

Don't you wonder about the cloud in today's first reading? The cloud that settles into the magnificent temple that King Solomon has just had built, a cloud so strong and powerful that it overwhelms the temple priests so they can't stand up and minister?

Solomon has just had a most beautiful temple built for God – crafted from the finest wood available, with ornate carvings and the finest stone, and decorated with bronze, silver, and overlaid with gold. The only thing left to do before the dedication of the temple is the placement of the Ark of the Covenant in its inner sanctuary, a dwelling place for the Lord.

The Ark was the symbol of the Lord's presence among the people. Before Solomon's temple was constructed, the Ark was housed in a temporary tent that traveled with the nomadic Israelites. Now the assembly of Israel has gathered and the priests carry the Ark into the temple. Then we are presented with the cloud image:

“When the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.”

How do you imagine this cloud? When I try to visualize this cloud, I imagine being in an airplane looking out the window in one of those flights where the plane is surrounded by thick and swirling clouds, where the plane is enfolded by clouds, and passengers can't see anything else. Or, I picture the beach or being on a boat when the clouds roll in so powerfully and suddenly you can't see anything but a thick cloud roll. The third cloud image I have is dense smoke from a wildfire. Lately we have seen so many pictures of the CA wildfires. The substance of the cloud, whatever it holds for the people of God, is powerful.

This is not the first and only time that the people of Israel have experienced the glory of the Lord through a cloud. You probably remember it from readings in Exodus. The people of Israel have fled Egypt and wander for long years in the wilderness. The Lord leads them with a cloud pillar by day. And a cloud descends on the top of Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with the Israelites.

This time, the people are gathering in the newly-built temple. The cloud appears as manifestation of God. The people recognize God's presence and see in the cloud, God's presence taking over the temple. The glory of the Lord fills the temple.

Over the millennia, the people of God struggle to find words or ways to describe the glory of God. The cloud in Solomon's temple is one way that the people of God describe the overwhelming presence of God. Another scriptural image of Glory is luminescence or very bright, glowing light. Scripture tells us that the people noticed that Moses' face is transformed after he talks to the Lord at Sinai. He glows. And there is a third way that scripture speaks of God's glory. In the psalms and elsewhere in the Hebrew scripture, another word for glory comes from the Hebrew word that can be translated as massive weight.

A cloud, luminescence, and massive weight – these are all ways to express the overwhelming presence of God, the glory of God.

But what is this Glory?

There's a wonderful passage in Exodus where Moses actually asks God, "Show me your glory." God's answer to Moses is this: "I will make all my goodness pass before you. This is another understanding of God's glory – God's goodness and all that is wrapped up in it.

The glory of God is mighty and all-enfolding and weighty. It is hard to pin one definitive image or truism on the glory of God.

One truism is uncovered in Solomon's prayer. God cannot be contained. God's glory cannot be boxed in a place, in a house, in a church, or by a people.

Solomon has a little conversation with himself and God. Now that the temple is built, he puzzles out the very big question: Where does God dwell? the heavens? earth? Can God be contained in one place? Solomon's answer to God is a resounding no. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

Solomon answers his own question. His magnificent temple is not God's dwelling place. God cannot be contained in one place. The temple is the place of God's name. Since in Solomon's day a person's name represented his or her essence, Solomon concludes, God's name is present, God is present.

The presence of God is revealed throughout all of scripture—in a cloud, in fire, at Mount Sinai, in the Tabernacle, in the Temple, in the Incarnation, in the risen Lord among us, and in God's Holy Spirit.

When we see snatches of God's glory, we see an action or a reflection of God. We experience something essential about God. Maybe we see the goodness of God that Moses gets a glimpse of in Sinai. Maybe we see God's all-enfolding, steadfast love that Solomon witnesses in the dedication of his temple. Maybe we see the wideness of God's love and mercy that extends to all peoples, also witnessed by Solomon in today's reading. Maybe we see that same cloud that the assembly of Israel witnessed with Solomon in our own magnificent house of God here at All Saints. Maybe we will experience, if we are aware, the overwhelming presence of God in our picnic we are about to enjoy on this glorious, late summer day.

God manifests God's glory to us in unlimited ways.

Lest we, with Solomon, get too righteous and self important about our churches as a manifestation of God's glory, here is a story told by the Episcopalian theologian, writer, lawyer, activist William Stringfellow, a story that he called "Street Sacramentals." A story that finds the glory of the Lord in every day street encounters. Stringfellow recounts:

"I remember one afternoon going to the northern part of East Harlem to visit a woman who was having difficulty with the welfare authorities. The matter took several hours to settle, and by the time I was returning to East 100th St., it had turned rather cold. I had gone out in the afternoon when it was warmer, dressed only in a shirt, chinos and sneakers, but now the weather had changed, I was shivering from the cold. About two blocks from my tenement, a boy I knew, who had been loafing on the

corner, called out that he wanted to ask me something. As we talked, he saw that I was freezing to death and so he took off his jacket and gave it to me to wear. The boy is an addict and I happened to know that the clothes on his back were virtually the only ones he had. But he saw that I was cold and gave me his jacket. This is what is known as a sacrament.”

Churches and streets, God’s dwelling places. Places and moments where God’s glory becomes manifest to us. An overwhelming presence not to be contained. A Glory open to all who draw close.

God offers us glimpses of the glory of the Lord each and every day.

Where will you glimpse God’s overwhelming presence, that cloud, that luminescence? Where will you look for the glory of the Lord today? Here in our worship? In the smiles of the kids as they step into the bouncy house?