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**Selections from: Genesis 9,**  
**Exodus 13, Matthew 16, Luke 12**

### **Clouds of the Bible: Signs of the Times**

If you were able to join us last week, you'll remember how we began our six week "Clouds of the Bible" sermon series with the opening verse of Psalm 19 that now so beautifully graces our worship space with our new lovely, cloud banner – *"The heavens are telling the glory of God; the skies are proclaiming the work of God's hands."*

The invitation last week was simply to look up, and to spend some time these weeks pondering the sky and the clouds, what Emerson called "the daily bread for the eyes."

Well, if Emerson was right about clouds being a type of "daily bread," then this past week would have meant some pretty lean days for us here, as up until the last couple of days really, we have had a pretty good stretch of mostly cloudless, bluebird skies here.

Although I enjoy being out in the summer sunshine as much as anyone, I admit that come midweek I was starting to get a bit nervous about it. How am I supposed to preach about clouds, I thought, if there are no clouds to whisper to me what to say?

Around mid-week I had an interesting cloud conversation along these lines. It was with a man who was gushing about all these cloudless days that we've had this month. In short, he was happy because his solar panels at his home were happy, producing electricity at record rates. "I don't think I've ever seen this many days without clouds!" he enthused, his face beaming with happiness like the sun. I tried to smile along with him, and share in the joy of his happy solar panels, but inside I couldn't help but feel some sadness. "That's great that you're panels are doing so well," I said. "But I've had the opposite reaction to all the sun these weeks. See, I'm trying to preach a 'Clouds of the Bible' sermon series, and I've been inviting my flock to spend as much time looking at the clouds as possible... So, what are we supposed to do if there aren't any clouds to look at?!?"

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That exchange I had is perhaps indicative of one of the more general ways that clouds tend to figure in our cultural imagination...in that, more often than not, in our culture at least, clouds tend to take on a slightly negative connotation, whereas sunshine tends to take on a positive connotation. So, for example, when we're worried about the future, we say that it feels like there's "a cloud on my horizon." Or when we're feeling down, we say we're feeling "under

the weather," or that "there's a cloud hanging over me." On the other hand, when we're happy, we turn to the cloudless blue sky, like with the song "blue skies/ smiling at me/ nothing but blue skies/ do I see." Or when we're feeling hopeful about the future, we say that there's "nothing but clear skies ahead." "Blue-sky thinking," is even a trendy buzzword these days in the corporate world for a type of brainstorming activity that tries to create space for new and creative ideas to arise.

This tendency to associate the sun with happiness and clouds with sadness also shows up, interestingly enough, in many of our hymns. Before this series began I sat down with our New Century Hymnal and scanned verse by verse, hymn by hymn to try to find as many cloud references as I could, so that in addition to thinking about clouds these weeks, in our worship we could also sing about clouds a bit. I was a bit surprised to find in our hymns how often clouds were referenced in a negative way, as something that one would hope would just go away. Here's a small sampling of some of the verses:

*"melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the storms of doubt away"*

*"may no earth born cloud arise...to hide you from my eyes"*

*"[may your] light break through our clouds and shadows"*

*"clouds of doubt"*

*"clouds of disaster"*

*"I don't mind the gray skies 'cause they're just clouds passing by"*

It was interesting to me particularly because I had just finished searching through the Bible to find the references to clouds there, and in the Bible, there is hardly any mention of clouds being a negative or unwanted thing, and instead the exact opposite is true – in the Bible, clouds are almost universally highly regarded and praised as nothing less than awe-inspiring natural expressions of the beauty and the glory of God.

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This high regard of clouds begins with the very first reference to clouds that's in the Bible and that we heard in our first reading—in the story of Noah and the flood in Genesis 9. There as we heard, after the flood subsided, and life returned to the earth, God made a covenant with humanity and with all creation that God would never flood the earth like that again, and as a sign of that promise God pointed to the clouds and particularly to that always surprising and delightful cloud phenomenon of a rainbow in the sky.

*“I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind.”*

*Whenever I bring clouds over the earth...* clouds here being nothing less than carriers, messengers, poets, preachers of God’s extravagant goodness and faithfulness, of God’s love for us and all creation.

Although I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of these myself, I recently learned that there’s a type of rainbow that rather than arching like an upside-down U, there’s also one that arches the other way. A circumzenith arc (CZA) is the technical term, but I like the common name for it: cloud smile. That’s how I like to imagine God’s cloud-covenant with us and all of creation... that from looking at the clouds that God brings over the earth, we might remember and feel God’s love—that when God looks at us, God smiles.

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After Noah and the cloud-covenant, the next major reference to clouds in the Bible is in the book of Exodus, which tells the epic story of Moses leading the Israelites through the wilderness as they escape slavery in Egypt and wander off into the unknown in the hope of getting to the Promised Land. We heard in that second reading about how the specific way that God led them was through taking on the form of a pillar of cloud by day, going in front of and ahead of the people to guide them along the way.

Let’s just pause and linger with this image for a moment—that the major way that the ancient Israelites wandering in the desert understood and experienced God’s presence was in the form of a cloud. Isn’t that amazing? A cloud that went ahead of them to show them which way to go. And in Exodus 19, a cloud that one time moved behind them to get in between them and the Egyptian army, to hide them from being seen by the enemy. But mostly a cloud that moved ahead during the day and then maybe stopped when it was time to camp. A cloud that would faithfully return again with morning when it was time to pack up camp and move on. A cloud that, we can imagine, in addition to shielding them from their enemies, also shielded them from the blistering desert sun. And this shade from the sun, that sense of being protected from harmful elements, was probably a big part of why they experienced the cloud to be God’s most direct presence and immediate nearness to them.

I pause here to wonder if the difference between our temperate landscape and the desert landscape of the Bible might be part of why our culture has a bias against clouds and a preference for sun, whereas in the Bible the clouds are so highly regarded and celebrated. This would be an odd thing to say to an English-speaking person I think, but in Iran, for

example, there's a common saying for someone who is blessed or lucky, 'dayem semakum ghaim' which translates as 'your sky is always filled with clouds'.

One more thought about the pillar of cloud that leads the wandering Israelites through the desert wilderness. That phrase "pillar of cloud" suggests to me a dense, vertical cloud stretching from almost ground level upwards. The sense I get is that maybe they couldn't exactly see through this cloud. The cloud clouded what was ahead, in a sense. And so their only choice was to trust the direction that the cloud was leading them, without seeing the destination. To trust where we are being lead, without knowing the destination. Isn't that how we all find ourselves—here somewhere along our life's journey, giving thanks for having arrived here by the grace of God, and by the grace of God trusting that God will lead us on, without ever knowing exactly where this journey is headed? A cloud like that, that would show us which direction to go without letting us see through it...a cloud like that indeed would teach us to trust in the slow, steady hand of God.

"My Lord God," as the monk Thomas Merton prayed in a famous prayer of his, "I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me.... Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost...I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen."

*"[And] the LORD when in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way..."*

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Clouds then as showing us a direction to head in, or as pointing us towards the future. Of course on a very practical level clouds have always been one of the major ways humans have tried to predict the future in terms of predicting the weather and how to plan their activities around it. Farmers and sailors, for example, have long looked to the clouds to try to navigate ships and plant crops.

Even Jesus, as we heard in our final readings, knew about these "Farmers Almanac" type ways of weather forecasting.

The first of his weather sayings, at least according to how I remember my grandpa telling it, goes – *"Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky in the morning, sailor's warning."* I'm guessing you've heard this saying before, and actually it turns out to be mostly accurate, particularly in places like ours where the weather tends to move from west to east. The short version of why it's mostly true goes something like this: particularly on days with Altostratus clouds, like the type of gray hazy opaque sky-blanket like clouds that we had here yesterday morning... a red sky can occur at sunset when it's relatively cloud-free in the west, meaning that there's a fair chance of clear weather approaching, whereas a red sky at sunrise suggests

that the skies are clear in the east, meaning that maybe the clear weather has passed and that there's a fair chance of cloudy and perhaps stormy weather to come from the west.

In Jesus's reference to the red-sky-saying, as well as his connection of clouds-in-the-west-with-rain-saying, his point is that we humans might be Okay at reading the signs of the sky to predict what will happen in the future, but we're not great at realizing what's happening in the present...we're not great at realizing what's happening in the world in this moment, right here, and right now...

It's interesting that he would use clouds to launch this teaching about being awake to the present moment, and I'll end by highlighting two ways that paying attention to clouds might help us to "interpret the present time" as Jesus puts it—how clouds might help us be awake and alive to present reality.

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The first is global and ecological – the truth is that observable changes to cloud activity is perhaps the most immediately accessible and compelling evidence we have that our earth's climate is in the midst of a time of great change. Particularly, with warmer temperatures overall, there is simply more moisture in the air, although the moisture isn't evenly spread out. Clouds have been showing us that storm clouds are becoming bigger and more intense. They're showing us that places which have historically had less clouds and rain have even less clouds and rain today. Today's clouds, then, are no longer just for predicting tomorrow's weather. Today's clouds are a sign written in the sky for today's world and for what's happening in this present moment, right here, right now.

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That's at the global, ecological level. My last thought for today involves how clouds can also help make us awake to the present moment in our own personal, individual, and inward lives. As I mentioned last week, clouds often have a curious ability to correspond to certain moods and emotional states. We often experience clouds as expressions of the atmosphere's mood, or of the day's mood. We talk about the angry storm clouds, or the lazy drifting cumulus, or the dreamy playful whimsical high cirrus...

I don't know exactly how to explain this phenomenon, but I hope you'll know what I mean when I say that sometimes (not always) there seems to be an uncanny correspondence between the mood of the sky above and the mood of one's own heart and being below. Do you know what I mean?

"I can be jubilant one moment and pensive the next," Bob Dylan has written, "and a cloud could go by and make that happen."

Now, whether clouds can actually have that direct of an effect on our moods, I'll let that question be as I think sometimes they can and sometimes they can't, but what I'm more convinced of is this: the truth is that for better or worse we are moody creatures, and that clouds can help us read our own moods, and so help us understand ourselves in the moment.

Moods have been a major theme for certain schools of philosophy like phenomenology, and the insight from that thinking is that moods are essentially what reveal or disclose the world to us. The German word is *Stimmung*, attunement—the idea that, like a tuning fork struck at a certain pitch, our own moods can be attuned to or can resonate with the mood of the world. So say I'm in a mood of sadness – that's to say that the world is opening or revealing itself to me as a somber and sorrowful place. Or say I'm in a playful mood – that's to say that the world is showing itself to be a place of lightness and laughter and delight.

I wonder then if that's part of our fascination with clouds – that us and clouds, we're like the two moodiest parts of God's creation. Studying the sky's mood, then, I think, can help us make sense of, and understand our own moods, and so our own lives, and our own worlds. In other words, I believe that just like our own moods are always different and changing, in a similar way the sky's mood is always different and changing, and so if we want to build a diverse and resilient repertoire of world-revealing moods—if we want to understand our own strange selves, and the strange world we live in—we could do well to study the moods of the sky.

Jose Eduardo Agualusa, a Portuguese writer from Angola, has put it this way: "When people look at the clouds they do not see their real shape, which is no shape at all, or every shape, because clouds are constantly changing. They see whatever it is that their heart yearns for."

Clouds then, could be a type of Rorschach test for learning more about who we are, and what we long for.

And finally, a quote to end on today, about how clouds can return us to being fully awake and alive to the ever-fleeting present moment, by Arizona writer Terri Guillemets:

*"Why do I love clouds? Because you can't save a cloud like you can save a leaf or a flower or a rock – clouds are now."*