

Camille Cook Howe
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration Sunday

February 27th, 2022
Luke 9:28-36
Weighed down with sleep

You may have had the experience of flying into a cloud on an airplane. Clouds can be strikingly beautiful as you admire them from the window seat - the unique contours, the weightless wisps, the lifelike movement. Then the beauty from the edges suddenly is absorbed as you move inside the cloud. You lose the sense of sight inside the cloud, and you now must “see” in new ways – you feel the rumble of the cloud shaking your vessel, you hear the air passing around you, you smell the invisible filtered air - you live momentarily in the clouds. It can be unsettling and disorienting even terrifying especially when those clouds are dark, heavy, and ominous.

It feels like we have moved into that kind of cloud this week as our fragile globe became drastically less stable. The world collectively moved into a new cloud as Russia unleashed war on Ukraine. For weeks, we have watched as these clouds formed and we wondered if they would lash out or dissipate. The clouds did not recess, instead they rained down in the form of advancing troops, missiles, and tanks.

I spent the summer of 2000, in Ukraine running summer camps in three different cities, Kiev, Donetsk, and Odessa. I was with a group from the Salvation Army who was there to bring sports and crafts and bible stories to local children, most who were impoverished and many orphans. I remember in Donetsk they were so excited to see us they would climb the trees each day to wake us, yelling “Good morning, Americans” into the windows. It was a formative experience for me to learn about their culture and their history and their hopes. That was twenty-two years ago, I cannot help but think about the boys who were so excited about the frisbee I brought and wanting to play from dawn to dusk. They would now be 25–35-year old’s, armed to defend their homes, their families, and their country in this cloud they have entered.

It is terrifying to be in a cloud because you don’t know what is going to happen. When Jesus was on the mountain with Peter, James, and John – a strange summit occurred. Moses and Elijah appeared to talk with Jesus. We call it the transfiguration because their appearances changed, Jesus’ face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. They were talking about what was going to happen in Jerusalem and what Jesus was going to accomplish. They were talking about Jesus’ death and how it would occur and what this would achieve. As Fred Craddock notes, this is a mountaintop experience, but not the kind “about which persons write glowingly of sunrises, soft breezes, warm friends, music, and quiet time. On this mountain the subject is death, and the frightening presence of God reduces those present to silence. In due time, after the resurrection, they will remember, understand, and not feel heavy. In fact, they will tell it broadly as good news.”

On the mountain, Peter and James and John were weighed down by sleep – but still they were awake enough to witness the transfiguration. They were exhausted from the excitement and the journey, but they overheard the conversation and they witnessed Moses and Elijah appearing and Jesus being transfigured. They witnessed the glory of the Lord on the mountain, and their reactions was that they wanted to build tents and stay there on the mountain forever. But this

was not how things were to unfold – they had work to do in Jerusalem. Jesus had a mission to fulfil, and they had callings to live out. And at that very moment, a cloud appeared, they saw it appear, then they felt its shadow, and then it covered them, and they were terrified. The disciples lost their sense of sight, they lost that glimpse of God’s glory they had seen, and they were afraid.

E.L. Doctorow said once said that 'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.' When dark clouds veil our sight, we rely on our other senses and for Christians one of those senses is that of faith. We rely on our faith, which tells us to trust Jesus when we are in the dark valleys. Our faith tells us not lose hope amid war and strife and suffering. Our faith tells us that light will shine in the darkness and Jesus will bring that light into the world. In the blurriness of the cloud the disciples had to use their other senses and it was then that God’s voice was incredibly clear, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

When they left the mountain to return to their work the mandate given to them was to listen to Jesus. Jesus was the headlight that would illumine their steps enough to guide them. We need to remember this when we are given to despair at the state of the world. We need to remember this when we hear about atrocities in our own country. We need to remember this when we experience grief and pain in our own lives. The clouds come and it is then we must listen. We must listen for God. We must listen to Jesus. In the midst of clouds and chaos, we must use other senses – particularly our sense of faith.

As we celebrate Black History month, we use the music of African American composers in our service. We celebrate their talents and contributions to the church and to worship and our culture and on this day when we are amid a cloud, we also remember that some of the music grew out of the suffering of enslavement and exile, the music was produced as joy in the face of suffering, the music was a form of resistance to despair.

Through the music people were using different senses when the vision for a better future was blurred by the clouds of prejudice and exclusion and subjugation. Maybe they couldn’t see the vision of a better future but still they could sing. And singing has power. It transfigures us from the hollow and lonely and afraid to those who are emboldened and united and filled. And so we join in singing and in prayer, for all who find themselves this day afraid, far from home, under attack, misunderstood, discriminated against, depressed – living in heavy, dark clouds. We sing for them. We sing with them.

The poet Rumi writes these words:

God picks up
the reed-flute world
and blows.

Each note is a need
coming through one of us,
a passion,

a longing-pain.

Remember the lips
where the wind-breath
originated,

and let your note be clear.
Do not try to end it.

Be your note.

I'll show you how it is enough.

Go up on the roof at night
in this city of the soul.

Let everyone climb onto the roofs
and sing their notes.

Sing loud.

We all must remember the glimpses of God's glory we have witnessed in our lives and hold fast to them. We must remember the times when justice prevailed, the times when good has conquered evil, the times when the David's beat the Goliath's.

As Paul writes to Timothy, "God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God." Acts tell us when Paul and Silas were in prison, they sang hymns. We sing not because we know how each step unfolds but we sing because it is God who shines the light into our darkness.

So go up on the roof at night in this city of the soul. Let everyone climb onto the roofs and sing their notes. Sing loud.

Sing for Ukraine. Sing for the refugees. Sing for the brokenhearted. Sing for the victims of war young and old. Sing for the ways this world is imperfect and broken and hurting. And when you have sung your note then do your part to overcome evil with good. Jesus needs disciples who will follow in his way.

Amen.

