

Clouds of the Bible: "The heavens are telling the glory of God"

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies are proclaiming the work of God's hands." For my money, I'd say that this is one of the most arresting and gorgeous of all the verses in scripture, and for me was the first little place my mind went when I thought about where we should begin this new summer series on "the clouds of the Bible."

And so as we begin, I want to invite you to try to think back to what the skies were like here this past week... and particularly just a couple of days ago, on Friday, for example, when I started to work on these introductory remarks to our series... Can you remember? The endless fields of perfect summer cumulus stretching out in a sort of southwest to northeast pattern, maybe like the stripes and spots of a tiger or a leopard in the sky, the sky a perfect blue behind them, the sun playing peekaboo as the clouds sailed along in the refreshing northeast wind...

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies are proclaiming the work of God's hands."

On a day like that, that's about all one would need to say, I thought, and I wished that we were worshipping together outside then, because then I could have just read Psalm 19 and invited us into a time of silent wonder, as the clouds communicated to us the glory of God that is beyond words...

I might have shared a couple more words though, or just a different version of the same words, as I also like how Eugene Peterson has translated the first few verses of this Psalm too:

*God's glory is on tour in the skies,
God-craft on exhibit across the horizon.
Madame Day holds classes every morning,
Professor Night lectures each evening.
Their words aren't heard,
their voices aren't recorded,
But their silence fills the earth:
unspoken truth is spoken everywhere.*

Going back a bit earlier in the week though, it would have been quite a different task trying to experience the clouds together, because as you'll remember we had a stretch there of mostly cloudless, and very hot, bright sunny days. And so we would have had to try to think about clouds on a cloudless day... and thinking back on those days, maybe you felt a longing for more clouds on a day like that...both as a respite from the heat, and as chance to add variety and beauty to the day. I've heard cloudless sunsets, for example, compared to a garden without any flowers. Or here's a nice little Thoreau quote, who wrote extensively about the clouds in his journal, he said, *"A sky without clouds is a meadow without flowers, a sea without sails."*

Or imagine if we met to think about the clouds yesterday morning, where there was a mix of bright blue cloudless skies, as well as at times very playful, almost Kandinsky-like abstract paintings of many different cloud types at once, mainly cumulus and cirrus in different forms like altocumulus and cirrostratus... A perfect sky fit for a light and playful summer Saturday to explore and enjoy and play...

Just from beginning to reflect on the clouds here from this past week, then, I think we can notice one of the most curious and interesting things about clouds and about paying attention to clouds, which is that maybe more so than any other aspect of creation, clouds have a certain resonance with particular types of moods and feelings and emotions... in the sense that there often can be a type of correspondence between the mood in the sky, and the mood within us...the outside world mirrored within the inside world...that which is above and beyond us reflecting that which is down here below and within. Here's Thoreau again, *"Would you see your mind, look at the sky. Would you know your own moods, be weather-wise. He whom the weather disappoints, disappoints himself."*

And here's a Buddhist saying to go along with that idea- *"Clouds in the sky resemble the thoughts in our minds. Both change perpetually from one second to another."*

So that's a curious type of insight about the mind and about moods and about how we too, like the clouds, are in a constant state of change and transformation, and so that's at least one good theme, and one of the ways I want to invite us to try to think about and experience clouds during this summer series.

Why else, we might wonder- why spend some time this summer reflecting on clouds together? Since this is our introductory week here I'd like to begin by sharing a few more thoughts about why spending the summer with our "heads in the clouds" might be a good use of our time and attention here...

So with that phrase "head in the clouds" – I imagine that there's some voice within us, or I should just say that there's some voice within me, that says, "How indulgent, just to think about clouds when there are so many important things happening in our world...where injustices are abounding...where there is so much suffering and need to respond to?" To which I'd say, "yes," "and" – "and" it's still true that "the heavens are telling the glory of God," "and" it's still true that we all need a little break from the heaviness from time to time, we need little Sabbaths, in fact the Bible and our faith commands us to take Sabbath breaks on a regular basis...and looking at the clouds happens to be one of the easiest and cheapest Sabbath breaks that I can think of. In the *Cloudspotter's Guide*, Gavin Pretor-Pinney has a nice little quip about how looking at the clouds every now and then might help just about anyone save money on psychoanalysis and counseling.

So studying the clouds this summer might I hope have a sort of therapeutic or Sabbath-like effect on us... but looking ahead at the rest of this series, I know it won't be all lightness and "head in the clouds" type stuff...because clouds will also take us into matters of suffering and justice. For example, clouds have been and might continue to be used as weapons of war. During the Vietnam war, the US military used what are called "cloud-seeding" tactics to increase the rainfall during the monsoon season to hamper travel and supplies, and they also "seeded" the clouds with chemical weapons so that deadly chemicals would rain down from the skies. Thinking about clouds will also bring us to think seriously about climate change and climate justice, as with changes to cloud activity – be it increased rain and storms in some places, and decreased rain and increased drought in others – clouds are literally the most clear and immediate "writing in the sky" when it comes to what's happening to our planet these days.

But again, for today, with Psalm 19 we have a more poetic, beautiful invitation to set us off on this journey together – this reminder to look at clouds as God's handiwork, as God's glory on tour, as nature's poetry - the sky as the canvas upon which God paints – because no matter what else is happening in the world, it's always and already the case that still "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies are proclaiming the work of God's hands."

I've been wanting to do a series like this for maybe five years now, ever since a friend cut out and mailed to me a fascinating article in the *Boston Globe* about clouds that she found inspiring, and that has stuck with me ever since, and has changed how I think about clouds and the role that they can play in the everyday spiritual life. Even maybe how clouds can change how we look at the world, and how we relate to God's creation. And so I'd like to end by sharing the main points of this article with you, in hopes that our summer journey together on this theme might be a bit like the experience in this article, with a good amount of Bible and Jesus and God mixed in too.

Titled "Lift Up Your Eyes," the article by journalist Jan Brogan was prompted by a cryptic email she received one day. *"Look at the sky as often as you 'can'—for about 21 days. I'll contact you again in 3 wks."* Signed, *"More Light."*

This challenge was issued to her by Jack Borden, a former Boston television reporter who now runs a non-profit organization advocating the cause of "sky awareness," a cause which, I have to admit, I had never heard of or even imagined existing before this article, but which, again, in this age of quickening climate change, seems surprisingly appropriate, for as Borden is quoted as saying, *"When we are unconscious in regard to our surroundings, we are irresponsible to them."*

The three-week challenge to look at the sky began without much fanfare. **Day 1:** Jan writes, *"Some clouds and a lot of blue sky.' I go back to work at the computer."*

Soon though, through her daily observation she begins to notice more about the details of the sky, even beginning to identify certain clouds by type: cumulus and altocumulus; stratus and cirrus. She begins to make connections between cloud formations and precipitation patterns, even predicting tomorrow's forecast based on today's sky.

It's not long before paying attention to the sky yields something like spiritual dividends, as when, on **Day 10**, looking to the sky helps smooth her traffic-laden commute: *"Stop-and-go traffic just before 4 o'clock, heading west on Route 109. I divert myself by looking at the different shades of sky: deep blue, periwinkle, and aqua. Ahead, the clouds are tattered, low on the horizon, and under-lit by the sun. I do not try to identify the clouds by type, which I think might wreck the moment."*

By **Day 21** she finds herself nothing less than a changed person. After she identifies the clouds overhead as the type of high cirrus which tend to usher in a cold front, she notes the transition in her experience from the observational to the spiritual dimensions of this sky-

watching practice. *"I like having this type of knowledge [of the cloud types]," she writes, "but there is something else going on. It seems amazingly self-centered to have so narrowly focused my visual field until now that I did not bother to notice the medium I lived in. The draw is not so much the beauty of the sky every day, but the enormity of it."*

She concludes her field notes on sky awareness with this exchange she has with her teenage daughter: *"My daughter walks into the office, sees the sky chart, asks if I am still into that 'sky thing' or if I am bored yet. I hear myself tell her that I don't think I could ever be bored by the sky."*

I don't think I could ever be bored by the sky, for indeed, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "The sky is the daily bread for the eyes...The sky is the ultimate art gallery just above us."

And so we begin our cloud journey together this morning, I invite you to hear something like Jan's cryptic email addressed just to you: *Dear humble human searching for a glimpse of God's glory- Look at the sky as often as you can for the next six weeks, because "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies are proclaiming the work of God's hands." I'll contact you again soon. Signed, More Light.*