Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, Tennessee  
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“The Cloud”  
Numbers 9:15-23

A month ago, we were in the WILDERNESS, where the children of Israel journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Into their midst as they journeyed, they SET UP a tabernacle, a kind of movable sanctuary that kept them in touch with God.

On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire. It was always so; the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp.

At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the Israelites would keep the charge of the Lord, and would not set out. Sometimes the cloud would remain a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord they would remain in camp; then according to the command of the Lord they would set out.

Sometimes the cloud would remain from evening until morning; and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses. The Word of the Lord.

“What is this CLOUD everyone is talking about?” I asked myself when a message popped up on my cell phone: “You have no more storage; want to put your photos on the cloud?” More and more messages about “the cloud” began coming up; even yesterday when I had to buy a new phone – “Is all your information on the cloud?” What IS the cloud, and where is it? On the very “cloud” itself I learned that … (are you ready for this?)

“Cloud storage is a model of computer data storage in which the digital data is stored in logical pools … keeping data accessible. The physical storage spans multiple servers, sometimes in multiple locations, typically managed by a hosting company. Cloud campuses are the sites where technology titans concentrate massive amounts of computer power in HUGE data center facilities. The pictures show just BANKS of computer/hardware. The cloud is not floating; it is often located in more rural areas like Ashburn, VA, and Maiden, NC. That’s where the cloud is! Some of us might remember the 1965 hit song by the Rolling Stones “Hey, you, get off of my cloud.” The refrain repeats “Hey you, get off of my cloud.” As if the CLOUD belongs to us.
And then there was this (other) cloud. What was IT? We first meet this cloud in Exodus 13; the people had just come out of Egypt, all 600,000 men, plus women and children. They were on the edge of the wilderness, unleavened bread and camping gear in tow. And the Lord went before them, the cloud went before them, to guide them … the cloud by day, the appearance of fire by night. And after the tabernacle had been set up, the cloud rested upon and over it.

The scripture says “And whenever the cloud lifted off the tabernacle and was taken up, the people would break camp, and set out; and whenever and wherever the cloud came back down, settled down, the people would stop and set up camp …. until the cloud lifted again.” That’s how they knew when to go and when to stop and stay. Wow!!

Imagine a cloud that would tell you when to go (to leave somewhere or something) and when to stay! That would be a really good thing, in so many ways, as it was for the Israelites, that clear guidance, especially in such a hard place like the wilderness. The challenging part would be that you couldn’t choose where God would lift and lower the cloud, because it is His cloud.

When the cloud settled down in a good place like Elim with 12 wells of water and 70 palm trees, they’d be ready to stay and build homes, maybe lagoons and some golf courses. But in the midst of their very unpacking there, the next morning the cloud would lift and they would have to leave, and journey on. And whenever and wherever it came down is where they would need to stop and stay, also in some not-so-nice places in the desert. I imagine the people tried to give the Lord advice on where He should put the cloud.

Don’t we sometimes wish we could throw a net over the cloud when we are in a good place, when things are going well, maybe tie the cloud down, or stake it to the ground in our backyard? One of our staff members shared a funny thought: say you are awakened one night by a strange sound in your backyard, “Boing!” What was that? You drift off again, and are startled by another “Boing!” You look out your window and realize the stakes are pulling out and the cloud is lifting, and there is no stake big enough to tie the cloud down, because it’s God’s cloud.

Or maybe you wish the cloud would lift from wherever you are but it doesn’t, and you stay there, encamped, even though it’s tough, or you are tired, or feeling alone, or bored and you can’t see anything good from where you are. But later you look back; and you are glad you stayed.

When do we learn that there is a cloud that is attached to God’s will, and leading?

Mark reminded me of the Haiti mission trip that was recently postponed because of the situation in Haiti. It was clear, at the last minute, that our team should not go, but should stay, and postpone. How amazing that God guides/guards, our going and coming.

Do you remember a time of going before God told you to go? I remember such times in my life, and am thankful that God is so gracious in the midst of our detours or disobedience, that He restores us and puts us back on the road.
Where are you in your life? At a time of setting out, or settling in? Setting out for a new chapter, a new work or task, a new way of being, a new mindset, leaving some place, even in our own hearts where we know we can’t stay there and really live? Perhaps setting out from the way we did things in the past, for unfamiliar, surprising territory where God surely is? Or are you at a place of settling in, staying, wherever that place or season is? I think often it’s harder to stay, but God seems to be especially close in those times and notes every act of obedience. For when it’s time to go, it’s time to go; when it’s time to stay, then it’s that time, too.

One of my pastor friends last fall wrote a letter to his congregation in Indiana, people he had loved and served for a number of years. I was so moved by his letter, and received his permission to share a portion. He writes to his church:

“The Israelites’ journey through the wilderness to the promised land can teach us much about our own journey through this life to the true Promised land, of heaven. In their journey through the wilderness “the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.” Sometimes the pillar and cloud stayed put in one place for a long time … but even then, a day would surely come when the pillar and the cloud would move, and it was time to go …

In much the same way, recently my wife and I discerned that the pillar and the cloud had lifted for us, and that it was time to go. Where the Lord leads, we will go, even if we do not know exactly what comes next. This is reminder to us that both for transitions within this earthly life, and for the ultimate transition of going to heaven, that the timing is not always what we except. May we all cultivate a continual readiness… following as the Lord leads, in the seasons and circumstances that he selects, in his good will.

I think of the wonderful life and people of our church, and the wonderful pastors we have had … the time when they came, and the point when the cloud lifted and it was time for them to journey on. At one of our staff meeting devotion times last fall, we looked at this passage, and right afterwards several staff members blew up a picture of a cloud and taped it on Steve’s door. “Steve, the cloud has descended and you’ll not be going anywhere.” But we know that’s not the way it is. There will be a time when the cloud will lift. The pastoral search committee has been so hard at work; and one day the cloud will lift for Steve and for the amazing season we’ve had with him, and the cloud will lift for the one who’s being called to our church (from the place they are now)!

At some points this past week, the clouds were so beautiful, even rays of sun streaming from behind the clouds. Our job and our part is not to own, or try to control the cloud, not even to understand at the moment but to watch and to wait, and to respond in obedience, to follow.

Where is the cloud in your life? How are you sensing God’s direction?

God used, uses a cloud. Maybe it is because He wants us to LOOK UP! “Look, Jesus is coming (it says in Revelation) with the clouds … and every eye will see him.” “And after Jesus had his final words before he ascended, as the disciples were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.”
And, as Peter, James, and John were on the mountain with Jesus, and a cloud overshadowed them, from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, Listen to Him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus. He is the One to whom, through whom, for whom, we are always led! Amen!

The charge, by the late Dr. Richard Halverson, pastor, chaplain of the U.S. Senate -

You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you go, God is sending you there. Wherever you ARE, God has put you there. God has a purpose in your being there. Christ lives in you and has something he wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in the grace and love and power of Jesus Christ.