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Interpreting Clouds

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Back when I was in college, I had several friends in the meteorology department who loved to teach me about clouds. It was the type of clouds, they said, that were the not so secret give away if you knew what to look for. As I'm sure many of you already know, my friends taught me the clouds that signaled precipitation are called scud, and they are usually darker, smaller, wispy clouds that move quickly across the sky below much fluffier looking clouds. My friends loved to test me by pointing to the scud and asking me what kind of cloud it was. "Scud", I'd proudly answer. "And what does it mean?" they'd ask me. "Rain." I'd answer. Which worked well until one day they tested me when it was below freezing, so they paused awkwardly at my answer and said, "Or snow." Duh. From then on, I always answered, "Precipitation." As it was correct no matter the temperature.

I still keep in touch with my meteorology friends, who now post pictures of clouds on their Facebook pages and Twitter feeds and once in a while, when they post pictures of scud clouds, they quiz me to see if I've forgotten how to interpret clouds.

As beneficial as it might be to read precipitation in the clouds, there are other ways to interpret them, as singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell wrote in her 1968 Grammy Award winning song *Both Sides, Now*. Her song begins with her artist's interpretation of clouds as she wrote: "Rows and flows of angel hair, and ice cream castles in the air and feather canyons everywhere, I've looked at clouds that way." The opening of Mitchell's song easily brings to mind breezy summer days lying on the ground looking up at clouds, watching for shapes and images a person might see in them. It is a sort of innocent and imaginative way to look at clouds.

Mitchell then went on to sing, "But now they only block the sun, they rain and snow on everyone, so many things I could have done, but clouds got in my way. I've looked at clouds from both sides now, from up and down and still somehow its clouds illusions that I recall, I really don't know clouds at all."

How quickly her child like innocence changed to seeing the ways clouds can inhibit sunshine and shadows and outdoor events and travel and all the things we want to do or need to do because clouds can bring disastrous weather like snowstorms and floods. Her lyrics remind us that clouds can mean daydreams, and

symbolize hopeful relief from dry spells, and bring fear of thunderstorms, tornadoes, and remind us of our own fragility; all depending on how we interpret them.

Interpreting clouds is a theme in our Epistle and Gospel readings today. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses the image of a cloud to bring together all those heroes of the faith that can inspire us and give us hope when we are facing struggles in our life and especially when our life and faith encounter or even contribute to conflict. The heroes mentioned like Rahab and Gideon can be reminders that the people God chooses might not be our first choice, but that does not mean they can't be part of God's saving work. People like David can remind us that even the mightiest warrior can fail, as David did many times, and how he repented each time. David can also remind us that he paid a price for his warrior ways when God forbade him from building God's temple or house. Through their lives and especially the way they handled persecution and challenges, this cloud of witnesses also can help us decide how we will choose to live our faith in light of whatever situation we find ourselves in, as they also remind us that living a life of faith does not mean people of faith will have an easy, prosperous life, free from struggles or challenges. This is what makes them heroes, in that they also show us no challenge or struggle is larger than God. Today's section from the letter to the Hebrews is a good reminder for us on the ways we can interpret the lives of those who have gone before us, just as Joni Mitchell's song reminds us there are many ways we can interpret clouds.

Interpretation is what might have gotten Jesus so wound up in today's Gospel lesson, as Jesus seems upset that the same people who can interpret the weather by looking at the clouds aren't as good at figuring out who he is. As I studied today's Gospel and read the many commentaries and scholarly interpretations of it I was surprised by the number of people who advised preachers to ignore today's Gospel because it made them feel uncomfortable. Today Luke seems to be showing us a Jesus who is stressed out and is claiming to be the source of division instead of peace. One commentator was so disturbed by this he wrote this is not the same Jesus as his Jesus.

While I can understand how at first glance this passage can make someone, maybe even some of us who are here this morning uncomfortable because it challenges one interpretation of Jesus as always calm, always docile, always gentle, I also wonder if that interpretation is too one sided for us to get a deeper understanding of the Incarnate Jesus who is, according to our doctrine or belief as Christians, both completely human and God. Just as there is more to clouds than

droplets of water vapor and dust, depending on your interpretation, there is more to Jesus. One of the great opportunities we have when we visit sections of the Gospels on a regular basis like we do on Sunday mornings, is that each time we read them we can be open to insights to help us gain not just a better understanding, but a deeper relationship with God and new possibilities on how to live our faith in our present time.

Remember the chapter this section of Luke's Gospel is in also comes with Jesus reminder of "Don't be afraid." I don't believe Jesus words today are intended to instill fear. I do believe he was challenging his listeners then and us now. The challenge at the time was perhaps to recognize Jesus for who he is. Remember there was a long standing belief and hope that the Messiah was going to be a Davidic like warrior who was going to bring about peace through the violence of military might, by creating an army so large and strong and fierce it would overthrow Rome and be the new force of power. Peace in this context is absence of war through fear, and that might be why Jesus said he did not come to bring peace, as he did not come to bring that kind of peace.

Jesus certainly didn't turn out to be the kind of messiah that raised up a mighty army and defeated a military and political power. Instead Jesus became a victim of that military and political power when he was crucified and died. And in his Resurrection Jesus showed us the kind of Messiah he is, the kind who brings life not death, the kind who shows there can be the power of heaven here on earth. And that is the Jesus that transformed lives, that healed, and who some people followed, formed communities around his teachings and sacraments, and were so dedicated to learning about and following Jesus they eventually began to form a church and a way of life. But not everyone who lived in those days, just like everyone who lives now, were a part of nor wanted to be a part of the Jesus movement.

The division the author of Luke had Jesus go into so much detail about may well have been an indicator of what was happening in Luke's time as families reacted to some of their members becoming Christians. Those who study the early church can tell us that persecution of Christians was common, that sometimes families worried for their relatives who decided to become Christian. This kind of persecution might be hard for us to imagine today, but it was a reality in the beginning of the church. The lifestyle of those early Christians was often radically different from the status quo: especially when it came to worshipping Caesar as god. This different way of living made those family members uncomfortable, and often was perceived as a threat by those in power. So we might understand why

some families might not have been too happy when some of their family members decided they were going to leave the religion of their ancestors and follow the Jesus movement.

And yet it is because of those very people who risked persecution and family division and became part of that great cloud of witnesses, that we are all here today, members of what our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry calls the Episcopal Branch of the Jesus Movement. And while Luke's Gospel might be directed at those who lived in the days of the early church, that doesn't mean it is irrelevant to us. According to New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright, this section of Luke's Gospel has been seen by the Church as a challenge for every generation to pay attention and interpret the times each generation of the church finds itself in and do what it must to live in ways that make heaven present here on earth.

This means today's Gospel is a reminder to pay attention to what we see happening around us like my friends the meteorology students and the singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell pay attention to the clouds in the sky. We might not always like what we see, but we can learn a lot. What we see and what we learn can then influence how we as members of the Church of the Good Shepherd live into our ministry of presence. For example, in the spring I attended a meeting where I learned that students of OU felt like they need a safe place to rest. Not relax, or have a good time, they have places like that. But a quiet place of no or few distractions or demands where they can just be is hard to find. In response to this, we opened the doors of our chapel for several hours during the day. Opening the chapel is also a response to all the news of violence we were hearing, and showed that what we can do when it seems violence is escalating is to open our doors to give everyone access to a different kind of space, sacred space that can give not just comfort but refreshment and strength for the living of life in times of conflict.

We have seen people take advantage of our offer and come in out of the rush of the days and spend a little time in prayer or rest. A few have even left us a bit of their story and expressed gratitude for sharing our sacred space with them.

This doesn't have to be all we do; all of us can pay attention to what is happening around us politically, nationally, personally, and in our community and share our observations with each other. These observations could be the beginning of interpretations that offer opportunities for us to stand against fear, to offer hope, and a bit of heaven here on earth.