

## Lost and Found in the Cloud

February 14, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Lexi Boudreax

*Texts: Mark 9: 2-9*

**2** Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, **3** and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one[a] on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5** Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings,[b] one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” **6** He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved;[c] listen to him!” **8** Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. **9** As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer! Amen.

Dear Church, happy Transfiguration Sunday or what one of our deacons called it this week happy clean laundry day! Another attempt at describing the transfiguration goes like this: it is a beguiling and strange story about the time that Jesus led some disciples up a mountain and something truly crazy happened. Jesus's form completely changes or is transfigured, his visage and clothing turning a blinding dazzling white. And if that wasn't shocking enough two more larger- than-life prophets instantly appear beside Jesus, Moses and Elijah, to form the strangest supernatural prophet boy band ever assembled. But in all seriousness, how are we supposed to make sense out of this cacophony of symbols and happenings in this passage? The transfiguration story is one of those "This is who Jesus is" moments. There are so many threads to follow: Jesus as the light of the world, Jesus as connected with the lineage of the prophets, Jesus as superhero and Jesus as the one come to die, allusions to Jesus' baptism, death and resurrection, the commandment to listen to him from a cloud -- all of this is in this passage and more.

I have to admit that initially when I re-read this that I had an impulse to try to get my head around it all, to attempt to unpack every last detail if only to have some sense of control over it. I wanted it all to make sense. I wanted it to fit into something know-able. Karoline Lewis in a podcast commentary about this passage said that "it's not about coming to one understanding, but this passage is about how to try to hold all of these differing things together."

Let's start with where the transfiguration lands in the liturgical calendar and in Jesus' ministry. It comes as the last Sunday of Epiphany and the first Sunday before the start of Lent, acting as a fulcrum and transition point between the seasons, a liturgical space of in-between. This story also is right at the turning point of Jesus' ministry, smack dab in the middle of the Gospel of Mark. It is the event that is sandwiched between the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the beginning of his journey toward Jerusalem and the other mountain that he will eventually climb to the cross. It is a moment of in between and yet of consequence. It is a moment that means something, and yet, we and the disciples can't fully grasp it.

Despite there being so much to talk about I invite us to focus on Peter for a while. His response to his friend and teacher changing form right before his eyes and miraculously talking with the major prophets from his Jewish faith is to try and do something. He offers to build Jesus, Moses, and Elijah all houses on the mountain. He says nervously, oh teacher you know what? It's so good that we are here because we can do something to help this situation! In that moment he assesses what has happened and attempts to quite literally put them in containers that he can control and understand, or perhaps to unpack later when it's more convenient. Why? Maybe it's

because Peter is human, and humans need to make meaning out of the world or perhaps it has something to do with as the text says, “he did not know what to say and he was terrified.” Next, a cloud appeared over them and from the cloud the voice of God oriented them to what this strange scene was all about- that Jesus is God’s Son, the beloved and that they should listen to him.

This cloud fascinates me. Clouds are often associated with the presence of God and the holy in the Jewish scriptures and yet, we usually see them as a negative thing, something to be avoided: cloudy judgment, cloudy water, nebulous situation- when we can’t make sense out of something, or in other words we can’t clarify it, we see that as a threat to our comfort and our safety. Peter had no idea what was going on, he tried to be reasonable, to manage the situation himself, which garnered no response. After trying to make sense of it all, he stopped, he dwelled in the presence of this God cloud, this cloud of unknowing as one English monk from the middle ages has put it, and he heard a message that oriented him to what had happened. The moments when our intellect fails, when our reasoning just can’t conquer what has happened in our lives when we are confronted with unspeakable joy or sorrow it’s possible that these are the moments when our hearts become open to be met by God. - however uncomfortable, messy, frustrating or confusing those moments may be.

It’s hard to believe that the first case of coronavirus was discovered in Massachusetts on February 1st and I wish I could say that it’s hard to believe that we suffered so much needless loss of life. There is not one person who has not been affected by the dual pandemics of covid-19 and systemic racism in this country. We have lived through a whole year of event after event of things just not making sense, of our worlds being flipped upside down, of not being able to plan what lies ahead. A full year dwelling in this cloud of unknowing. And even as the vaccines are coming and it seems as if some semblance of normal is on the horizon this next part of our journey will in some ways be more unknowable than the era of social distancing. How and when will we return? When it feels safe enough how will we hold the trauma, the pain, and the grief of it all? How do we begin to make meaning out of something that we have just been trying to survive? It’s a natural thing for these questions to arise but I’m finding more and more that when we are in this place of seeking security that we forget what God can do when we are dwelling in the cloud.

Over the course of this year, like most millennials I have found my way onto the social media app Tiktok. Among the dance routines and people sharing videos of their pets, there is also a lot of social justice and progressive Christianity content on there to my surprise and delight. Tiktok uses their algorithm to send you videos that they think are relevant to your interests and I guess the algorithm finally figured me out. One video in particular caught my interest a couple of weeks ago. This young woman shared something very compelling about the connection between one of the characteristics of white supremacy, perfectionism and approaches to social justice work. She says, “under white supremacy this construct of perfectionism creates a dynamic in which we are constantly searching for the inadequacies of work and we view inadequacies of work to be a reflection of our own personal inadequacies. This also means that we are searching for the best way of doing things or knowing things, instead of acknowledging that there are many ways to do or know things. -- She continues—If we approach social justice with a desire to capture and conquer and attain some level of mastery over knowledge we are approaching social justice through the lens of colonialism. We have got to approach our learning and growth as expansion outward and inward at the same time. Not as a climb to the top of something. That doesn’t exist.”

“We have got to approach our learning and growth as expansion outward and inward at the same time. Not as a climb to the top of something. That doesn’t exist.” There isn’t any space for perfectionism in the practice of radical, transformational love as that kind of love is soul work, the work that has no laid-out path, the work that does not claim there is only one way of knowing, it has only a willing heart that listens to Jesus as the cloud commands. This work requires a heart that is rooted in its own growth and lack of expectation so much so that the healing expands to envelop its neighbor. It’s fundamentally relational, producing a connection that a posture of knowing cuts off. A friend of mine who is a life coach shared something with me recently. She said, “I think maybe perfectionism is an aversion to the experience of unknowing.” When we focus on extricating ourselves out of the state of unknowing it might be helpful to turn towards a reorientation: to valuing growth and learning that

evades a linear path. To take a moment to breathe in the spaciousness that this orientation affords. Whether in our work towards a more just world through our racial justice ministries or the effort of our homeless ministries or in our work on ourselves and our relationships on this Valentine's day, remaining open to being imperfect, embracing what we don't know, leaning into surprise and mystery and delving into that unknowable work together often gives the Spirit room to conspire with us in the space that remains.

As we move closer to Lent and start to think about our spiritual practices for this season of wilderness I invite us to ask ourselves where we are making room for the Spirit to meet us in our clouds? How do we find glimpses of assurance in the confusing and overwhelming moments of these days? How can we be open to different perspectives and ways of knowing? At the root of this journey perhaps is being assured that even in the cloud, even with no way to articulate what is happening in our lives, even when all we can do is take that next right step, that God sees us as beloved, as enough in our imperfections, as worthy to be in the presence of the holy.

The transfiguration of Jesus is so mystifying that many have created art to capture what it might mean. One of those people is Sufjan Stevens. He wrote a song called The Transfiguration. If you aren't familiar with him, he is an American singer/songwriter who is known for playing multiple instruments himself in the production of his melodies and music. It results in an orchestral sound that is of different styles and textures but is coming from one person, much like the variety of themes in our transfiguration text this morning all having their root in who Jesus is. He sings on repeat at the end of the song:

The face of God covered in a cloud...  
Lost in the cloud, a voice. Have no fear! We draw near!  
Lost in the cloud, a sign. Son of man! Turn your ear.  
Lost in the cloud, a voice. Lamb of God! We draw near!  
Lost in the cloud, a sign. Son of man! Son of God!

If you have time between now and Ash Wednesday I invite you to find this song and give it a listen and to dwell on these lyrics. Listen to them on repeat and take a moment to breathe. Listen to them as a prayer that in the moments when you are lost in the cloud that you might feel the very presence of God, have no fear, and draw near.

Amen.





