THE NEW SHOFAR

Bless Yahweh, O my soul!… He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters; *he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind;* he makes his messengers winds, his ministers a flaming fire (Ps 104)

March 16 2025 Lent 2

His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet - Nahum 1:3

Though most of us do not think about it, clouds are significant in the Bible, and they form a background to understanding today's Gospel. They focus our attention on what God is doing, how God is working. Those clouds offer spiritual commentaries on what God wants his people to understand. On sheer numbers alone, they are mentioned 187 times in the Old Testament and 27 times in the New Testament. The first reference is comforting: God's covenant with mankind after the flood: "*Whenever I form **clouds** over the earth and the bow appears in the **clouds**, I will remember My covenant between Me and you and all the living creatures: water will never again become a flood to destroy every creature"* (**Genesis 9:14-15**).

As the Israelites travelled to the Promised Land, they stopped when the cloud which led them stopped. When it lifted in the morning, they would head off and follow God's lead (Numbers 9:21). God was ***in the cloud.*** Moses ascended Mt. Sinai, and the glory of Yahweh settled there. *For six days **the cloud** covered the mountain, and on the seventh day* Yahweh *called to Moses from **within the cloud*** (Exodus 24:16).

Yahweh communicated to Moses and Joshua through the presence of a cloud shaped like a pillar: *Yahweh said to Moses, …. When Moses and Joshua presented themselves at the tent of meeting, Yahweh appeared at the tent in a **pillar of cloud**, and **the cloud** stood at the entrance to the tent* (**Deuteronomy 31:14-15**).

God spoke firmly to Job while describing ***clouds*** as the sea's garment, and thick darkness its blanket (**Job 38:9**). In **Psalm 77:17-18**, the psalmist observed how God's presence created upheaval within nature: ***The clouds*** *poured down water. The **storm clouds** thundered; Your arrows flashed back and forth. The sound of Your thunder was in the whirlwind; lightning lit up the world.* And an anonymous psalmist wrote: ***Clouds*** *and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne* (**Psalm 97:2**).

I**saiah** depicted Yahweh riding on ***a swift cloud*** on His way to Egypt (**Isaiah 19:1**). He also comforted God's people with these words: "*This is what Yahweh says…I have swept away your offenses **like a cloud**, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you"* (**Isaiah 44:6,21-22**).

Jeremiah referenced clouds to describe his despair over the destruction of Jerusalem. Though we might say our prayers "bounce off the ceiling", Jeremiah offered a more commanding phrase: "*You have covered yourself with **a cloud** so that no prayer can get through"* (**Lamentations 3:44**).

Nahum, God's prophet to the unrepentant city of Nineveh, described God's awesome power this way: *Yahweh is slow to anger and great in power; …His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, and* ***clouds*** *are the dust of his feet* (**Nahum 1:3**).

New Testament references often appear in more intimate settings. Jesus said to the crowd: "*When you see* ***a cloud*** *rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. …Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"* (**Luke 12:54,56**).

Peter, John, and James travelled with Jesus to a mountain to pray. While there, Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus about His death. When Peter, James, and John woke from a deep sleep, they saw Jesus' glory along with Moses and Elijah. Peter immediately suggested they make three tabernacles: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Then, *while* (Peter) *was speaking,* ***a cloud*** *appeared and enveloped them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came* ***from the cloud****, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."* (**Luke 9:34-35**).

While gathered on the Mt. of Olives, the disciples watched Jesus ascend into the air. Luke recorded: *He was taken up as they were watching****, and a cloud*** *took Him out of their sight… This Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen Him going into heaven"* (**Acts 1:9-11**)*.*

Just as the disciples watched Jesus leave this earth, we now await His return. The angel on the Mt. of Olives did not specify that Jesus would return in a cloud, but John did. In his Revelation, John used a variety of Old Testament scriptures to describe what the world will one day see: *Look! He is coming* ***with the clouds****, and every eye will see Him* (**Revelation 1:7**). Toward the end of his Revelation John wrote, *Then I looked, and there was a* ***white cloud****, and One like the Son of Man was seated on* ***the cloud****, with a gold crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand* (**Revelation 14:14**). This reflects what Daniel had seen centuries earlier in his own vision: *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven"* (**Daniel 7:13**).

Jesus is what God does

The message of the evangelists is clear, and the presence of the cloud says it all: Jesus is ***the*** way God, the same God who has always been present in the story of Israel, the God of Abraham, Issac and Joseph, the God who promised to undo the darkness brought about by the sin of Adam, that same God is bringing the world into his loving and merciful embrace in this God/man Jesus. Salvation is gifted to those who hear him, who imitate him and who walk in his Way. Hence the reading for the second Sunday of Lent. We can look at clouds all day and never see God, and yet God puts them there to remind us of the divine promises, promises repeated by Jesus: *I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth*. There are no absences of God, just as there are always clouds somewhere. To find God, to see God and to reveal God is our vocation, one we have received from the Transfigured Christ himself, and Lent is a good time to get better at doing just that.