

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY
MARCH 2, 2014

FIRST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

EXODUS 24:12-18; PSALM 99; 2 PETER 1:16-21; MATTHEW 17:1-9

Jesus Moments

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe, and in believing, we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

In both our OT and Gospel stories, we hear about a religious figure who goes up a mountain that then becomes covered in a cloud: Moses in the OT, then Moses, Elijah and Jesus, along with his disciples, in the new...

The fact that the cloud is so prominently mentioned in both accounts is very important – not because the authors were interested in meteorology (this is **not** a **weather** report!) – but because a cloud is one vital clue announcing that God has made an appearance in the bible.

Turn to the OT lesson from Exodus and look at vs. 16-17 of ch. 24. Here we'll see **both** signs that together tell us that ***God is in the house!***

¹⁶*The **glory of the Lord** settled on Mount Sinai, and the **cloud** covered it for six days; on the seventh day **he called to Moses out of the cloud.***¹⁷*Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a **devouring fire** on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.*

There you have it – clouds and lightning, smoke and fire...and when put together, they tell us that **God**, the **Almighty**, the **Glory of the Lord** is present.

I can think of two other great O.T. stories of how smoke and fire signaled God's presence among the people. When the Israelites escaped from Egypt, they were led out in the wilderness by two symbols...a pillar of cloud by day, and fire by night.

Secondly, it also happens at the call of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has a vision of God seated on his throne and surrounded by angel-type creatures called seraphim. One of the seraphs takes a tong, picks up a burning coal and touches Isaiah on the mouth as a symbol of how he will now be speaking the Word of God. The throne room is filled with smoke and...fire (**because God is present!**) and the creatures are all singing, ***Holy, holy, holy...***

Now, when I was a kid, we sang Holy, Holy, Holy as our opening hymn *every Sunday*. Did anyone else do that? How many of you know the hymn? The first verse reads:

*Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee.
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity. **Sing that first verse with me...***

It's a great song of praise, right?...at least that's what **I** always thought. In **fact**, says Prof. Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary, this song sung by the seraphim before God actually has an edge to it. It's like they're flying around crying ***Holy Moly, God Almighty is here!!!!***

Smoke and fire, cloud and lightning – those symbols continue to carry a sense of power and mystery...and **fear**.

It made me think of scenes from two movies – one very old and the other very new. You remember the Wizard of Oz, and how happy the three travelers were to get to see the great man? Yet when the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man, Dorothy (and Toto too!), enter the great hall – their mood changes completely. Smoke and fire, along with a booming voice, fill them with a sense of dread.

They don't have Jesus to touch and encourage them, but they do have Toto who exposes the Wizard as a fraud...

And then I thought of the second Hunger Games movie, called **Catching Fire**. **Who here has seen that show?** To sum it up: a group of people are forced to fight each other to stay alive – even as they're also threatened by ingenious traps that are just as deadly.

In **this** story, a group of exhausted and thirsty combatants are surprised to see a fog, a cloud, a mist that starts to materialize through the trees. At first glance, it looks innocent, peaceful, maybe even comforting from the heat that they've had to endure...

But then...those tender tendrils of mist...turn out to be deadly to anyone who is touched by them. The fog is poisonous – and causes a deadly burning wherever it touches the skin. The contestants run as fast as they can in the opposite direction – they are terrified of that lethal mist.

No one escapes unharmed... some die, **all** are wounded by that cruel, callous, caustic cloud... But in a scene that's filled with beautiful overtones of baptism, the people finally discover that water cleanses their wounds, that water neutralizes the venom, that water washes away the deadly effects of the poison...in the same way that the waters of baptism wash from us the deadly effects of sin...

And then I thought about my family's tornado experience in St. Peter back in March, 1998. But before I go there, I'm going to ask a question that I'd like a *child* to answer. **When the sirens go off during tornado season, what are people supposed to do?**

-Correct, we're to go to the basement.

Here's my next question: **When the sirens go off during tornado season, what do many people actually do?** Exactly! You go outside to look at the clouds...!

When the sirens went off the *first* time we all went...*outside to look at the clouds...* Never before – nor ever since – have I seen clouds that were so eerie, so ominous, so filled with angry lightning. So when the siren went off the 2nd time, we went downstairs and waited for the storm to do its damage. *Holy Moly* we said to ourselves...

Now back to our bible lesson for today. Jesus takes three disciples with him and climbs a high mountain. While there, some really cool things happen:

- Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest heroes from the past – appear
- Jesus is changed, transformed, transfigured – he becomes dazzling white, like he's glowing on the inside with the light of heaven
- Finally, a cloud covers them all, and God speaks from that cloud.

Those are all very cool things, but – *God-in-the-cloud* finally got to the disciples. In fact, we're told that they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear... Says Eugene Peterson, *They fell flat on their faces, scared to death!*

And being afraid is a feeling we **all** know – *all too well*. We know what it's like to be afraid for ourselves; we know what it's like to be afraid for others: those who are sick, loved ones in **harm's way**, strangers who are caught in **catastrophes**...

So the question is not: *Have you ever been afraid?* Instead, the question is: *who or what helped you overcome your fear?*

Who remembers what happens to ease the fear of the disciples on the mountain top?

Exactly. **Jesus** touches them, and encourages them... *Get up*, he says to his fearful friends, *and don't be afraid*.

Think about a time when you've been afraid like that, **lost in a cloud** (literally or figuratively), that **scared** you (literally or figuratively). *Who came and comforted you? Who touched you, and encouraged you? In other words, who was Jesus to you at that moment?*

After the tornado my family and I saw lots of *Jesus moments*.

- Neighbors** whose houses weren't damaged took us in and helped us get back on our feet.
- The **Pepsi Man** came to our neighborhood and unloaded crates of bottled water on the street corner for anyone who needed it.
- Busloads of volunteers** walked through our yards, picking up garbage and cleaning up messes.
- Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota** was there almost immediately to help the healing process begin.

Each of these people – and many others – touched our hearts and encouraged us to not be afraid. I'm sure you all have similar sorts of blessing stories to tell.

And today, on top of it all, we get to celebrate another wonderful experience of Jesus touching our lives, calming our fears, and giving us encouragement – we get to share in the Lord's Supper.

In a very special sense, Jesus' body and blood is the **best** way that God comes to us – to touch, to bless, to encourage us – all so that that you and I might be able to offer a *Jesus Moment* to others who are afraid. Amen.