

Cloud rider

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After Jesus has been taken up in a cloud, the “men in white” convey a message of hope to the disciples: this Cloud Rider will return in the same way they saw him go. The cloud that carried Jesus away was the power and presence of God, the Ancient of Days. It is a powerful metaphor for God, and reminds us of other metaphors, and other encounters.

God was present with Moses at Mt. Sinai in a cloud that covered the mountain, and “the glory of the Lord” appeared “like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.” Moses met with God in a “tent of meeting” where a “pillar of cloud” covered the tent or stood at its entrance. Moses’ face-to-face encounter with God was so transformative that his face shone and he had to cover it with a veil (Ex. 24: 15-18; 33: 7-11; 34:29-35).

God was present in a cloud in Jesus’ life on the mountain at the day of the transfiguration, when Jesus’ face, like Moses’ face, changed while praying to God. That day a cloud overshadowed Jesus and the apostles, and they went into the cloud. God spoke from inside the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

We call Jesus both Son of God and Son of Man. What does the “Son of Man” title reference? To better understand, let's go back to the time of Daniel. Daniel saw a vision of a series of imperial rulers represented as gruesome beasts. There was a lion with eagles’ wings, a bear with tusks, a beast with four wings and four heads, and a beast with iron teeth that chewed and mauled everything in its path.

Then “the Ancient One took his throne” and the beast-like, arrogant ruler was destroyed. Daniel saw “one like a Son of Man (“one like a human being, “ NRSV). This Son of Man, this human being, was given “dominion and glory and kingship” over “all people, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:9-14).

I think there is something significant in the fact that one like a human being became the true and enduring ruler after a series of beast-like rulers fell. There is something about humanity and mercy and justice and humility all wrapped up in this human-like ruler.

In Daniel, the Son of Man comes to the Ancient One in clouds, but Jesus himself spoke of the Son of Man coming in clouds to the people, to bring redemption (Luke 21:27-28). When the angels in Acts 1 promise that Jesus will come back they are affirming that he is the Son of Man, he is the Cloud Rider, the king who has not lost his humanity to become an arrogant beastlike-ruler.

King Nebuchadnezzar learned about this humanity when he was exiled, his human mind taken from him because of his own arrogance and lack of mercy. Finally he found his humanity and humility as a ruler, regained his throne, and proclaimed the justice and truth of the King of heaven.

When the men in white confirm that the Cloud Rider will be back, they are also affirming that unjust kingdoms and arrogant leaders ultimately fall. What never changes is that God, is in ultimate control and gives authority to the just and the humble.

The kingdom of God is here now, Jesus said in Luke 17:21, and people will come from east and west, from north and south, to sit at table in the kingdom of God. Even the Cloud Rider, Jesus himself, will drink of the fruit of the vine at that table (Luke 22:18).