

### Coming in a Cloud

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on 30 November 1997, the first Sunday in Advent. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Signs of Christmas are everywhere. The Advent wreath, Christmas tree, and Christmas carols are a sign that we're going to celebrate the birth of Jesus long ago in Palestine. We see not only signs of Christ's birth in the distant past, but also signs of Christ's presence with us today. We'll celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion this morning. The bread and the wine are signs that Jesus is not someone simply of the past. We believe that Jesus is present with us today and the signs of his presence are the Bread and Wine. We also look for signs of Christ to come again in the future. Jesus says, "*Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.*" This week I've been looking at the clouds. I've been taking special notice of clouds and cloud formations and all the different kinds of clouds. I look at the clouds and I search them for the hidden face of Christ who is *coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*

I've noticed that some clouds are friendly and some are threatening. And I wondered what kind of a cloud Jesus will come in. Will the cloud be a threatening funnel shaped tornado? Or will he come in a friendly, soft, fluffy cumulus cloud? What kind of a cloud will Jesus return in? Years ago Joni Mitchell, the singer, looked at clouds and saw "*flows of angels' hair and ice cream castles in the air.*" We can probably all remember those kinds of clouds. When we were young we'd lay out in the cow field and look up at the blue sky at the fluffy cumulus clouds and life was wonderful and carefree as we played the game of looking for faces and figures in the clouds. But there's another side to clouds Joni Mitchell sang, "*they also block the sun; they rain and snow on everyone, so many things I would have done, but clouds got in my way.*" Friendly rain clouds bring life to parched farmlands. Violent thunder storms destroy crops. Clouds can be friendly or threatening. What kind of cloud will Jesus come in?

Fifty years ago a threatening cloud gathered over all of Europe. Nothing like it had ever been seen before. The cloud was an ominous dark cloud with lightning flashing from it. It covered all of Germany and then it began to spread. It spread over Poland. It spread to Norway and Denmark. Lightning strikes from that cloud struck in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands.

And in that cloud people could see the face of Hitler coming in power and great glory. One day during the war President Roosevelt wondered aloud to Winston Churchill what people would call the war after it was all over. And Churchill responded, "*The Unnecessary War.*" Signs of approaching war abounded everywhere but we didn't pay attention. After the war Churchill wrote a book, *The Gathering Storm*. If we had just paid attention to the signs we would have seen the storm brewing. We could have prevented the war. And do you remember how the war ended? The war ended with a mushroom shaped cloud over Hiroshima and another over Nagasaki. One eyewitness recalled that after the initial blinding light and rush of wind: "I raised my head, facing the center of Hiroshima.... [There I saw] an enormous mass of clouds... [they] spread and climbed rapidly... into the sky.... It took the shape of a monstrous mushroom." [As quoted by James F. Kay, *Seasons of Grace*]

When Jesus comes again, will he come in a mushroom shaped cloud? Or will he come in a friendly cloud? Some people look at the skies and see only threatening cloud. Millions of years ago, scientists say, an asteroid fell from the sky, struck the earth, thrusting tons of debris into the atmosphere. The cloud of debris blocked the light of the sun for thousands of years. It brought to an end the reign of the dinosaurs and hastened the coming of the ice age. It could happen again, they say. Even today, acid rain falls from the clouds over the Adirondacks destroying acres of forests. The friendly ozone cloud that protects us from ultraviolet rays is vanishing over the polar ice caps. Mt. St. Helens erupted and sent a cloud of ash 15 miles in the air destroying crops and wildlife and blanketing cities. El Nino threatens to bring the worst winter storm clouds in recorded history to the West Coast. Will Jesus come again in threatening and destructive clouds to wipe out the human race and destroy the world?

Others see more promising signs in the clouds. Some scientists claim they'll be able to predict the weather more accurately and over longer periods of time by monitoring the movements of clouds from satellites circling the earth. Furthermore, they'll actually be able to control the weather through the seeding of clouds that will bring life giving rain to deserts. Scientists will harness the wind borne clouds and turn them into cheap electric energy. The clouds will have a

friendly face. What kind of clouds will Jesus return in, clouds that bring life or dark mushroom shaped clouds that bring death?

Whenever I look at the clouds - storm clouds, or bright, friendly, cottony cumulus clouds - I look for the face of Christ who is coming. The Advent candles and Christmas trees point to the birth of Jesus in the past. The Bread and Wine of Holy Communion are signs of Christ's presence with us today. And the clouds we see in the sky are signs that the future belongs to Jesus. So when I look at the clouds, I remember that Jesus said that we *will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.*

*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.* But whatever happens, Jesus says that we're to stand erect, confident, hopeful, knowing that whatever cloud comes to meet us we'll see in that cloud the face of Jesus Christ. Several years ago, when Andy Murray was dying I visited him in the hospital. He took my hand and he kept repeating to me, "The future belongs to Christ! The future belongs to Christ!" He had it right! He knew that Jesus said he was coming in a cloud with power and great glory. He knew that the future belongs to Christ. He had hope that no matter what kind of clouds came his way Christ was going to be in that cloud and God was going to win in the end.

That's why we can never give up - especially when we see storm clouds on the horizon. We must never give up on ourselves, on our friends, on our enemies, or on our world! Whatever clouds are on the horizon, Jesus will be in that cloud somewhere. That's why we pray without ceasing, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." It's a prayer, not simply for our personal salvation, but a prayer for the whole world, that the whole world would know the blessings of the reign of Christ.

Faithful God,  
your promises stand unshaken through all generations.  
Renew us in hope,  
that we may be awake and alert  
watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ,  
our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, forever and ever. Amen.