

“Where is God?”

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We see the cross in the center of the camp and say, “There he is!”

Numbers 9:15-23

September 20, 2020

(Available in print form at corinthtoday.org/sermons or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

Clouds and fire

We have a love-hate relationship with clouds and fire, especially right now. Fire is something we all need, and usually love – the gas fire that heats our homes or cooks our food, or maybe a fireplace. We have a mostly cozy relationship with clouds, which provide needed rain and shade and brighten our sunsets.

This week we’ve seen and heard some horrific fire stories lately in California and Oregon. One of our members lost his brother two weeks ago in one of those Oregon fires, and had to give a DNA sample so they could confirm his brother’s identity.

Another member, Richelle Roithner, has asked for prayer as the YWAM training center in Salem has been threatened and the team members breathe unhealthy air. She sent me pictures that show the red glow from fire and darkened sky from ash.

We have members and friends in the Florida panhandle and others who have been battered and flooded this week by Hurricane Sally. Joseph Vaughan grew up here in Corinth but now lives in Pensacola, FL. His wife, Cindy, said they survived the storm without major problems but neighbors didn’t fare so well.

We ask in times of disaster, “Where is God?” The answer of Numbers 9:15-23 is that he’s in the clouds and in the fire. There’s no “love-hate” relationship with clouds and fire in the desert. It’s all love. A cloud means shade if there is no rain during the day, and a fire warms up the cool desert night.

The glory of the LORD

The “pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night” is a relatively well-known biblical image. As with many familiar biblical stories, however, I learned a lot about this one in a week’s time that has made the passage so much richer.

We start with a little history. God did not lead his people on the most direct route from Egypt to Canaan, because he knew the threat of war would terrify them. Nevertheless, “The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle” (Exodus 13:18).

To assure them, “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Exodus 13:21-22).

What they need to know is that their God is a 24/7 God who will lead them every step of the way toward their new home. Yahweh is an in-front God.

That changes in the next chapter. When Pharaoh pursued the Israelites to the Red Sea, terrifying them, “Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long” (Exodus 14:19-20).

There’s more in that story as well. As the Red Sea parted and Israel walked through on dry ground, the Egyptians pursued them. “During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion” (Exodus 14:24).

This band of ex-slaves needs a lot of assurance. Neither individually nor collectively have they been making decisions about what to do or where to go for generations. Now they know this guiding God is also a protecting God.

From there we have no further mention of the “pillar” of cloud or fire until after they set up the tabernacle. When Moses is up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God, we have both cloud and fire accompanied by a loud trumpet blast (Exodus 19:16-19; 24:15-18). There is a God who not only guides and protects, meaning he is an intimate God who is close by – he is also a God of mystery and power.

Before the tabernacle was set up, Moses had a “tent of meeting” on the outside of the camp. Whenever he would enter, the “pillar of cloud” would descend, but apparently only temporarily (Exodus 33:7-11).

Then, at the end of the book of Exodus, after the more “permanent” tabernacle was erected, the tabernacle became the “tent of meeting,” and “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). Exodus ends by saying, “In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels (Exodus 40:36-38).

The Cloud-Fire Song

Now we return to our passage in Numbers 9. We’re a year-plus out from the Red Sea, but this is also a preview of forty years ahead. Only the Israelites don’t know at the beginning of forty years that it will be forty years.

Verses 15-16 are a reminder of that we’ve already seen in Exodus. The day-cloud and night-fire are primarily associated with the tabernacle, which itself represents the presence of God. Let me give you a Bob-theory, not explicit in the text. While there’s clearly a supernatural element to this cloud, especially as it moves, remember that this is also the place of regular burnt offerings. There has to be constant ash in the area, and perhaps evening sacrifices reflect off the ash. In this passage, unlike in Exodus, the focus is not on a “pillar.” There’s always a “cloud” over this altar.

What strikes us as we read the rest of the passage is the repetition. “The LORD’s command” or “the LORD’s order” is found nine times. The cloud “settled” or “remained” or “stayed” vs. “lifted” all through the passage. The people alternately “traveled” or “camped” in this text.

We also see an emphasis on the repeated obedience of the people. We know this gang was not consistently faith-filled or obedient, and God will eventually judge them for staying when he said move and moving when he said stay, and for repeated acts of unbelief and rebellion. None of that is in this passage. Why all this repetition on God’s command, the cloud’s movement (or lack thereof), and their obedience?

One more “note” (pun intended). What follows this passage is what looks like a random disconnect. Chapter 10 records the making of two silver trumpets that call the people to assemble or set out. They seem to reinforce audibly the visual of the cloud and fire. But maybe the cloud and fire are not only about the visual.

I think Numbers 9:17-23 is a song, a traveling or campfire song – along the lines of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” or one of the sixty middle earth poems and songs J. R. R. Tolkien wove into the story of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien fans know Tom Bombadil sang a lot of them – even though his character didn’t make the cut into the movie version. The songs were for going to war, or wandering, or drinking, or telling a story.

There are also more songs and poems the Old Testament books of Law and History than you remember, and that doesn't even include the collection we call "Poetry" or the many poems in the books of prophecy. That this one doesn't fit the exact pattern of the others doesn't surprise me.

Look at the end of Numbers 10, when Moses has a poem/song for "whenever the ark set out" –

*Rise up, LORD!
May your enemies be scattered;
May your foes flee before you.*

He has another poem/song when the ark came to rest –

*Return, LORD,
To the countless thousands of Israel.*

Why is that important? Because the cloud and fire are the answer to the Israelites' question, "Where is God?" As the people wander through the desert without knowing where they're going or even if they're going anywhere anytime soon, of course they're going to ask, "Where is God?"

They had to wonder and sometimes voice all kinds of questions. Do we have to pack up everything again? Where are we going? How long will it take? Will there be any water? Will we have enough food? What if we're attacked? Are we ever going to get to our new home?

Numbers 9:15-23 belts out a song to sing and remember! The poetry makes this passage brighten the Numbers landscape like a pillar of fire at night. This is the musical reminder of the visual dominating the skyline in the day or the night.

The cloud and fire are like a biblical spotlight saying, "There he is!" "When we set out, we may not know distance, direction, destination, or duration, but we know God is in the center of the camp." When they stayed in one location for a year, they could still see God. When they had to pack up everything again after just one night, they could still see God.

Even when for any reason they couldn't see, or years or generations later could no longer see, they could still sing. That's what songs do. What love songs bring you back to why you got married? What is your alma mater's fight song that you sing to the annoyance of everyone except other alumni? What songs do you sing that remind you of why you're a believer, why God can be trusted? We sing songs because they more indelibly imprint truth into our hearts and minds.

How could anyone be an atheist in that urban campground? We're getting ready to hit a whole section of Numbers with story after story of complaints, rebellion,

unbelief, and frustration. Even Moses loses his temper. With that centering visual they should have never, ever lost perspective.

But are those practical atheists different than we are? It's surprising to me how quickly we can lose perspective. Right now there's a lot of impatience out there, a lot of frustration, a lot of conflict, a lot of anger, a lot of fear. You know what I'd love? If there were a stark difference between "the world" and people who know Jesus.

I'd love it if just once the media would say, "Folks, here comes another hurricane. The fires keep burning in the west. COVID cases are rising again. Quarantines and isolation abound. There's an election coming up, and we don't know who's going to win. The Supreme Court has a vacancy. Cancer's all around. Unemployment is still high. Fears are rising. But everywhere you find churches and people who believe in Jesus Christ, the anxious-ometer is low. I wonder why that is."

I don't hear that much. Instead, it seems in many cases Christians are the ones who feel and spread fear. You'd think Christians think God is nervous about who wins the next election. That God is wringing his hands over the pandemic or what's going to happen to the church.

I've seen internet videos that say what we're seeing are signs of the end. I've lived long enough and read enough church history to know that 100% of the time, everyone who has dated the coming of Christ or the end of the world was wrong.

The New Testament urges us to live and speak with the sure knowledge of Christ's imminent coming. So if the response is examining ourselves and repenting and seeking God and praying, that's the right response.

But how do we know God is there in our situation? Where can we look to remember? When life is falling apart and we're not sure what's going to happen next to the world or the nation or our family or ourselves, is there any visible evidence that God is among us? Is there anywhere we can look to see our version of the pillar of cloud in the day or the pillar of fire at night?

I hate to be so un-pastoral, but I have a one-syllable answer: "Duh!" "Where is God?" Lift your eyes to the center of our camp, to the cross of Jesus Christ. God has come into our world in Jesus Christ. Paul asks in Romans 8, What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

This is why the most enduring, well-loved songs in our hymnals and repertoires consistently take us back to the incarnation, the cross and the empty tomb. We sing, over and over again, that God has come to us. In the words of John 1, he "pitched his tent" among us forever when God became man in Jesus Christ.

I searched and was surprised that with a billion and a half sites on the World Wide Web, no one seems to have put this passage into a song. There are a handful of songs that sing about the cloud and pillar (like the one we'll sing at the close of this service), but none that I could find that actually turn Numbers 9:15-23 into a song.

So I did a very un-Bob thing and wrote one. I usually leave the song-writing to experts like Peter Corneliussen and Paul Cummings. I'm not the world's greatest poet. But this passage inspired me, and I invite you to sing this song. The tune and first line of each verse are borrowed from a 17th century German song translated into English.

*God himself is with us
We can see his presence
Grace and holiness his essence
God's command will move us
Guiding luminescence
Our response is acquiescence
Fire or cloud, trumpets loud
Night and day our story
We can see your glory*

*God himself is with us
Though the way's uncertain
We will never be disheartened
Rise, O Lord, and conquer
When we travel burdened
Or we rest among the legion
Settled here, traveling there
Night and day our story
We can see your glory*

*God himself is with us
Now we see more clearly
How in Christ we're loved so dearly
In his incarnation
And his death severely
We are given peace securely
Risen Lord, hope restored
Night and day our story
We can see your glory*

Amen.