

Counting Clouds  
Job 38.1-7, 34-41; Mark 10.35-45  
October 21, 2018  
Pentecost +22B  
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I stood up on a Wednesday night before about half of this room and prominently displayed two, large, wall calendars. On one side was the 2016 calendar and on the other was a mostly blank 2017 calendar. The 2016 calendar was overflowing with regular events, special events, meetings, hosting neighborhood groups, opportunities for volunteering, budget conversations, stewardship emphasis, our first Mabel Palmer Lecture and the surrounding planning flurry, and ordinations of a chaplain, an associate pastor, and a professor of sociology in the church.

Enough time has passed that I don't recall everything on that 2016 calendar, but I remember the mess of dry erase markers and swirl of notes covering almost every box of the 365 days. Then we turned our attention to 2017, and I promised I would not give us another year that looked like that—filled to the brim, overflowing with commitments, maxing us out on doing rather than being and stretching our capacity as a small-to-mid-size congregation.

October in New Orleans is a month when every box on the calendar is filled, and St. Charles has been a pretty full place lately. Add to that my family's calendar: two children in two different schools with two different fall breaks, a partner with an equally busy work and volunteer schedule, and our family's decision to take on house renovations on the lakefront, and October has me at about the maximum of what I am able to juggle as an individual.

Is it just me? Maybe your life is the right balance of seeing and noticing, breathing and walking, serving the world and tending your soul, giving work and voluntarism the appropriate hours and then embracing Sabbath and honoring time with God as part of your life flow. Maybe I can learn from you in my perpetual life lesson of overextending.

When I am maxed out, I recognize something dangerous can happen. I can begin to think that all of this activity and productivity around me is a product of my sheer will and personal effort. I can begin to think that nothing could possibly get done without my hands touching it and mind helping to create it and order it into being. My value can become wrapped up in the quantity of tasks I perform. And when I am juggling just a bit too much, I can sometimes, possibly, begin to focus on what isn't going right, what isn't perfect, what isn't happening my way, in my time, at my speed, in my style, by my preferences. I told you it was dangerous.

Lamott Week, as we called it in the church office, was a wild one with last minute details and tweaks to the facility. As I finally sat down in the sanctuary last night, listening to the beautiful swirl of music from the Matt Lemmler Jazz Band and the soothing, compassionate meditation offered by Quaker pastor William Thiele, I did not settle into soul space and prayer space. Instead, I heard the list running through my head: you messed up the book tickets. It's a total, absolute mess. Anne's car is late. You didn't think to double check when it would arrive or how to contact then. I bet it's stuck because of Krewe of Boo. The balcony's too hot. Look at how they're all fanning themselves. Tom told you the balcony would be hot. And they can't hear anything up their, either. He told you that, too. What a mess.

Then I sat there for another minute, allowing myself to participate in William's prayer and Matt's song, swirling as a rhythmic invitation into the moment and the breath, and I had another set of thoughts: this is beautiful. Look at this space! The sisters and brothers of St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church had a vision more than 93 years ago to build a space right here on this corner to be a gathering spot for neighbors, and we're still doing it! Listen to this music soar all the way through the balcony. Maybe they didn't hear my announcements, but they hear this and can be transported from a head space to a heart space. Look at these volunteers who showed up to take tickets, welcome guests, answer questions, arrange a green room. God is good! Spirit is present! What a night!

I'm embarrassed to say, it doesn't take much for me to lose hold of what is good. My hope is that the gap is shrinking between when I lose the real plot of the story and when I get it back. Maybe that's where our work is sometimes—the space of awareness and awakening shrinks, we can say, "Ah, I'm doing it again." Then we move into a space of gratitude and perspective of who we are, what our role in the

story is, how our friends and neighbors around us are also equal participants in this Divine story and not background character actors, and we remember again what God's role in this story is.

My favorite lesson on this theme comes from Elizabeth Gilbert's book *Eat, Pray, Love*. In the middle part of her journey, she has come to an ashram in India to learn to meditate. Not only are her efforts going poorly, she keeps being assigned jobs like scrubbing floors when she wants to be transcending in prayer and encountering the Divine. She befriends a man name Richard who tells her to let go and stop grasping.

"At some point, as Richard keeps telling me, you gotta let go and sit still and allow contentment to come to you.

Letting go, of course, is a scary enterprise for those of us who believe that the world revolves only because it has a handle on the top of it which we personally turn, and that if we were to drop this handle for even a moment, well – that would be the end of the universe. But try dropping it....Sit quietly for now and cease your relentless participation. Watch what happens. The birds do not crash dead out of the sky in mid-flight, after all. The trees do not wither and die, the rivers do not run red with blood. Life continues to go on.... Why are you so sure that your micromanagement of every moment in this whole world is so essential? Why don't you let it be?"

We love the illusion of control, and sometimes busy-ness gives us that illusion. Sometimes it's grasping for power, and that's where some of the disciples are losing the plot in Mark's gospel reading for today. Just like me. Just like us. They are focusing on the wrong thing and cannot see what is good and best in front of them. They are missing the better way.

Jesus is teaching them to heal the sick and welcome the stranger, go to the outcast, cross the boundaries of culture and ethnicity and religion, speak to the hearts of people, see them for who they really are, restore people to community, liberate people from the burdens they carry, love so big that the established traditions and powers-that-be will start to sweat because they recognize that real power, holy power is rooted in that pulsing, healing, creating, Divine love.

But these guys don't seem too interested in that day-to-day, relationship, life work. They want to know who gets to sit at Jesus' right and left hand. Not only do James and John want the position of power and authority and honor, they have the audacity to ask Jesus to give them honor without work, glory without sacrifice, authority without service.

Jesus, overflowing with patience and not judgment, leans into their fantasy by asking them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" James and John stunningly reply, "We are able." Sure. Of course. Got it. We are able to drink the cup, take on the baptism, walk this Jesus path. We've got this. No problem. We are able. It isn't much longer before Jesus is literally looking to his left and to his right, and on either side of him hang two criminals, dying by crucifixion. Is that the cup James and John were so confident they were able to drink? Is that the path they were so sure they could walk?

James and John are focusing on the wrong goal, missing the life they are called to live right here and now, forgetting altogether where their feet are planted, and tremendously confident in their ability to spin the handle on top of the world. Meanwhile, Jesus reminds them, "whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant." As if to say, "Friends, this story is not about what you seem to think it's about. Living the path of revolutionary love is not about securing a good position in a life to come but about the hard, slow work of serving the world, tending your heart, loving your neighbor has yourself. Oh, and maybe even learning to treat yourself with as much kindness as you're able to muster for the neighbor. Securing a power position for later, eesh. You've lost the plot again."

With Mark's gospel in one hand, we turn to Job with the other, and he is in arguments with God about what is real and what is not real, what is fair and what is not fair, and who is God and who is not God. God speaks to Job not from the sound of sheer silence (as in the Elijah story) but from the eye of a swirling storm and asks Job, ""Why do you confuse the issue? Why do you talk without knowing what you're talking about?" Job has had his turn questioning God, now God questions Job. Eugene Peterson plays in the words of Job 38, saying:

Where were you when I created the earth?  
Tell me, since you know so much!  
Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that!  
Who came up with the blueprints and measurements?  
How was its foundation poured,  
and who set the cornerstone,  
While the morning stars sang in chorus  
and all the angels shouted praise?  
And who took charge of the ocean  
when it gushed forth like a baby from the womb?  
That was me! I wrapped it in soft clouds,  
and tucked it in safely at night.  
Then I made a playpen for it,  
a strong playpen so it couldn't run loose,  
And said, 'Stay here, this is your place.  
Your wild tantrums are confined to this place.'

"Can you get the attention of the clouds,  
and commission a shower of rain?  
Can you take charge of the lightning bolts  
and have them report to you for orders?"

"Who do you think gave weather-wisdom to the ibis,  
and storm-savvy to the rooster?  
Does anyone know enough to number all the clouds  
or tip over the rain barrels of heaven  
When the earth is cracked and dry,  
the ground baked hard as a brick?"

"Can you teach the lioness to stalk her prey  
and satisfy the appetite of her cubs  
As they crouch in their den,  
waiting hungrily in their cave?  
And who sets out food for the ravens  
when their young cry to God,  
fluttering about because they have no food?"

Job thought he understood how the world worked. He thought he knew all there was to know about God. He'd heard about God and thought that was all he needed to know. And then the swirling wind of God whips around him, and he encounters the real Holy One. Job thought he knew enough about the world to be in control of his life, but God who counts the clouds in the sky can speak to those clouds and command the rains. They go back and forth like this until Job repents of what he knew. He repents of his words. He repents of his assumptions that he knew how the universe worked and what the role its creator played in its ongoing story—not fixed at all but ever-changing and pulsing with life. He repents of his false belief that his hand was on the handle atop the world, making it spin, allowing the sun to rise, keeping the birds in the air. He repents of his assumptions altogether, of taking for granted the power and creativity in God's world, for seeing it as backdrop to his life's drama. He will join God as a counter of clouds and not take for granted their capacity for beauty and their testimony to God's presence.

Friends, take a deep breath with me as we cease our relentless participation in the world.

May we not miss the call to the Jesus path because we are so consumed with our own inner drama, our need for power and recognition, our need for controlling the narrative of our lives. May we say "yes" to the servant life with Jesus as our guide.

May we not miss a true encounter with the swirling wind of God because we think we know enough after hearing about God a few times. May we not miss the real power in the magnificent presence of creation, calling us back to the real presence of God, the strength of our Creator, the one whose breath gave us life and fills our lungs here in this moment.

As we return to the Jesus path together this morning, may we confess where we've lost the plot, and return to the story of God, the great counter of the clouds, today.