

# “Under a Cloud”

## 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 & Luke 13:1-9

### March 7, 2010

We all share some things in common. That is the way the 2nd scripture reading for today begins. And I think it makes an excellent point - one worth noting for all of us. Of course, I should note that Paul specifically talks about “our ancestors” ..... But I think that the point is to suggest that whether it is in days gone by with our ancestors or if it is in our world today or just in our little community ... We all share some things in common. Number 1 - we all exist ‘under the cloud’ ..... And number 2 - we all “pass through the sea”. It is my belief that we all must start with this as a foundational reality in our life and it is here that we begin to understand the life that we experience.

Think about what the scripture is saying to us. We always have been, are and will be under the cloud. I suppose that in recent weeks as we have been experiencing dense and unrelenting fog every day we might have come to feel as though the cloud was always present and we could hardly wait for it to lift and for the sun to shine. But of course, the Apostle Paul is talking about a deeper, spiritual reality. For the ancient people of God in particular, there was an understanding that the cloud was a symbol of the presence of God - something they would never want to lift. During the Exodus experience we are told that a cloud led the people by day ... And when Moses went up Mt. Sinai a cloud covered the mountain. They understood that God was present - hidden in the cloud perhaps, but present never-the-less. And Paul reminds us that we are all ‘under the cloud - God is always present - always protecting and shielding.

But remember too - we all pass through the sea. Certainly, every Israelite who wanted to live had to follow Moses across the Red Sea. But on a different level, it is important to note that the belief of those days was that the sea was a place of great danger - it is a place of struggle and suffering, danger and sometimes even death - it was a place filled with fear.

So we are reminded that first and foremost in our lives we are a people who are always under the cloud - God is always present. But even though this first statement is true it does not prevent the second from being a reality too. God is always present but still we will endure difficult, dangerous times of suffering and struggle. It is just a reality of life! The first truth does not eliminate the second. Nor does the fact that we encounter the pain of the sea mean that the cloud is not present.

It is interesting to note that throughout history people have had to acknowledge the reality of suffering in our world and try to put it in context with their belief in a god. Look back to the questions raised by the ancient Israelites in the midst of their Exodus from Egypt as they wondered where God was in the midst of their difficult existence. They had seen God so often but they struggled and questioned. Or listen to the Jews talking to Jesus in our Gospel text for today as they reflect on their current news stories. Or check other religious teachings like that of the Buddha who came to the conclusion in the first of his Four Noble Truths that “to live is to suffer”. Of course Buddha taught that suffering was the result of desire and the only way to deal with suffering was to reduce our desires through right thinking and right living. But no matter how rightly we think or live we can not avoid the dangers and pains of this world. We will all pass through the sea ..... It is a part of life. I really enjoyed reading about a notice that appeared

in the window of a coat store in Nottingham, England: "We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, coat rationing, government control and bad payers. We have been cursed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next." Sometimes we wonder what could possibly happen next!

Given the fact that we will encounter plenty of suffering along life's journey, I think that how we think about it is important. And specifically, as we live as children of God, how we think about suffering in the context of God is really important. Way back in Old Testament times people were asking the questions. One of Israel's leaders named Gideon in the book of Judges [6:13] asked: "If the Lord is really with us, why has all this happened to us?" In today's Gospel text Jesus must answer the question as faithful Jews came wondering about those who suffered and died when a tower in Jerusalem collapsed or when the military got carried away and some Jews were killed. Even in our day people write articles in which they talk about a tornado that touched down in Minneapolis at the time a controversial vote was being taken .... the suggestion is that that is how God works and you will be struck down for wrong thinking or wrong actions - wrong votes. Jesus says, "No!" It was really interesting for me to read about a Rabbi {Harold Kushner} who's son was struck down by a medical condition. As the Rabbi tried to struggle with his emotions through the ordeal he investigated the traditional religious answers for why bad things happen to good people. He discovered four answers that are often given - - - none of which he considered satisfactory to solve the problem. One answer said that suffering is God trouncing us (we're being punished for our sins). Another answer said that God is teaching us (we're being educated by these misfortunes). A third answer said that God is testing us (we're afflicted so God can learn how strong we are). Finally, a fourth answer said that God is transferring us (through terminal illness from this bitter world to a better one). The rabbi found all four answers unsatisfying. He would not accept these alternatives. Jesus did not accept the neat solution that catastrophes implied some personal sin as the cause.

I am guessing that you have heard all of these before .... perhaps they reflect what you think at different times. For the Rabbi who came up with this list of 4 ways we talk about suffering in relationship to God none seemed to be an appropriate understanding. When asked the question, Jesus about sin and suffering and God His answer was simple .... NO! No, God is not going around trouncing you because of your sin ..... our sin and the sin of the world in which we live gets us in plenty of trouble all by themselves. No, God is not trying to teach us a lesson. .... But we probably should pay attention ... when the tower falls, maybe we need to learn some better building practices. When we suffer maybe we need to learn from the suffering. But it is not God inflicting us. Is He testing us ..... that is a bit silly - God knows what we are made of and what we can endure. Certainly our endurance is tested all of the time by the things we encounter in our world. It is an interesting thought in our second lesson - I hear it frequently as people refer to this text and misquoted it saying that "God will not give me more than I can handle". Then as the load gets more and more difficult they wonder about the promise of God. But the text is clear that it is not God trouncing, teaching, or testing us. The darkness of the world and the fact that the world is full of sin does all of those things. We all pass through the sea. But the good news is this - the cloud is always there. God is always present to lift and guide us. God is there to strengthen and support us. God is there to lead us through the sea and into a new life.

AMEN