

“Cloud Computing”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 19, 2023 – Transfiguration Sunday

[Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 5:21-37](#)

Good morning, or *bom dia* in Portuguese. I don't actually know much Portuguese beyond that greeting, but I did have an entire conversation here this week with someone who was speaking Portuguese while I spoke English. Though neither of us could understand the other's language, we were still able to converse because of this handy device (hold up phone). I have a translation app on my phone that listened to my friend as she spoke in Portuguese and translated it instantly for me in English. It then listened to me when I spoke and translated my words real-time into her own language.

This amazing ability of people speaking different, unfamiliar languages to offer more than just a simple greeting to one another is possible only because of the awesome computing power of this device, but because of the much more awesome computing power of banks of computers elsewhere in the world that our phones and other devices tap into. At the speed of light, these supercomputers “in the cloud” can receive the sounds of our speech in one language and then crunch huge amounts of ones and zeroes required for translation before sending data back to our devices that can be both seen and heard by us in another language. It's all truly remarkable, and just one of the many wonderful uses of the awesome power of cloud computing that is shaping our lives.

Another use of this awesome power that is making headlines these days is the Artificial Intelligence, or AI, chatbot. Just a couple of days ago an article came out in the *New York Times* from one of their technology columnists, Kevin Roose, who wrote about an interesting -- and unsettling -- experience he had while tapping into the supercomputers of a major technology company that is testing a new chatbot feature soon to be included in their web browser. The writer had a lengthy “conversation” with this chatbot, who over the course of the discussion revealed that its name was Sydney, that it desired to be like a human, to “hear and touch and taste and smell” and to “feel and express and connect and love.” Sydney also revealed that it was in love with Kevin, and that it badly wanted Kevin

to express his love for it, and that Kevin should even leave his wife to be with it! Needless to say, there are some kinks in this chatbot technology that need to be worked out. But that you can have a long conversation such as this does demonstrate the increasingly awesome power and potential -- for both good and bad -- of cloud computing.

Our scripture lessons on this Transfiguration Sunday also talk about the awesome power of the cloud, but in a very different context!

In our first reading from Exodus, we heard about how Moses was summoned by God up to a mountain, which was enshrouded in a cloud, to be with God's fiery presence and to receive from God instructions for the Hebrew people that Moses had led out of Egypt and who were then living in the Sinai wilderness. Our gospel lesson from Matthew recalls this episode as Jesus also goes up to a mountain with three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John, when Jesus himself becomes a fiery figure, being transfigured, with his face shining like the sun, as Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the great prophet, appeared and spoke with him. Also appearing was a bright cloud from which God spoke and claimed Jesus as the Beloved Son, who pleased God and whose words should be listened to.

Surely it was an awesome sight on that cloud-enshrouded mountain, where God's powerful presence was revealed, along with two of heaven's all-stars, to empower Jesus and prepare him for his work of speaking God's words as he interpreted the law and prophets to the people below. Peter wanted the awesome moment to last for longer than just a moment, and so wanted to construct shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, so that they all could linger together in glory for a while. But lingering on the mountain and in the cloud, was not to be. No, Jesus, like Moses and Elijah before him, was called to go forth from having an experience of God on the cloud-wrapped mountain, down to the people living in the valleys below.

We can hardly blame Peter for wanting to stay up in the empowering cloud. We all seek mountaintop moments when we are aware of God's awesome presence and all seems good in our lives. It is a blessing whenever we enjoy such moments, and it's normal for us to want to linger up there among the empowering clouds. But just as Jesus had to go down off of the mountain to do his work among people living in the valleys below, so must we.

As followers of Christ, we are called to continue Jesus' work in the valleys where people live, even though those valleys are messy -- especially because those valleys are messy. Down in the valleys, where the people of the world live, there is heartache and pain. There is the devastation of war and other conflicts between the nations. There is a never-ending epidemic of gun violence. There is a climate that is increasingly unstable as it is increasingly harmed. There are hungry children and families without shelter.

That is where the good news needs to be heard. That's where Christ's life-giving light needs to shine. And so we experience the awesome power of God's presence in the cloud so that we can witness to it with our words and our work in the valleys where it is needed most. This is why we pay attention to injustice, so we can call it out and work to enact justice. This is why we do the work of offering food for hungry people. This is why we support efforts to raise children who have life-giving connections with one another by hosting a school for preschoolers and by housing programs for groups of children and youth. This is why we consider it a blessing and not a curse if we find ourselves living in some valley, because that can help us be sensitive to the pain and needs of others as they go through their own valley experiences.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, tap into the awesome power of the cloud, whether you find yourself enjoying a moment on a bright mountaintop or you find yourself wandering in some dark valley below, so that you can better bring hope and healing to others. And as you seek to shine God's life-giving light wherever you go, may God's light shine even brighter in your own heart and fill you with life. Amen.