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The Wisdom of the Cloud
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This past week, I retreated with sixteen preachers from around the nation to discuss how we can (and will) continue to speak to the spiritual needs of our congregants, particularly in this time where our post-pandemic future continues to be delayed by the onset of the Delta variant.

One of our leaders for the week was Dr. Craig Barnes, president of my alma mater Princeton Theological Seminary, began our time together reflecting on the story of the exodus:

As the Hebrews walked away from being slaves in Egypt, the Bible says that God did not lead them to their freedom by taking them through the shortest way possible, but that God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. Then it says that the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and that the pillar of cloud was illuminated by fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Scripture emphasizes that neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night ever left its place.

Which means that every day the Hebrews walked toward the land of milk and honey, they were walking in a fog.

In our society today, we are fond of believing that we can only see the present with clarity: the past is gone, and the future remains uncertain. However, Dr. Barnes reminded us that, for people of faith, it is often our past and our present that are the most clear. It is the present that remains foggy.

His point was that the past reminds us of our collective history that is forever molded by varied circumstances of confusion, pain, war, peace, growth, and joy. Our past is clear, and for those who practice faith, our past shows us that God remains faithful in every circumstance, no matter how elating or despairing that shared past has been.

Similarly, for people of faith, our future is known with clarity as well. Our future will be a continuation of our past, characterized by a God who is faithful in every circumstance and who will conclude each of our lived stories by leading us toward the eternal City of God.

It is our present that remains unclear, mysterious, and cloudy. We have so many questions about the journey: What will we need to get through today? Who will be alongside us as we go? When will we encounter rest, challenge, or nourishment? Much like the Hebrews who walked toward freedom accompanied by perpetual fog, we often find ourselves surrounded by grey when we would prefer black and white, and enveloped by mist when we are really seeking clarity.

But it's the questions of the present, it's the fog of the cloud that make room for our faith to grow.

If we find that our present is not as clear as we would like it to be, if the journey is longer than we imagined, if we have more questions than we have answers, then we do not walk in the fog alone. It turns out that God has a track record of leading people in faith by the wisdom of the cloud.