cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor...and that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen...I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side..." Lucy says, "Uh huh...that's very good...what do *you* see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?" Charlie Brown replies, "Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsey, but I changed my mind!"

I guess some of us know how to read the clouds and some of us do not!

How do you read this “cloud of witnesses” that the writer of the Hebrews calls us to see? There are heroes and prostitutes in that cloud. There are prophets and martyrs in that cloud. There are adulterers and justice seekers in that cloud. There are ordinary and extraordinary people in that cloud. Our spiritual forebears are certainly a mixed bag of folks, but all of them share something in common: a faith story with God. And with this short (and by no means complete) list of courageous, exemplary and/or infamous people of faith, the writer of the Hebrews suggests that we press on in that same story of faith:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...

Did you notice the communal context of the writer's appeal?

*Therefore, since **WE** are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let **US** also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let **US** run with perseverance the race that is set before **US**, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of **OUR** faith.*

The writer signals that this race we are running is not a solo run. The writer recognizes that the spiritual journey is something that we embark on together, never alone. Yet increasingly our culture pushes us to be isolated individuals, lone consumers of whatever the culture wants to pass along as the latest and greatest have-to-have. Families are isolated to their highly mortgaged homes (many of which are now “underwater” due to the economic downturn) and extended families live far apart from one another. The impact of this emphasis on me and mine and rampant individualism is to discourage us from making entangling commitments, and instead, to encourage relationship with electronic screens instead of real people. You can work from home on your computer. You can get your news and entertainment from your television. You can shop by the internet. You can even do all of *that* from a little hand held gadget you can take with you wherever you go called a “phone.” You can find perfect boyfriends or girlfriends in the fantasy world of cyber space. You can even get your groceries and meals delivered to your door. The ideal these days seems to be a retreat from any extended human relationships and the avoidance of as much human contact as possible.

Even in the realm of faith we have separated from spirituality from religion. “Spirituality” – a personal, private, connection with the god of your own devising – from “religion” – a corporate, institutional and in much of the public mind, an oppressive and cumbersome entanglement. But here’s the problem with all of that as I see it: God seems to thrive in the context of human relationships! God seems to have made us for each other. And in the consistent witness of our sacred story, personal spirituality is always secondary and in service to spiritual community, for without relationship and community our experience of life and faith is incomplete and our understanding of God is distorted. In *Seeking Enlightenment...Hat by Hat: A Skeptic's Guide to Religion*, Nevada Barr explains why community is necessary to the life of faith:

Church is for finding and adoring God in community: with others, through others, because of others, in spite of others. Only by finding this place of human interaction focused around the need for the spiritual was I able to recognize God in other people and so in myself. Without community, how would I learn to share? Who would I help? How would I learn to accept help?...Community is God rubbing elbows and passing the tuna casserole, a place where we can snuggle down with the Divine. Though I'd never have suspected it when I began this spiritual journey, God is not separate from people. Sure we're hypocrites, liars, boasters, blasphemers, and cheats, but we are God's hypocrites, liars, boasters, blasphemers, and cheats. The spark is in each of us. When we work together for what we sincerely hope is good, worship together in the belief we will touch God, sing together in the hope (God) hears our praises, the spark is fanned and God becomes as visible in us as God is in new snow or mornings or a mountain lake.

If we try to run the spiritual journey as a solo runner, we find ourselves hanging by a thin thread, which is easily broken. But when we run the race together, when we entwine our lives with one another, the treads of our lives are twisted into a strong rope. One rabbi put it this way: “A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of a great meaning.” I am struck by the words of verse 39:

“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.”

Even though we have all these examples and shining stars of faith from our past, not one of them -- NOT ONE! -- when it came to God and the spiritual journey "finally got it" or "fully grasped it," or "figured it all out," or "solved the Mystery." I like the way the old Revised Standard Version translated verse 39 better:

"And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect."

Did you catch that: "that apart from US they should not be made perfect?" No matter what has happened in the past, the story of faith is incomplete. It is un-finished story. There is more to come. There is more to be revealed. There is more to be experienced. There is more truth and light to break forth from God's Holy Word. "God is still speaking" we like to say in the United Church of Christ. All we can do is run the race and add our voices and testimonies to the story. All we can do is contribute our experience and offer our "take" on the unfolding drama. In so doing, we...all of us as community of faith...keep the story going and keep the faith alive. We have some responsibility to build on what they began, or at least to do our part in building the loving and just dominion of God, but whatever we do, we understand that the story and the journey of faith is never, NEVER finished. It is never complete.

Some of us around here like to say that we find more grace on the journey searching for God than arriving at some fixed, dogmatic certainty. It is a sentiment with which I resonate. And this perspective calls us to deep humility. We nurture in each other a deep suspicion of definitive creeds and firm dogmas knowing the Mysterious Reality we name God always exceeds our grasp and transcends our naming. So, as I gaze into this "cloud of witnesses," I imagine not just those faithful folks from our past, but I am also well aware of the importance of those faithful folks who surround me in the present. They... YOU!... WE!...are part of this cloud too! We need each other...both past and present. We need a family or community of faith. We need a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us in the here and now if we are going to run "the race," and do something beautiful with God. We need a great cloud of witnesses if we are ever going to make any sense of God in our lives or in the world.

The great preacher Fred Craddock tells a story of a little boy who was carried on his father's shoulders into a country store. The man behind the counter said to the little boy, "My, aren't you tall today?" And the little boy replied sheepishly, "Well, it isn't all me." And there is whole lot of truth in those simple words spoken by a child. Who we are and what we accomplish is never all our own doing. We have this "cloud of witnesses"...a grandstand full of folks both past and present cheering us on. We have this race to run...this spiritual journey to travel. And for sure, this race is a relay more than sprint. It's a community effort not a solo run.

And then, the writer adds another piece to the picture. While running the race together, with all the support from the grandstands, the writer adds, "look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." In other words, if you are going to run the race, you'll need a focus...a point of reference...a goal... someone up ahead...a pioneer showing the path...an inspiring example to light the way. "Look to Jesus!"

Why? Why Jesus? Because for Christians Jesus has been like shorthand, our most concise and quickest reference point about both God and humans. For our clearest clues about the mystery of God's being and the mystery of our being human, we "look to Jesus." In a most basic sense, this is what it means to be "Christian." Looking to Jesus through our own history and our own eyes will be different -- sometimes drawn by Jesus, sometimes repelled, sometimes enlightened, sometimes confused -- but looking to Jesus is always a focus...a point of reference, a clue. And again, I think this "looking to Jesus" is also a community activity. It's important for each of us to tell what we see. But it is just as important for each of us to listen to others as they tell what they see. And in this holy and reverent and messy exchange of looking and telling it's important for us to be open to having our vision tweaked, or shattered, or expanded as God's spirit moves among us. That's why I think valuing and surrounding ourselves with a diverse community of faith is so essential. For if we believe that in some way, and that somehow, each of us bear the image of God and a spark of the Divine, then it behooves each of us to seek out and be in community with those who are different from us: black and white, straight and gay, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, conservative and liberal, saint and sinner. If we are serious about deepening our understanding of God, and of life, and of our life in the world, it just makes sense that our coming together in a community of love and justice, committed to openness and diversity will enhance and enlighten the spiritual journey we're on.

We find God in community. And we need each other to do that. My friend and mentor, Mahan Siler, offers a helpful way of thinking about this and envisioning this. He suggests that when it comes to God, each of us was handed a ball of yarn all tangled and gnarled. And those of us who enter the race... the spiritual journey...the community of faith are trying to untangle the God question...the yarn...so it can be useful in weaving a more meaningful pattern in our lives and in our world. We have been given a religious ball of yarn for weaving the creation of our lives. And for many of us, the yarn is tangled, even knotted in places, requiring a lot of sorting out before it can be useful.

This untangling of a knotted ball of yarn we see dramatically depicted in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. Celie grew up, saturated with religion. She has a lot of sorting to do. In a sense, it's what the novel is about – how her concept of God changes. Her friend Shug asks her why she pours out her burdens in letters to her sister Nettie rather than to God. Celie responds, "What God do for me?... He gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow...the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act like all the other men I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown." Shug responds worriedly, "Miss Celie, you better hush. God might hear you." But Celie answers with passion, "Let 'im hear me...If he listened to poor, colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you."

And gradually Celie untangles the ball of yarn and begins with it to weave another life with another understanding of God. She begins to see God – not as some remote, judgmental male – but as a joyful, affirming, empowering presence, delighting in common things. It's important to God, Celie comes to believe, that when you pass through the fields that you notice – no, relish – the color purple. It makes her real angry if you don't! So living for God becomes living a life in which you revel in the color purple and other such beauties of the world.

I hope Cross Creek is a safe place for all of us to share our God-stories. And perhaps Alice Walker, author of the *Color Purple*, is right: Church is not a so much a place to find God but more a place to share with others the God we find in our living.

And that is happening. It's been happening with increasing comfort in our short history of being church together, and I'm so grateful for it. I hope that as we continue to journey together that we become more and more a community of theologians, sorting out the images of God in our heads, untangling the religious ball of yarn given to us, weaving in the fabric of our living our own sense of God's presence and purpose. And we can only do such sorting out and weaving together...in community...listening to and reading God-stories, identifying and reacting with "yes, that fits," or "no, it doesn't fit," or "maybe" – and then risking the sharing of who God is to us, the images that connect, the names for God that live.

Yes, a lot of theology is happening here, bubbling up, coming in from the edges and the margins, coming from our keen paying attention to life as it is. We are finding God in community. And with our untangled threads we are – together – weaving the faith that will give shape to a hopeful future.

AMEN.