**Exodus 40:33-38** February 23, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Transfiguration

*Exodus 40:33Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work.*

*34Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*

*36In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; 37but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. 38So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.*

**Life under “The Cloud”**

Dear Fellow Redeemed by Our Glorious Lord,

At first light on the eastern horizon, stars still above, a man comes in from outside and crawls back under the covers. His wife mumbles, “Can we sleep in?” “Yep. The Cloud says we can stay put this morning.” She says, “Then we can. The Cloud is always right.” Life governed by The Cloud isn’t a *Matrix-*like future digital dystopia. This imaginary conversation took place long, long ago. The husband’s mind wanders on, thinking of last couple mornings and the awesome sight of The Cloud, that fiery presence of the Lord, rising from just above God’s Tent of Meeting on the desert floor. What a sight! His wife continues, “Good. I was hoping we could spend a few days here; the kids need a rest before hitting the trail again.” She is also thinking how glad she will be to not begin the day with taking down the tent and packing up their meagre belongings for another 10-mile trek through the Sinai desert—with their kids. Welcome to the Israelites on their desert journey under The Cloud, circa 1400B.C.

That’s how it worked for four decades. From the time the Lord God broke the chains of their Egyptian slave masters until they arrived in the promised land, for forty years of “wandering” in the wilderness, the Israelites moved, not when Moses told them to, but when this mysterious presence of the Lord, The Cloud, moved. When it didn’t, they didn’t.

Wouldn’t that be great? To walk outside the house in the morning—there are a dozen of you or so who live close enough to Faith Lutheran Church to imagine this—to walk outside your house in the morning, casting a glance over in the general direction of Faith, Lutheran, and seeing above it a fiery manifestation of the Lord what you need to do today?

How many a Christian has earnestly prayed for that kind of direction! “God, please show me what to do!” How many a young Christian has asked for God’s direction when wondering if they are ever going to get married, or to whom? How many a Christian, stressed out by parents, professors and classmates over career choices has asked God, “Please show me what you want me to do with my life!” Or in the middle years of life prayed, “Show me how to get out of the financial mess I am in,” or “…out of the job I hate.”

Not all prayers for direction are prayers of desperation. Many of our prayers for God to lead the way are prayers of hope. “Lord, please help me forget my past; to hate the sins I once loved.” “Jesus, help me to forgive others as you have forgiven me.” “Please, God, show me how I can give thanks for all your blessings to our family.”

How many of our prayers are simply asking for what those Israelites woke up to every morning: direction. Wouldn’t it be great to have a special presence of the Lord always within eyesight? Wouldn’t it be great to have God give you a little nudge in the right direction every morning? Wouldn’t we love to have some sort of physical manifestation of God among us?

That situation, a situation where God is almost literally in the driver’s seat, is where our reading puts us. These words are the perfect end to the second book of the Bible, Exodus. Exodus starts with the Israelites in slavery. Then God called Moses to be his right hand, to strike Egypt with ten plagues, to open the Red Sea before his people and to close a watery grave over an entire division of Egyptian soldiers. Then in the heat and sand of the desert, God provided his people with manna and quail. He led them on a desert odyssey to the foot of frightening Mount Sinai where God thundered and then summoned Moses up the mountain.

Just here is an important question that has everything to do with our reading. Do you know why God summoned Moses up on Mount Sinai? If you remember your Sunday School lessons, you remember that Moses went up to get The Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. But that’s not the whole story.

Let me read a portion from *most* of what God told Moses up on Mount Sinai—the stuff you didn’t learn in Sunday School: The Lord said to Moses, *“Make a table of acacia wood—two cubits long, a cubit wide and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold and make a gold molding around it. Also make around it a rim a handbreadth wide and put a gold molding on the rim. Make four gold rings for the table and fasten them to the four corners, where the four legs are…”* Have your eyes started to glaze over? It goes on like that page after page, chapter after chapter. Almost two-thirds of what God told Moses on Mount Sinai was mind-numbing building instructions for Israel’s first worship facility. Then, once the directions have been given, Exodus continues for page after page, chapter after chapter: *“[Then] they made the table of acacia wood—two cubits long, a cubit wide, and a cubit and a half high…”* No wonder people trying to read through their Bibles get bogged down in Exodus!

But seriously, what does this tell us, that most of God’s words on Mount Sinai were about a worship facility, called The Tabernacle? Maybe it should tell us, that more important than “following the rules,” is cultivating a relationship with God. Maybe it is telling people who try to be honest and hard-working and once in a while help others but rarely open their Bibles and infrequently come to God’s house, that their priorities are screwed up. Without going further, I think that’s part of what God is telling us.

But a more important question is, Why was that Tabernacle so important to God? Because it was central to his people’s spiritual life. At that Tabernacle, God revealed his mind and will to Moses and through his prophets (Ex 29:42). At the Tabernacle, sacrifices were made which atoned for sin. At this Tabernacle, God’s people presented their offerings of Thanksgiving. At this Tabernacle God’s people met together and enjoyed their spiritual fellowship.

But there is one more special thing about the Tabernacle, the most important of all. In this fortieth chapter of Exodus, after God’s great acts to redeem Israel from slavery, we have these words of our reading: ***“Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work. Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.”***

Do realize what just happened? He whom all the forces of nature obeyed in smiting the Egyptians. He who split open the Red Sea before Israel, and closed it behind them; he who had dwelt up on top of Mount Sinai in a thundering dark cloud, now peacefully comes to rest in the midst of his people. He takes up residence in a place built from the offerings of and by the hands of his people. The Lord God whom no building can house, whom not even the heavens above can contain, this Lord God said, “I am pleased to live in this here tent, with my people.” And there he stayed.

***“In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels.***

We sometimes say that when people get married, they get hitched. In a sense, God got hitched to Israel. The free and independent God who depends on no one for anything, bound himself to his people in an oath. He submitted to living in their midst. And for forty years, he made a special show of it, with that cloud above it. That’s what the cloud above the Tent of Meeting and the glory filling the tabernacle meant. They were his people and he was their God.

This was not lost on Jesus’ disciples when they stood on that mountaintop, Jesus in glory, and a shining cloud enveloping them. They knew they were not seeing something new. They were seeing something dreadfully old, ancient even, that had not been seen on earth for centuries. That glory of the Lord which appeared when Moses completed the Tabernacle, that same cloud of the Lord’s glory surrounded Jesus to declare to the disciples that in him all the fullness of the deity lived in bodily form.

Those three disciples of Jesus, Jews who probably knew their Old Testament better than you know your New Testament, when they saw the cloud enveloping them, they knew what it was. That’s why they, at the same time as being scared out of their wits, also said, “It is good for us to be here,” and “Let’s put up three shelters.” Just like we would love to have God whispering in our ear at all the crucial junctures of our life, those disciples thought, “Wouldn’t it be great to have God literally, physically, visibly with us at all times? Like the Israelites of old?” Indeed!

But there’s more. Let’s link the tabernacle and Jesus’ transfiguration with hindsight that the disciples did not have. Think of how all that was true of the tabernacle is also true of Jesus. \*Remember how God told Moses he would spoke to humanity at the tabernacle? So too Jesus said that he revealed his Father’s with clarity none other could offer. \*In Jesus, as in that tabernacle, atonement for human sin is made; we filthy sinful beings are cleansed of all that is wrong with us through a sacrifice for sin. \*In Jesus and in that tabernacle, believers have fellowship with fellow believers. (Do we not call one another brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus?) \*And in Jesus’ physical body, as in the Old Testament physical tabernacle, God has chosen to live among us, to assure us that he knows what is going on in our lives, and that he is always near. The Tabernacle was prophecy of our Savior. Jesus Christ is fulfillment and perfection of that cloud-filled Tabernacle.

Which makes us think about that couple in their tent, content to get their daily marching directions from The Cloud. Two reflections on this:

First of all, don’t think that such arrangement would suddenly make us all saints. Sure, you would think that if any time you stepped out of your house you saw the Glory of the Lord hovering in the sky a few hundred yards away, that that would make you into a saint. It didn’t. The Israelites marching under that cloud were a remarkably stubborn bunch of malcontents. Read it in Exodus and Numbers! And the disciples having Jesus, the Son of God, in their midst had its limits. One of them, in spite of seeing miracles every day, still betrayed him to death. Another, in spite of being enveloped in that glorious cloud with Jesus, Moses, Elijah, a few weeks later turned coward and denied he even knew Jesus. In our day we have a bigger slice of God than any of them. We know about Bethlehem and the Sea of Galilee; Pilate and Golgotha. But that doesn’t keep us from routinely throwing off God’s will. God be merciful to us!

A second application: We do still have The Cloud in our lives. Here is how you get daily directions from it: You wake up in the morning, you take a Bible and you put it in your lap, you say a brief prayer, and you open that Bible up, and you start reading. Or you take a devotion book like our church’s *Meditations* book, you find the day’s date, and you take two minutes to read a Scripture based devotion. Or if your mornings are hectic, you put the Bible or devotion book beside your bed and do the same thing, only just before going to sleep. It’s simple. It’s effective. That is God Among Us. But best of all, like that tabernacle, our time in direct communication with God will continually direct us, not to God’s laws, but to Jesus the place where we are forgiven and put right with God. Amen.