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“Walking into the Cloud”

Today, I want to preach something I’m calling “Walking into the Cloud.” There’s a popular saying. You may have heard it. “If you want to get what you never got, you gotta do what you’ve never done.” I recognize the grammar is a little off. Catchy sayings sometimes require a little poetic license. “If you want to get what you never got, you gotta do what you’ve never done.”

It’s pretty self-explanatory. It alludes to the idea that we might want our lives to be different, we might want our world to be different, but we cling to our familiar habits and patterns of behavior. Our habits and behaviors lead to certain outcomes. Different outcomes require different habits and behaviors.

In fact, there is another saying that defines insanity as doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. “If you want to get what you never got, you gotta do what you’ve never done.” I believe there’s an image in our reading from Exodus that represents the willingness to do what we’ve never done. It’s that of “walking into the cloud.”

The context of today’s reading is the Exodus. God brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and led them toward a land they were promised, a land in which God would make of them a mighty nation. Their journey took them through the wilderness, where they arrived at Mt. Sinai and a definitive moment in Israel’s history: the giving of the law.

God told Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for [the people’s] instruction.” When Moses began to climb, we’re told “the cloud” covered the mountain. The cloud represented God’s glory and God’s presence. But, at that time, the presence of God was dangerous and scary.

It was believed that no one could see the face of God and live. God’s glory was so magnificent and so powerful it would simply consume a mere mortal. That’s why God stayed at a distance. The mountaintop was God’s natural habitat, high above, and inaccessible.

In fact, I would suggest the law and commandments were the vehicles by which God chose to be present among the people. God would give them as a gift and the people would carry the law and commandments with them. They would revere them. They would write them on their hearts. The glory of God would manifest among them as they ordered their lives according to God’s laws.

I realize this is very different than the way many Christians view the biblical laws. We might see them as a list of do’s and don’ts provided by a God who’s a bit of a taskmaster. Granted, they were written down thousands of years ago. Many of them are not morally binding in today’s world.

In Bible study, this week, I suggested thinking about what it would be like if we didn’t have traffic laws. Imagine what it would be like on the roads if we had no rules of the road. One of my pet peeves is people who drive in the passing lane when they’re not passing anyone. The rule is if you’re not passing anyone, move to the right. It’s not that hard. It doesn’t take much effort. Life would be so much better if people just adhered to the rules of the road.

If you don't think the law was the most thoughtful gift God could have given, think about the Constitution of the United States. It's the thing that maintains our nation. It keeps us from going off the rails. It gives us norms and expectations in order to live together in some semblance of peace. The biblical law and commandments served the same purpose, which is why they were considered such precious and sacred gifts from God.

We're told, "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses [from] out of the cloud." To emphasize the scariness of this moment, we're told how it appeared from the foot of the mountain: "Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel."

Then, we're told, "Moses entered the cloud." What a statement! A cloud or a fog represents uncertainty. When you are in it, you can't see clearly the path forward. You can't see that which lies beyond. It can be disorienting and even scary. However, Moses had to walk into the cloud in order to encounter God and to receive the gifts of God.

By walking into the cloud, Moses did something no one had ever done. He went to a place no one had ever gone before. God wanted God's glory to dwell among the people. But for God to come here, Moses first had to go there. If you want to get what you never got, you gotta do what you've never done.

I think this image of walking into the cloud could be helpful for us. Because, honestly, I think we tend to avoid the cloud. I think we tend to be creatures of habit, content with sticking to the safety and familiarity of our daily routines. We avoid situations that make us uncomfortable. We avoid situations in which we are not in control.

So, what would it look like for us to walk into the cloud? For one thing, I think the season of Lent, which begins this week on Ash Wednesday, is a time for walking into the cloud. It's a time to leave our familiar routines and take on something new and different.

For example, I'll be leading guided prayer and meditation on Zoom. You might say, "Pastor Eric, I don't know how to pray. I've never been comfortable with it." To that, I say, "Enter the cloud. That's why I'll guide you through it. Lent is a time to do things we don't normally do. It's a time to walk into the cloud. If you want God to loom larger in your life, if you want a deeper faith, you might have to try some things you don't normally do. If you want to get what you never got, you gotta do what you've never done.

Talk about "walking into the cloud." This Lent, we are literally inviting you to go on walks. I'm going to see how many of them I can do. They vary in difficulty. One of the them will go up Mt. Agamenticus. If there's a cloud covering Mt. A. that day, it could be interesting.

I'm inviting you to read the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* and join a discussion group. That book provided me a very different perspective on the world around me. There's a gift in being exposed to new and different perspectives. It's a way to walk into the cloud.

I think the message of today's story is that there is a gift in entering the cloud. God rewards us when we take that chance. We walk into the cloud when we decide to face an uncertain future with courage and hope. We walk into the cloud when we take on a new venture,

not knowing what the results will be. We walk into the cloud when we risk failure or embarrassment in order to answer the call of God. Entering the cloud leads to divine encounter.

This story from Exodus provides the background for the Transfiguration of Jesus in the gospels. Jesus went up the mountain with a few of his disciples. There his face shone like the sun and his clothes turned dazzling white. When Moses came down the mountain, he brought with him the law, just a taste of God's glory. Jesus embodied the glory of God. When he came down the mountain, God's glory dwelt among us in flesh and blood. That's why Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the law, I've come to fulfill it."

God's plan was for the glory of God to dwell right here, right where we are. And all that's required is for someone to enter the cloud.