

Sermon TUMC – August 31, 2014 – Shapes in the clouds

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Hebrews 11:32-12:3

Exodus 33:7-11a

Not every day is a good day for cloud-watching, as you know, and not everyone can find the shapes.

For best results you need a friend with you. And the best location is to be barefoot and lying in the grass. (Though being in the back seat of a car with your brother on a long trip has also been known to work.)

You need someone that will look where you point: “See, that one over there, ... no not that one, the other one. See how it looks like a pelican? A dinosaur? Like Grandpa?”

Then it’s the other person’s turn to point one out what they see and go through the whole guessing game again.

It’s a strange form of communion of imaginations.

That, my friends, is the approach I’m taking in my reflection today in our series on cloud-sourcing. Will you relax with me in the grass, and look where I’m pointing?

I see two images in the scripture passages: a cloudy mist that descends when God’s presence is made known, and a cloud of witnesses, stories of people who have gone through a life of faith and who serve to encourage us in ours.

I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that cloud-watching works best if you use your imagination. Imagination sees possibilities. It is what will give you: a bunny, a locomotive, a flower, or if you’re particularly devout, you might even see Jesus or Mary.

Whereas a scientific approach, for example might say of a cloud: “What an interesting collection of suspended water droplets. I believe we are looking at a stratus.” It will invite you to pronounce cool words like stratocumulus and cumulonimbus, and nimbostratus.

There’s another thing about a scientific approach to clouds, it can’t resist making forecasts, and looking into the future, and worrying about all sorts of storms.

Imagination is more about the present moment or about the past when it’s weaving stories. It’s foggier and fuzzier and fluffier in its conclusions and not as prone to cause anxiety, in my experience.

Clouds do lend themselves to the realm of metaphor: cloudy judgment, Uncloudy Day (an old bluegrass hymn), head in the clouds... (*any others?*)

Fog and mist are also a form of clouds. This week I came across some intriguing thoughts about mist from a Brazilian poet-theologian called Rubem A. Alves.¹

“I love the mist which covers mountains and abysses, and I feel sorry when the sun dispels it because my imagination together with elves and leprechauns, is deprived of the mist-eerie atmosphere without which it cannot breathe... And I also love the darkness which abides inside the deep [and lovely woods] ... and the eerie atmosphere of the gothic cathedral ...My whole Being reverberates and I know that it belongs to the darkness of the woods to the depth of the sea, to the mystery of the cathedral... If lights are turned on I am homeless...”

Mist and fog do fuel the imagination, don't they?

Alves goes on to recall some advice he got about his own poetry:

“I brought my texts for [my friend] to read. ‘- Too much light,’ he remarked, as if his eyes had been hurt by clarity. ‘Let's mix a bit of mist to your ideas, a bit of darkness to the argument, a bit of blurriness to the contours... Don't you know that a clear idea brings the conversation to a halt, whereas one unclear idea gives wings to the words and the conversation never ends?’”

I began to imagine what the connection is between this and the cloud surrounding the tent where Moses and God would meet as friends?

At one point, in an intriguing story that we heard in a previous sermon by Ethan, Moses got tired of the cloud and asked God for a face to face meeting without any ambiguity and God let Moses know he couldn't handle such clarity, that it would be the end of him.

What can our imaginations teach us when things aren't all entirely clear? What new shapes might we see when we meet God in the *mystery*? Rubem Alves is certainly right about God's strategy in that particular story, the conversation between the Divine and us humans is still ongoing. Even Jesus' parables were always kind of fuzzy.

So, that is the shape I saw in that cloud in Exodus that surrounded the tent of meeting.

Let me point out to you another shape in another cloud.

¹ Rubem A. Alves in a book called *A Poet, a Warrior, a Prophet*.

All this talk of clouds of witnesses and cathedrals sent me on a trip down memory lane to three encounters with churches that have icons painted on the walls.

Just this past July I was on a group tour to explore my Anabaptist Heritage. We found ourselves on a misty day – coincidence? ☺ – visiting the church where Jakob Amman was baptized, in Erlenbach im Simmental (Switzerland). He was the namesake of the Amish sect from which my relatives sprouted. The walls were covered in frescoes of stories and saints and angels in earthy tones. To my eyes it was beautiful, but at some point during the Reformation (Amman’s time) it had all been covered over vehemently with paint, and it was that spirit of unadorned simplicity that ruled the day for church buildings in that tradition for a long time.

Clouds have a way of accumulating and dispersing over time...

On another trip, one evening in Nazareth, Israel/Palestine, I went with my sister Gini to the Sisters of Annunciation convent. The walls were covered from top to bottom with bright colourful icons. It was overwhelming and beautiful, and dark, and foggy with incense and with the sound of chanting. Gini’s favourite icon was of the nativity depicting the midwives washing up baby Jesus, and a forlorn Joseph sitting on a rock. But Abraham was also there on the walls, Lazarus, and other biblical characters and bible stories. Our hostess explained that the icons were part of the cloud of witnesses surrounding the present-day faithful. And then the penny dropped for me. My protestant eyes had only ever viewed icons as idolatry. Once I understood icons as a cloud of witnesses, I saw the particular cloud and the shape that she was pointing to and I have grown to appreciate it.

So, about 5 years ago I was driving home from Vacation Bible School up in Markham and I had a couple of Wichert girls in my car with me. On a whim – what better way to do this kind of thing ? – I suggested that we try to take a peek into the Ukrainian Catholic Church at Markham Road and 401 (Sts Peter and Paul). It was complicated to get in, but there too, the walls are covered in beautiful colourfull stories. We had the good fortune of coming in while there was an artist actually painting some of the icons.²

While we stood under the scaffolding I asked the girls to see how many bible stories they could identify on the walls, and they started listing them off. It was an “I spy” game of bible stories. The iconographer and the person who had made an exception and let us into the locked church were impressed. I was too. Clearly the girls had been formed by these stories, guided by this same cloud of witnesses.

That led me to wonder, in a more fine-tuned way, about who is in the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, both literally and metaphorically here at TUMC?

² According to the church’s website, this was likely Bohdan Holowacki, a Toronto-based artist/iconographer.

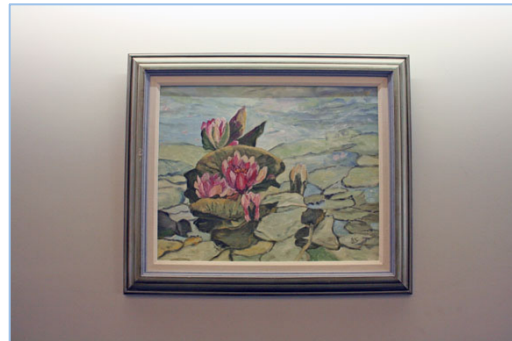
Let's start with our own walls.³



We can see the string art piece by Marta Armin, which represents inclusivity. She and her husband Jay were long time members of TUMC. (*Does anyone remember a story about them?*)



We see a forest landscape by Bill Huebert, a founding member of TUMC, father to Rudy Hubert. (*After the service, go and ask Rudy about him sometime*)



And water lilies by Helen Sawatsky, another founding member of TUMC. (*Who can tell us about her?*)

³ For a great review of all the objects at TUMC, see a wonderful article by Doreen Martens in Place of Meeting, November 2013.



The etched doors are from Henry and Anne Peters, made by Sharon Tiessen. (*Check out the description on a plaque in the foyer and then draw your own conclusions.*)

We've got Menno Simmons up there the namesake of Mennonites, a old caricature put together by Harvey Braun in neon colours.



Menno witnessed to Jesus as follows, and shaped an entire movement of which we are a part:

True [Christian]⁴ faith is of such a nature it cannot lie dormant, but spreads itself out in all kinds of righteousness and fruits of love;
it dies to flesh and blood (1);
it destroys all lusts and forbidden desires (2);
it seeks, serves and fears God in its inmost soul (3);
it clothes the naked (4);
it feeds the hungry (5);

⁴ The original quote uses the word evangelical, I have changed it here to avoid confusion with the way that word is currently understood.

it comforts the sorrowful (6);
it shelters the destitute (7);
it aids and consoles the sad (8);
it does good to those who do it harm (9);
it serves those that harm it (10);
it prays for those who persecute it (11);
it teaches, admonishes and judges us with the Word of the Lord (12);
it seeks those who are lost (13);
it binds up what is wounded (14);
it heals the sick (15);
it saves what is strong (sound) (16);
it becomes all things to all people (17).
The persecution, suffering and anguish that come to it for the sake of the Lord's truth
have become a glorious joy and comfort to it."

And indeed, the early Anabaptists suffered horribly.

On the trip I mentioned we were in a cave in Switzerland where one group would meet
in the late 1500's to avoid persecution. Someone read the Hebrews passage we heard
earlier and it was a powerful moment, to know that people had literally died from
persecution so that we could worship in the way that we do. It was a powerful reminder
from the cloud of witnesses that change can require a lot of courage.

So finally, this summer our preachers brought us some other witnesses in the cloud:

We heard a biblical narrative of exodus in a different voice of James Weldon Johnson,
through "God's Trombones"

We heard from St. John of the Cross and the Dark night of the soul,

We saw the shape of the life's work of Miriam Therese Winter whose cloud gave us *Joy
is like the Rain*

We heard about creation as re-imagined by Walter Wangerin

there was a cloud shaped like an elephant in a medieval sermon

there was one that reminded us about God as love and infinity, through the thoughts of
Gregory of Nissa in the 4th century

And we experienced a cloud in the voice of one of our Anabaptist forebears, Pilgram
Marpeck.

And there was a cloud that stretched across the whole sky and reminded us that

"The heavens herald your glory, O God,

and the skies display your handiwork.

Day after day they tell their story,

and night after night they reveal the depth of their understanding

Without speech, without words, without even an audible voice,

their cry echoes through all the world,

and their message reaches the ends of the earth."

All the stories in the bible are part of the cloud too. As the saying goes, the biblical stories are either a good example or a terrible warning⁵ -- and sometimes it's hard to tell which is which. They are there to bear witness to the conversation between the Divine and the human, as Christians we see this especially in the life of Jesus. (Aha, there is a cloud shaped like Jesus after all!)

Hebrews 11 says that the cloud of witnesses is to help us lay aside every weight that clings to us from this world we live in so that we may not grow weary or lose heart.

So then, when you're growing weary or losing heart do some cloud-sourcing, find the stories, the people and the imagination that will sustain you in the mystery.

⁵ "If you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning." — Catherine Aird