

Luke 9:28-36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

“God of the Clouds—Church of Doubts”**Rev. Rebecca Aist McFee****August 9, 2009**

I want to start with a word of thanks. I've been here a week, unsettled, not yet out of suitcases, but a word of thanks to a wonderful staff what has helped me, and many of you that I have already met, that have graced my first week. I look forward to the meeting of the rest of you as we start this relationship together. A few days ago Senior Pastor Charles Schuster asked me, are you feeling like you're in a cloud or fog? Yes, that's exactly how I feel. I think it feels more like having a heavy dose of cold medicine for like two months. People are just kind of moving in and out of my world, and you don't look familiar yet, but we're working on it. I don't know if you remember that old cartoon, I think his name was Mr. Magoo and he would walk around and fall off cliffs because he didn't have his glasses on. Is that just me? Do people remember him? I feel like I'm wandering around without glasses, but God has graced me to not fall off any cliffs, and I thank you for helping me in the right direction. The humorous part about Charles asking me if I felt like I was in a fog is, I had already chosen the topic for today's sermon, and it's about a fog. So I don't know if subconsciously I feel like I have a lot to say about this topic, but we'll see.

The truth of the matter is that my husband and I like to hike. I would not say that we're good hikers. We always have this problem and that is, you know, when other hikers talk about getting to the top of the mountain, they usually have pictures of things they can see for two or three hundred miles away, and it's absolutely stunning and beautiful. But when you look in our photo albums, after we've taken a vacation, and you see our walk up the mountain, all those pictures are white. There's nothing to see, usually, when we get up there, because we always hit the top of the mountain right as the fog has descended, and our view is the thick cloud. Well, I kind of wonder if our mountaintop experiences that we talk about in religious circles are perhaps romanticized a bit. Perhaps it might be nice that we get to those mountaintop experiences and see for a million miles, but my experience has been one in which the mountain at the top is not always clear. That we

indeed encounter God, but it also comes with some doubt involved, some uncertainty. And we see this in the very story of the transfiguration. The disciples, we are told, in this story, by the way usually told around the time of lent, have ascended this mountain, and there they find Jesus transfigured, and there is Moses and Elijah, and they have this experience with God. But we are also told in three Gospel texts that they were surrounded by a thick cloud. That is, I wonder if they could see beyond their feet, if they only saw white. I don't know what they saw, but they certainly encountered God. And it makes me wonder if sometimes our encounters with God are in the midst of times in which we don't feel like we can see, times of doubt, uncertainty, when we can only see our two feet and little before us.

One thing that does bother me about the rise of Christian fundamentalism is that it has defined faith in ways that I don't feel has left us much room to doubt. That is, for fundamentalism has become part of our own views, that to doubt means that we have lost faith, or to be a believer means that we are not to doubt, and those two things have become polar opposites. You're one or the other. I recall leaving for seminary and in my home church that's United Methodist, a few people pulled me aside to warn me that this United Methodist seminary might teach me to question Scripture, and then my faith might never be the same again, and in fact, it probably never was. But that didn't mean that it was bad.

I don't know if you've seen the recent movie, *Doubt*. It stars one of my favorites, Meryl Streep, and she portrays a nun and the principal of a parochial school in 1964. This nun has a very strict view of the world that is dualistic, it's black and white, it's yes or no, you're either good or you're evil, and for her the church and her school have the answers for people. The church is a place that is right and correct, and without giving away the movie, the title will tell you that even in this person who believes that everything is right with the church, even she comes to realize that there are doubts. Well, I don't want to prolong a history lesson here, but I do want to say a word about Rene Descartes. This was part of the series that was put together. Rene Descartes was an important figure in thinking about questions. He was sometimes called the Father of Skepticism. He stood at a very important time in history, when a lot was changing, in which we were starting to move out of this pre-modern worldview that we might call the Dark Ages, but we weren't quite in the age of reason and science that we might also call the Enlightenment. He stood right in the middle. We know him to be a philosopher and a theologian, but he was also a wonderful mathematician. He had one leg in both worlds, one in theology and one in science. And he took a little bit of this new appeal to observation, what we might call the scientific method, and he saw that it was good for us to challenge things, to push things, to observe things, to question things, because there we have better answers in the world. And so his view was, anything worth living for was worth challenging, because it is in a challenge that we make things better, that we refine them.

As you would probably imagine, the church wasn't real keen on this idea. They had stood as the center point of all answers, and here's this man who's trying to tell people it's good to question even the most basic of doctrines of the church. The church said he was atheist. The church said he hated the church. We find other writings of people who knew

him personally, who said that they actually believed he was quite devout, to the end of his life, that he wanted the church to be the best it could, and in a time of transition, the church needed to hear the concerns and questions of the people around him. He saw questions not as a spiritual threat, but a spiritual imperative. And so when he makes his famous proclamation, "I think, therefore I am," he is saying to us, we think, we challenge, we push things, we doubt, because it is in those moments that we live, that we exist. I would switch it around and say the opposite, it is that when we lack questions, we stop living. When we stop asking the good questions, we cease to really live.

I think that we are in another period of history in which the questions are bubbling up. We're seeing this in a lot of arenas, not just religion and theology, but we're also seeing it in politics and economics and other areas. People are questioning. And I'm not just saying this of my own thoughts, but we are finding in sociology, in people who are studying generations, that there are more questions that people are asking. One example of this is actually an older book, James Fowler wrote a book several years ago entitled *Stages of Faith*. In *Stages of Faith*, he says that just like developmental psychological studies of people's lives, we go through those same sort of developmental stages of faith. There is a stage that he says occurs in our forties or fifties called the conjunctive stage, in which all those things that we had kind of come to believe to be true, start to fall apart on us, and we have to go through another stage of questioning until we can start to re-assemble and synthesize that in a new way.

More people who are doing generational studies are saying that this conjunctive stage we're starting to see in a younger age group, in people in their twenties. That people are starting to wrestle earlier with their life questions. And so there is a sense in which we have a culture of questions, and we as a church must ask how we are addressing and making connections with those people. I find this to be accurate with my own experience of working with college students. I've worked in campus ministry for about the last seven years. One of the interesting things I've found is, for a while we were doing programs such as Bible studies and discussion groups in which usually a local minister would come in and talk with the students, and those programs were good. They were okay, they were fine. But one year we had a planning session and asked the college students, "How could we do things better?" and all of them said, "We would like to be able to ask some of the questions. How do we do that?" We reformed things, not in any grand way, but in a way in which they were able to ask the questions that were pressing for them, with talk back about theology, and here's what I found that surprised me. They could ask their questions, but it was more the community that formed around that group, because it seemed that one student would bring a question, but another student would come and challenge it, and then they would start talking about, "Why is this question important to you?" and what started to develop was a community in which they started hearing each other's questions, and it was as much about hearing questions as it was about asking questions.

We are to be a community of people where we sometimes have answers. Of course the church has answers. But where we are also challenged in the gray area is to hear the people who are having pressing questions about faith, about life and about death. Kathleen Norris, some of you may read some of her books, she's a Christian author but

she comes from the standpoint of a person who had great doubts about Christianity, wondered if she could even really be a part of this thing that we call faith. She writes this. She says, "When I first stumbled upon the Benedictine Abbey where I am now an oblate, I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned about my weighty doubts. I was a bit disappointed. I had thought that my doubts were spectacular obstacles to my faith, and was confused but intrigued that an old monk blithely stated that doubt was merely a seed of faith, a sign that faith was alive and ready to grow." She was lucky. She found a community that was willing to not push her aside or see her as a threat, but to welcome her in and to know that her questions could make them a better community. And that's where we stand today, being a church that's open to the questions of others, even if they seem to challenge us.

I'm a real fan of the writing of Elie Wiesel, the Jewish Holocaust survivor. He, throughout a lot of his writings, makes mention of asking good questions. He mentions this in several places, and though I noted it, it wasn't until maybe four or five years ago that I went through a point in my life with lots of questions, lots of doubts that pertained to all areas of my life. And then his writings really became clear to me, that when he says that life is about asking good questions, perhaps it's because sometimes in life we have no longer have a place of answers. And then we have to depend on the questions. We have to ask God good questions, and perhaps God comes to us with even more questions, and that doesn't mean that's a good place to be, and it doesn't always feel right. But sometimes that's where we are.

And it's occurred to me in reading Elie Wiesel, that sometimes we must be with the questions because that's where people are. It's somewhat of a spiritual care thing that we do, that when we hear people's questions, we hear their needs. We hear their fears. We hear in their questions, dreams that they have, and what kept them up late at night that they were thinking about, and it occurs to me that when we start journeying with the questions of others, instead of stopping them and giving them the answers, that we're helping, that we're struggling with them, and that we become their companion, and in the world today I think people want companions. For Wiesel the struggle in the concentration camp didn't come down to the certainty of Jewish law. It came down to the uncertainty of their human struggle. It came down to where God might find them and where they might find God in a great cloud of uncertainty. And so I return to Descartes, to say perhaps we could say, "We think, therefore we are." We question, we challenge, we doubt, we observe, we live in the fog, because like in that transfiguration story, in a fog is often where we find the presence of God. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.