

When Life Takes the Long Way Around

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 July 2025

Preacher: Heidi Mills

[0 : 00] Good evening, everyone. My name is Heidi. I am the associate pastor here at the table. Pronouns she, her. And tonight I'm going to be continuing our sermon series that we've been on all summer.

It's called What Lies Beneath? Moving from the clouded to the clear as disciples of Jesus. But before I get started, I wanted to start with a little icebreaker.

And if you're an introvert like me, an icebreaker is fill you with a deep fear. There are snacks in the back. There's also the bathroom around the corner. But the question is simple. What did you want to be when you grow up?

All right, y'all. You can wrap up your conversation and then we'll come back to the group. So I'm curious. What did people want to do? People want to shout out a couple of things?

Oh, nice. I mean, you'd probably do a better job than most people who have had the office. So yes, it's not too late. Anybody else? Well, I used to want to be a gymnast.

[1 : 22] I remember many, many memories of watching the Olympics and trying as closely as possible to emulate the routines of like my favorite gymnasts. So I would drag the cushions off of the couch and lay them on the floor and do like somersaults until I got dizzy. And I would do like the flying leaps. And in no way could I ever do a split. But I was determined. And I used to pretend the arm of the couch was like a balance beam.

And I remember that I didn't really like the vault because I knew that I couldn't take a flying flip off of a piece of furniture without breaking probably every single bone in my body.

So secretly, I still want... It's a big unfulfilled dream of mine. I keep... Katie was saying that like, I have the perfect body type for it. So if I'd gotten into it before my fear instinct kicked in, who knows? I could have been the next like Simone Biles or Jade Carey. You never know. In a future life, in another life, maybe I was. But alas, was not to be. So once I got rid of that dream, I decided that I wanted to be an English teacher. Because if you know anything about me, you know that I love to read.

So I could think of nothing that would fill me with more joy than getting to talk about books all day. So I remember... A very nerdy thing I used to do is that there were these school specialty catalogs that you could get in the mail. And I would flip through them and write down actual lists of everything that I wanted for my dream classroom. Like from like file folders to like markers of every shade and notebooks and anything I needed. Like even math supplies, even though I wanted to be an English teacher. But just everything. And looking back, that's probably where my love for a stationary came from.

Huh? No, I wanted to be. Well, that's a good question. So when I went to college, I decided I didn't want to be a teacher anymore. I think probably my stage fright. Not wanting to speak in front of the irony.

[3 : 55] The irony of what just came out of my mouth right now. But you know what? That goes with what my sermon is about. Yeah. But I decided in college that I wanted to major in political science and mass communication instead. Political science because I took a class during a summer program I was doing. And I thought, this seems interesting. And mass communication because I initially was a journalism major. But I quickly figured out that I didn't really want to interview people for a living. And I didn't want to write like news articles have like a very like strict style.

And I did not want to have to deal with that. I was like far more creative. And so like that was not what I wanted to do. But mass communication meant that I could still count some of the classes I had already taken. So that's what I did. But am I using those degrees now? Not really. I instead decided two years after I moved, after I graduated from college, that I was going to move to DC to

work at a medical hospice.

And I had a medical phobia. So you never know where life's going to lead you. Yes, full of contradictions. And if you had told me seven years ago that I would be still working at a different medical non-profit and leading in a church, I probably would have like laughed in your face. Yeah. So reflecting on my own journey has made me look at this idea of calling like very differently. For most of my life, I thought that calling meant there was only one right path for our lives. And it was our mission to discover it. And I was afraid that one wrong move would mean that I was forever separated from God's vision for my life. And calling was conflated with my job. But calling has always been more broad than that. As Frederick Buchner said, the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. Our calling is about our whole being, not just what we do to earn money. And our calling also isn't about following one straight line from birth to death.

[6 : 24] Probably not many of us ended up pursuing that dream job from our childhood. If you did, that's great. And I would love to hear that story after. But in many of us probably changed our major a lot in college. And if you're anything like me, what you're doing now is probably only vaguely related to that major.

God often leads us on a roundabout path, even against our will, when we've made our lists and refined our five-year plans. Even those best laid plans can go awry. And in moments like that, we have to unlearn that our lives will ever follow that straight line from where we are now to where we are called to be. And we are in one of those moments right now. Many of us don't know what the next day will hold. Our world has changed a lot over the last six months, often in some pretty terrible ways. And finding and pursuing our calling and learning to discern God's voice can seem hopelessly convoluted. So many of us maybe thought that we were pursuing God's will for our lives, only for the rug to be pulled out from under us.

We can feel lost in the mire of job loss, relationship changes, relocation stresses, family conflict, and the never-ending scroll of bad news can make it worse. Through no fault of our own, sudden job losses or other changes can lead to so many existential questions like, what is happening? And how could you let this happen, God? And others of us in this room may be confused by this idea of discerning God's voice, telling us to do something specific, telling us to do something specific, because that may have never happened to us in our lives before. And so in this moment, and when we think about the idea of calling, there can be so many conflicting emotions. Anger, sadness, fear, despair, confusion, dread, tentative hope, cynicism. And discerning God's will, especially in these day-to-day realities, can seem cloudy and mystical.

Two questions hang in the air. Where are we going next? And how do we get there when the path ahead of us is dark? We long for a guide, someone or something to show us where to go.

And so tonight we are going to return to the book of Exodus, where the Israelites received this guidance in the form of pillars of cloud and fire. And it is my hope that we will just demystify this idea of discerning God's will and encourage us to recognize what contemporary pillars of cloud and fire might be guiding us today. So let's pick up where we left Moses' story last week.

[9 : 42] For the past several weeks, we have been following Moses' journey from a baby left in the reeds of the Nile River to a shepherd who receives his call from God at the burning bush.

We have discovered that Moses' journey has never been a straight line. And Moses' life is a testament to the fact that life can lead us in unexpected, even painful directions. Moses' life began under the very real and active threat of genocide. He was never meant to survive and he never would have, if not for the enterprising spirit of his mother and his sister Miriam. He went from being a Hebrew child nursing from his mother in seclusion and fear to an adopted boy at the heart of Egyptian luxury. But this was only the beginning. We've talked about how Moses spent 40 years wandering through the wilderness, wrestling with this trauma after he murdered an Egyptian in cold blood and wrestled with what his people had been going through for hundreds of years. And he had to leave behind everything he knew. And even when he heard the call from God, he still had to endure 10 plagues before the Israelites would escape slavery.

And for the Israelites, freedom was only a prologue to the story that would follow. So we'll pick up the story again in Exodus chapter 13, verses 17 through 22. You're welcome to pull it up on your phone, but it will also be on the screen behind me.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer. For God thought, if the people face war, they may change their minds

and return to Egypt. So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness, bordering the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt, prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, God will surely come to you, and then you must carry my bones with you from there. They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.

Neither the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, left its place in front of the people. When I read this passage, I wonder how the Israelites responded in the aftermath of their liberation. [12:50] They probably left Egypt with a certain amount of fear and trembling, where they were taking their first deep breaths in years, but they still had no idea how they would reach the promised land.

And they feared that the Egyptians would come after them, which they ended up doing. They were about to discover this idea of the wilderness as a form of liminal space, where they were stuck between a painful past and an unknown future. They couldn't go back to what they knew, which was Egypt, but they hadn't yet stepped foot in the land of their ancestors.

They were on this roundabout path of wandering through the wilderness for 40 years, a journey that was full of frustration, doubt, uncertainty, and pain.

And we too exist in this space. We can't go back to the way things were 5, 10, 15 years ago, and intellectually, when we look back, we might realize it probably wasn't as rosy as we imagine it to be now. But the road ahead of us is murky, and the kingdom of God can seem so far away from being fully realized. A sudden closed door or a detour on the path makes us wonder if God is even really there at all.

And when we're taught that there is always a linear progression between where we are now and where God has called us, any delay is seen as a failure or a problem to be fixed.

[14:24] But when God leads us on the roundabout way, I think that this allows us to encounter our limits and our boundaries. And it shows us that we don't need to accomplish everything all at once, and it's normal and human to take one step forward and two steps back. Instead of trying to flee the wilderness of our present moment, maybe we can ask, what is God doing in the wilderness that God could not do in the promised land?

For the Israelites, the answer to that question was found in the arrival of the tangible pillars of cloud and fire. The Israelites would encounter great trials in the wilderness, including foreign armies, plagues, and famine.

But the pillars of cloud and fire reminded them that they were utterly dependent on God's guidance into this great unknown. Even when they turned their backs on God and created the altar of the golden calf at Mount Sinai, God went before them, but he only gave them the next step forward. The pillars of cloud and fire would move from the camp and the Israelites would follow it. But when the pillar stopped, so did they.

When we cannot see the path in front of us, our hope lies in the fact that God goes before us and makes sure we have what we need to encounter whatever lies ahead. And the pillars form changed depending on what the Israelites need. Consider the pillar of cloud. When I think about a cloud, I think about how it offers shelter a cloud. And the power and comfort on a sweltering hot day. When you're walking to the metro or in the park, there's a simple joy when the cloud moves in front of the sun and you experience that breath of wind wind that makes you realize that maybe DC is not that bad. And then there was the beauty of lying in a field and watching clouds as they race across the sky. That moment of peace. And when all is bright, God's guidance can feel like the gentle shade of a cloud on a sunny day. Cool, comforting, as easy as breathing.

But when we are in a dark night of the soul, when the future seems dark, and we don't know where to find the kingdom of God, then that's where we need the pillar of fire. Fire illuminates. It can be a flicker of candle flame in the darkness that just gives us that moment of hope. And other times, it is the enveloping presence of a fire on a wintry day. In the sunlight moments of the day, in the dark moments at the peak of midnight, God always speaks to us and leads us.

[17:32] We can connect the pillars of cloud and fire to the idea of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends on the assembled crowd of disciples in the form of wind and fire. And this fulfills what Jesus spoke to his disciples right before his crucifixion. The advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you that you will

remind you of all that I have said to you. So our invitation and challenge today is to learn how to recognize those contemporary pillars of cloud and fire that can guide us. And when we don't have those tangible pillars like the Israelites did, where do we find our guidance and our direction? How do we listen to the Holy Spirit in the wilderness? The answer to this question comes in the form of spiritual discernment.

And I know that this term can feel very like cloudy and abstract and mystical. But for Christian contemplative Henry Nowen, he describes spiritual discernment as learning to read the signs of God in daily life. There is nowhere we can go that is outside of God's presence. And everything tells us something about how God is guiding us in our lives. And I want to acknowledge here that I know that when we talk about this, it can seem a bit like spiritual bypassing. Like, oh, I don't know what I'm going to do next. And then someone tells you, just pray about it. God will tell you what to do. And that might be true.

But it's not exactly comforting when we're trying to engage with the realities of our confusing lives. And for some of us, we may not have a big burning bush moment. Some of us might, and that's great. But others of us, for most of our lives, we have to learn how to see the more subtle signs of God in our daily lives.

It's about figuring out how to take that next leap in faith, even when we don't know the whole staircase. As one of our members of our preaching team, Shay, talked about last Sunday morning, our calling might not end up being this grand and specific thing. It's not about the what, but it's about the how.

So spiritual discernment is about learning to structure our lives so that we are more likely to see the signs of God's presence leading us to the next step. And this looks different when everything is falling into place and when everything is falling apart. It's not about one right path, but about noticing how God shows up at every stage of the journey. So I want to propose three pillars of cloud and fire, three contemporary pillars that can guide us today. And as spiritual discernment looks different for each of us, feel free to take what resonates and leave what doesn't. So the first pillar I want to talk about is the pillar of silence and solitude. For the past several weeks, we've been talking about this theme of paying attention and slowing down enough to attend to God's voice in our lives. We've talked about how when our lives feel like we are in a crowded room and everybody is speaking all at once, how do we begin to figure out how God is speaking to us in those moments? There's just too much noise. And so it's about learning how to take a pause to let our minds rest from running a thousand miles a minute with everything that we have going on in our lives. So I want to suggest a very simple practice that I have been introducing into my own life that's been very helpful. Just start your day by taking a few deep breaths.

[21 : 42] This might be when you're driving to work. It might be when you sit down at your desk. Just take a moment of stillness and then check in with yourself. How are my energy levels? How is my mood? How am I really doing? And then invite God into the reality of that present moment. And it's okay if it doesn't feel like anything at first. Deliberately slowing down and being present to ourselves is the first step. And if you realize, oh, today I am feeling frazzled and hectic with everything I have going on, that moment can ground you and realize, okay, what is the one thing I need to prioritize? Or if you're entering the day feeling calm and restful, you can consider how can I engage with what's going on? How can I engage with the people around me? And this leads me to the second pillar, which is the pillar of community. I have learned that

God speaks to us most clearly during a conversation with a dear friend, a loved one, a therapist, even a stranger on the street. A couple of years ago, when I was struggling with my future after graduating from seminary, I was torn between two career possibilities. And I could clearly see the advantages and disadvantages of both. And both required risk and sacrifice. And I couldn't figure out how to work through that tangled mess of thoughts. But I decided to schedule a meeting with Pastor Anthony. And just by asking good questions and talking it through, I was able to gain a much clearer sense of where God was leading me.

And I realized that it wasn't really that there was one correct path, because God could work in my lives no matter what I chose. But it was about learning how to take that next step in faith, knowing that would lead me to where I needed to go. And looking back, I realized how God was illuminating the path even when all seemed dark. And I think that the pillar of community can help us combat the tendency to over-spiritualize our struggles by saying, just pray about it. God will tell you what to do.

Sure. But sometimes God tells us what to do in those moments when we talk it over with a trusted friend who can see every aspect of the situation and is looking for our good. So my invitation is to just have an honest conversation with a friend this week about how you're feeling and pay attention to how God is showing up in those moments. Every chance with genuine connection is a chance to see what God is up to.

And then third, the pillar of nature. I really like the story of the pillar of cloud and fire because it speaks to this longing I have for a tangible sign of God's presence, something that I can see, feel, and touch. Intellectually, I know that all of creation proclaims the glory of God.

[25 : 01] That the God who descended to earth in the form of a baby and spent 33 years living in the mess of life longs for us to see how the trees, animals, all of creation are speaking the glory of God.

So my invitation is to just spend some time in nature this week and see what sparks you. For example, every day on my commute, I see this beautiful tree with these purple flowers and it's just like that bright pop of beauty that reminds me that, okay, God wants me to experience something small, but something good, something beautiful in my day. And that gives me energy to tackle what else might lie in my path. And so listen to the birds, walk through grass barefoot, experience and see the creation that God called very good. And it's about seeing how we fit into the grand family of things where we all belong, just like all of nature. And these are only three of the pillars that can guide us.

We can also receive wisdom and guidance through the words of a book or our favorite worship songs. We can experience God's presence through dance, through exercise, through creativity. So this week, I want to invite you to reflect on your own specific pillars of cloud and fire. When you don't know where to go, what or who do you turn to? And how do you see God in those things? On the roundabout path, God's pillars of cloud and fire are going ahead of us, no matter what the future holds. So in closing, I want you to return to your groups that you were in at the beginning.

[26 : 57] And I have two questions. One, what is a pillar of cloud and fire that helps guide you in your life? And then what is one simple way that you can experience the pillar of silence and solitude, the pillar of community or the pillar of nature this week?