

Who Owns the Cloud: Google or God?

Luke 21:25-36

Welcome on this First Sunday of Advent. Today's lesson from Luke's Gospel is a little unsettling. In it Christ seems to be describing the end of the world. Listen to his words: "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken . . ."

That's vivid imagery. "Signs in the sun, moon and stars . . . nations in anguish at the roaring and tossing of the sea . . . people fainting from terror . . . heavenly bodies shaken . . ." Hollywood would have a great time with special effects to portray that scene. It's a scene that has been painted from many pulpits as a time of great terror.

Yet most of us think of Advent as that special season in which the church prepares to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas. It's a season of joyous anticipation. But there is a Second Advent in scripture, one that is far more disturbing that has nothing to do with snowflakes and visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads. Luke describes it in our lesson for the day.

Luke uses the mysterious imagery of a cloud. Luke intends to be mysterious. Clouds are the biblical symbol of mystery and of the presence of God. Rev. 1:7 says "He is coming with the clouds." On Mt Sinai God says to Moses: "Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud." In Exodus 40 a cloud symbolizes the divine presence covering the tabernacle in the wilderness.

In Leviticus a cloud shrouded the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the presence of God dwelt. And a cloud of glory, the very majesty of God, filled the temple of Solomon at its dedication in I Kings 8.

A more familiar scene takes place in the New Testament where Jesus and three of his disciples are on a mountain and Christ is transfigured. When the New Testament says that Jesus is coming in a cloud with power and great glory, it's a powerful symbol of mystery and divinity.

These days we hear a lot about the cloud, even though we usually associate the cloud with our computers. When tech companies say your data is in the cloud, or that you can work in the cloud, it has nothing to do with white fluffy things in the sky. Your computer data isn't actually in heaven. It's stored somewhere here on the earth--lots of "somewheres," actually, all over the world.

I'm told that computer companies like Amazon and Google have built a vast network of servers housed in huge warehouses in widely scattered locations--some the size of a football field. That's where the cloud resides as far as computer users are concerned. Not on Mount Sinai, but anywhere that tech companies can find sufficient power to keep their servers humming.ⁱ

The Bible tells us that at the end of time Christ is coming in a cloud, but that doesn't have anything to do with computers. When Luke says that Jesus is coming in a cloud with power and great glory, it's a biblical way of saying that at the end of days, Google or Amazon won't own the cloud. God will own the cloud and Christ will reign over all.

Which is to say that Christians ought to be excited about the future. According to scripture, all of creation groans, waiting expectantly – not to see what Google or

Amazon or Apple will do next - but to see what God will do next. Because the future belongs to God.

The people of Israel waited expectantly for the Messiah and the early church waited expectantly for Christ's return to reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The Christian life is an expectant life. It's a life lived in anticipation that the promises of God will be fulfilled.

Dwight L. Moody used to tell a story about an optimistic and cheerful lady who was, nonetheless, a shut in, bedridden in an attic apartment on the fifth floor of a run-down building. There was no elevator in the building and here she was, lying there alone in a shabby room of this run-down apartment building.

One of her friends came to see her one day and brought with her another friend. The second friend was of a wealthy family. As they entered the building, the wealthy lady was struck by the austere and depressing surroundings. As they climbed the stairs to the second floor, the wealthy lady remarked, "such a dark and filthy place." Her friend responded, "It's better higher up!"

They climbed the stairs to the third landing. "It's even worse here," the wealthy lady said. Her friend responded, "It's better higher up." Finally they got to the fifth and entered the tiny and run-down apartment of this shut-in lady. But the lady's face was glowing to see her friend and she was radiating with the love of Christ in her heart.

The wealthier woman was distracted by the awful surroundings and she said in a sympathetic way, not wanting to be mean, but kindly, "It must be difficult for you living here like this." The shut-in smiled knowingly and said, "Yes, but it's better higher up."

That's the promise that Christians always live by. "It's better higher up."

Who knows what grand thing God may be doing right this moment! No wonder that for over 2000 years people have been trying to read the fig trees, trying to analyze the seasons, trying to see the signs, trying to determine when God's promises will be fulfilled. It's a futile effort, to be sure. Jesus says no man knows the hour, no one knows what is in the mind of God, even the angels, but we keep trying.

So, we're excited about the future. **We live in anticipation, secondly, because we also know that God does not forget His own.** Much of the New Testament was written during the time of persecution. To be a Christian believer was a test of real courage and endurance. Much of the New Testament was written to the believers to say: "Hold on! God has not forgotten us. He will come."

During this special season of Advent, the Jewish faithful will celebrate Hanukkah. Hanukkah, like Christmas, is a celebration of lights. Christians light an Advent wreath. Jewish families light a nine branched candle holder called a menorah.

The menorah celebrates an event that took place before Christ during a time of Roman oppression, when after a fight to recapture the temple at Jerusalem, the Jewish people wanted to relight the menorah at the altar and keep it lit 24 hours a day.

Since they didn't have candles, they used the purest olive oil, but only had enough oil to last one day. It takes eight days to prepare olive oil to the purity needed to keep a candle lit. Undaunted, however, they lit the menorah on the first day and filled it with a one-day supply of oil believing that by faith it would last until more could be produced.

It did! The one-day supply burned for eight days, miraculously. Hanukkah, for the Jewish faithful, is a sign that God does not forget His people.

God's people have always taken comfort in the knowledge that whenever life grows uncertain, dangerous, or difficult, we can look to the clouds, as it were. He does not forget or forsake us.

Ours is an expectant life, waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled, remembering that God does not forsake his own. Ours is also an expectant faith for one more reason, and Advent is central to that reason.

Lastly, advent reminds us that the victory is already ours. Now you'll need to think about this one. Theologians speak of realized eschatology. That's a fancy term that means we can live now in the light of Christ's final victory, even though that victory is yet to be won. Let me give you an example.

Dan Bauman in his book, *Dare to Believe*, illustrates how we are to experience tomorrow's joy today. He explains that at Christmas time as a youth he always did a lot of snooping, trying to find the gift-wrapped presents and figure out what was in them. Some of you have undoubtedly done the same thing when you were young.

One year, he found a package that was easy to identify. The contents were golf clubs. His mother couldn't put enough wrapping on the clubs to disguise them from her sneaky son. Bowman makes this observation: "When Mom wasn't around, I would go and feel the package and shake it and pretend I was on the golf course. The point is, I was already enjoying the pleasure of a future event, namely the unveiling. It had my name on it. I knew what it was. Only Christmas would reveal it in its fullness."ⁱⁱ

That's realized eschatology--enjoying the wonder and majesty of the victory, even though it has yet to be accomplished.

We live in a God-invaded world. Even though the final victory has yet to be won, we live in anticipation and assurance. So, Advent is here. Let the watch begin.

Let us live with unbridled expectancy in the coming days and throughout this year, remembering the words Jesus said, "At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory . . ."

It won't be Google's cloud or Amazon's cloud. It will be God's cloud and everything that is bad about this world will be swept away leaving only God's love and mercy in its wake. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.recode.net/2015/4/30/11562024/too-embarrassed-to-ask-what-is-the-cloud-and-how-does-it-work>.

ⁱⁱ (Gospel Light Publications, 1977).