

THE CLOUD MOVED
Exodus 13: 21-22 & Exodus 14: 5-14 September 27, 2015
The Church of the Covenant

I remember a great sermon preached by a great African-American Presbyterian preacher, Dr. Jim Logan, when I was serving First Presbyterian Church in downtown Pittsburgh before I came to The Church of the Covenant. He was preaching as part of a Spiritual Renewal Weekend there and his text is the same one we just read together from Exodus. At the time I was mightily praying to God to show me where I was to serve as a pastor; I was then serving as an interim, which is to say *temporary* pastor, in downtown Pittsburgh, but it was on my heart to be called to serve as a called and installed Pastor of a church where I could use all I had been taught by God in some 30 years of ministry. You know how sometimes you hear a sermon and you think to yourself, "It is as if God sent that preacher just to preach that sermon just for me." And Dr. Logan had a big section in it about "the cloud moving". And God was leading the people of God through the wilderness by putting in front of them a "*pillar of cloud by day*" and a "*pillar of fire by night*" (Exodus 13: 22). It reminds me of the cute thing that a little child once said when asked about Lot's wife and he confused two Bible stories and said she was a "pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night". Or something to that effect. Then Dr. Logan in one of those great sermonic moments told us this –every morning the Israelites would pack their bags and be ready to move according to God's will. They would ready themselves and prepare themselves each day to watch the skies for the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. And when the cloud moved, they would move. And when the cloud didn't move, they didn't move. When the pillar of fire moved, they moved. When the pillar of fire didn't move, they didn't move. The cloud and the fire are always the sign of the Holy Spirit. So when the Spirit moved, they would move; when the Spirit didn't move, they didn't move. Their job was to watch for the signs of the movement of God and then to move where God was already at work in advance. –**When the cloud moves, you move; when the cloud doesn't move you don't move.** So my prayer from that fall through the next spring was –"Lord, show me the cloud and have me be ready and spiritually prepared to move when you move; in Jesus' name. Amen."

So Moses and the people of God are being led by the cloud of the Spirit into the wilderness. And Pharaoh is suddenly unhappy that he has let his Hebrew slaves go. It doesn't matter that nine plagues have attacked Egypt. It doesn't matter that every Egyptian has lost their first-born son, including Pharaoh. Suddenly, Pharaoh's anger is kindled and he begins to pursue the Israelites with his army of chariots. The Lord "*hardened his heart*" and Pharaoh went out "*defiantly*", as the scriptures attest. The time of transition had come for the Israelites and now they were afraid. They were moving from one thing to the next; from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land; their anxiety produced their fear and their fear produced a lack of faith in the Almighty God to save them. So they cry out to Moses, their leader, "*It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.*" (Exodus 14: 12) They actually shout out loud in the presence of God –IT WOULD BE BETTER TO LIVE AS A SLAVE THAN TO DIE A FREE PEOPLE IN THE WILDERNESS. Never!!! The people of God are always KVETCHING around about something; they are always complaining about something; gossip and lack of faith always abound among the people of God, unfortunately. Fear and anxiety do that. Faith in God to SAVE is always the antidote. Somehow they had forgotten that it was the cloud that had positioned them exactly where they were; that the hand of a LOVING, SOVEREIGN, all powerful, merciful God whose plan was to save them and bring them into a Promised Land, had positioned them exactly as they were –with the bloodthirsty Egyptians closing in on them with fast chariots, and their backs up against the Red Sea. (And you know something, as I was praying and praying and praying about the cloud moving, I became more and more anxious, because I was just sure somehow that the church I was serving as Interim Pastor was

going to find a new pastor and I was going to be thrown out on the street without a job or a way to make ends meet). We are all very human people, after all, pastors, too.

Moses, their leader, declares in consummate faith, to his people: *“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord...the Egyptians who you see today you will never see again.”* (Exodus 14: 13) Notice, he didn’t say “stop complaining” rather he addressed the real root cause of their complaint –by saying, “Watch what the Lord can do.” They were about to see that the Lord would part the Red Sea and do a mighty miracle –which is what the Lord does when we follow HIM and the cloud moves.

So I am praying and praying and praying about my next call into ministry some eight years ago. I am watching and expectant for the cloud to move. But frankly I am getting more and more anxious and more and more fearful. And that Pittsburgh church hosted a major national speaker in the spring. And 600 people came on Thursday and 600 people came on Friday and 600 people came on Saturday and more than 600 people came on Sunday not to hear the speaker but to hear me! (I remember that was the church that had 20 people on my first Sunday there and half of them were my family!) And I was so excited. I was thinking to myself, maybe the cloud is hovering right over this church because I am to stay at this church; maybe You Lord God Almighty are saying stay here and don’t expect the cloud to move. So I get up so excited that Monday morning, I eagerly go into my prayer time, full well expecting the Lord to nudge my heart and to say, Stuart, THE CLOUD HAS NOT MOVED and I WANT YOU TO STAY. But instead, and this still shocks me to this day, THE CLOUD MOVED. It was so clear to me in prayer that even though the church was packed all weekend, that nevertheless, THE CLOUD MOVED. And therefore, I was going to be called away and moving also. See, I think sometimes we think the cloud moving is a bad thing, or is surrounded by bad circumstances. But the truth of the matter is that the cloud moving is always intended to bless and to lead people into an ever closer relationship and trust with the Lord God Almighty who loves us and wants to bless us in our life. Would it shock you, then, to hear that two weeks later the chair of that church pulpit committee called me on the phone to say that she felt they had their candidate? And probably if I had not known already that the cloud had moved I might have been SUPER anxious. “See, I knew I was going to be tossed out in the street.” But instead I was quiet and trusting. And would it shock you that a month later the Chair of the pulpit committee of The Church of the Covenant called me on the phone and asked if I would be interested in interviewing with the committee? And I knew in that moment that indeed THE CLOUD HAD MOVED and it had moved from downtown Pittsburgh and that it had moved over and hovered over The Church of the Covenant. And praise God for me, the CLOUD still hovers over The Church of the Covenant and has not in any way moved, for me.

We say we believe in God. As Presbyterians we say we believe in a Sovereign God; we believe in a Sovereign LOVING God who has a Sovereign LOVING plan to bless us in our life. But when times of anxiety come; when the people of God are buffeted by change, then we look to human instrumentalities. O Lord, it is impossible for us to escape the Egyptians and our back is to the Red Sea, we complain. We say we believe in God, but then we do not trust Him. We say there is a Sovereign plan to bless us in our life, but then as God is moving and THE CLOUD MOVES, we are just somehow certain that God somehow doesn’t love us and His plan isn’t somehow to bless us. See, I think God is the great chess player. Ever play someone in chess who is really, really good? I know how to move the pieces, but someone who is really good at chess knows all the moves in advance; they’re like 12 steps ahead of you. And you wind up being defeated by them every time. God is the great chess player. Only God is 50,000 chess moves ahead of us; HIS Sovereign will has planned a plan to bless us and from before creation began; before time itself began God was already 50,000 moves ahead of us on the great chess board of

life. That's why when God moves a piece on the chess board we know it is His plan to bless them and to bless us as well. And for HIM it is never about defeat; it is always about our victory.

This Bible passage from Exodus we just read concludes: *"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still."* (Exodus 14: 14) So what is our job in the midst of every change in life? To take matters into our own hands? No. To worry and be anxious? No. To complain and remonstrate against the Almighty? No. Our job is simply to "be still" as it says. God is at work...you have only to BE STILL. *"Be still and know that I am God."* Sayeth the Lord in Psalm 46. Our job is to be still, be calm, be trusting, act and speak in faith, not fear.

I remember several years ago here at The Church of the Covenant. I was preaching on the text from the Psalms, *"Be still and know that I am God"*. (Psalm 46: 10) I had major pregnant pauses in the middle of the sermon. It was to emphasize being still and not needing to fill up all the space with the noise of my voice. It was to allow God to speak into people's lives. So at the 8:30 service that morning I am preaching, "Be still" and I hear snoring. Loud snoring. Loud sustained snoring. Now it is never a complement to a preacher to think that someone has fallen asleep during your sermon. Be still (LOUD snoring ensues) and know (MORE LOUD Snoring in the silence) that I am (Snoring, snoring and loud snoring –I think the young man has sleep apnea!) Be still and know that I am God! (a great crescendo of loud snoring erupts from ¾ of the way back on the lectern side). The ushers are trying to awaken the young man and he will not awaken. It seems that someone had too good a time the night before, had entered into the sanctuary very early in the morning, where he found a comfy pew to sleep off the excess of the night before. I loved the fact that the student was from Grove City College, not W&J. There is a God in heaven! And HE has a great sense of humor!

But the point is this –We are to be still in the presence of God. But we are not to fall asleep. We are actively to prepare ourselves spiritually for what God is about to do for us. We are to pack our bags and ready our hearts. We are to pray expectantly and believe in faith that God will move in our midst. We are to wait upon the Lord and that waiting is not passive; it is proactive and dynamic. Our job in this is *"(we) have only to be still."* But it is an ACTIVE stillness. BE STILL and watch what God will do. We trust God implicitly to bless. We trust in the chess moves of a LOVING, SOVEREIGN Chess-Master GOD who has everything planned out in love to bless and sustain. God is still on the throne. God is still God. He is still sovereign. We need not complain nor remonstrate. We may set aside fears and anxiety. The Spirit is moving. And we will follow. When the cloud moves for us, we move. And right now the Spirit of the Living God is hovering right over The Church of the Covenant. BE STILL AND KNOW THAT GOD IS STILL GOD. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*