

TIED TO OUR MOTHER'S APRON STRINGS

Sermon, May 13, 2018

Mother's Day

Texts: Psalm 68:1-20; Acts 1:1-11

In our Psalter this morning, God is referred to as "*the one who rides upon the clouds.*" One might say God is the original Space Cowboy, if one was familiar with the lyrics of a 1973 song by the Steve Miller band ... a song my daughter Hannah knows will always elicit a negative reaction from me, as for some reason it was played incessantly on my favorite oldies station when I used to drive her to school. The lyrics begin, "*Some people call me the Space Cowboy, yeah, Some call me the gangster of love. Some people call me Maurice (whit woo) 'Cause I speak of the pompitous of love.*" Well, in the sacred literature of the Canaanites, whose land the Israelites had occupied, one of their gods was the Space Cowboy ... the god they called "Baal" was the god who rides upon the clouds and the storms. To recall another "oldie" those of my generation may remember, this one by the Doors, Baal was the Canaanite's "Rider on the Storm." To the Canaanites, Baal controlled the rains, the winds, the clouds; he was the one who tamed the heavens. The Psalmist, speaking into that historical cultural context, emphatically asserts, "*No, it's not Baal who does that. It's God. The God of Israel. He is the God Who reigns supreme over all the earth, and the heavens above the earth.*"

Also in this psalm are references to the Exodus event in which the divine One Who rides upon the clouds came in the *appearance* of a cloud to guide the Hebrews as they walked through the wilderness; He led them in a pillar of cloud by day and by a pillar of fire by night. The Psalmist goes on to expand that our God does more than just "*ride the clouds.*" He is also the God who "*provides for the poor and needy*" (v.10); who is "*father of the fatherless and protector of widows*" (v.5); the One who "*gives the lonely families to live in*" and "*leads forth the prisoners with singing.*" In short, the Psalm describes a God who may ride the clouds, but He does not spend all of His time with His head *in* those clouds! This God is very much involved with His people, and He is very involved in this world *through* His people ... wherever the most vulnerable are cared and provided for, wherever the lonely are set in families, wherever justice is done to those society may consider "the least of these." And it stands to reason that worshipping this God who rides upon the clouds directly involves getting *our* heads out of the clouds and involving ourselves in moral and ethical and loving and caring and active and hands-on service on His behalf here on earth.

Seven years ago, on the Sunday of Hannah's confirmation, I told you of a pastor who was talking with a prospective new member. This man was very enthusiastic about joining the church. When asked by the pastor why he was so enthusiastic about joining, he replied, "*I want to join this congregation because I so enjoy being fed by this church's ministry!*" He certainly meant it as a compliment, and I'm sure the pastor took it as such on behalf of the congregation, but the wise pastor went on to reply, "*Well, that's fine, but I think you should know ... 'WE WANT OUR MEMBERS TO WEAR APRONS, NOT BIBS.'*"

I like that. BIBS are for people who only want to be fed. BIBS are for those who are not yet ready or able to feed themselves. BIBS are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. BIBS are for those who only understand the church to exist for *them* and to feed *their* needs and *their* wants and *their* appetites. BIBS are for young babies in the faith, or perhaps those who are not yet of the faith ... they are for those who haven't yet grasped what it means to be part of the church, the servant people of God. An APRON is an apt symbol for church membership. APRONS are for those who have a heart to serve others in Jesus' name. APRONS are for those who know they are the church, and they go to work being the church ... the church isn't "them;" the church is "us." APRONS are for those who are growing in faith, and are eager to help others grow as well. APRONS are for those who take the time and energy to feed their spiritual and physical need **as well as** the spiritual and physical needs of others. APRONS are for those who primarily come not to be served, but to serve ... and if that sounds familiar, it should, for Jesus said it of Himself: "*the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.*" APRONS are for those understand we are best nourished, best fulfilled, when we go to work serving. And the One who rides upon the clouds calls His people to serve. Jesus calls His disciples to wear aprons, not bibs.

In our reading from Acts, it's been forty days since His resurrection, and Jesus assembled His disciples together on the Mount of Olives. Now, they've been on the Mount of Olives before. Forty seven days before, to be exact, for this was where Jesus started His parade into Jerusalem that first Palm

Sunday. At the time, many thought Jesus was going to ride in and start taking charge, booting out the Romans and restoring the throne of David to re-establish the kingdom to Israel at long last. As you know, all those hopes evaporated five days later when Jesus was, as we say in the creed, "crucified, dead and buried." But ... "the third day He rose again from the dead." In the resurrection of Jesus, the hopes for the kingdom were also resurrected in the hearts of His followers, though they apparently still didn't quite grasp the meaning of this kingdom as Jesus spoke of it. Their hopes came back to life. For the last forty days Jesus has been meeting with them, *"showing many convincing proofs He was alive, and speaking about the kingdom of God."* Now here they are, back on the Mount of Olives once again, the same place where they had been forty-seven days ago launching the parade into Jerusalem, so it's not surprising they ask, *"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"* To put it more colloquially, *"Are you going to do it for us now, Lord? You've been talking about this kingdom ever since we've known you; we've been waiting. Is this finally the time?"*

Jesus responds, in so many words, *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. Don't get all caught up in that speculation. But you know, I'm leaving and **you're** going to 'do' this now. You've been fed by Me long enough; it's time to take off the bibs! Now, you won't be doing this alone, but get your aprons on and be ready ... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will go to work being My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* As soon as He said that, He just disappeared from their sight and went riding upon the clouds! We're told Jesus *"... was taken up, and a cloud hid him from their sight."* They all got left behind as He mounted the cloud and was taken up into heaven. This past Thursday, May 10, the church marked this occasion with "Ascension Day;" the day Jesus ascended to His seat at the right hand of God, and left us, His disciples, behind ... and He left us with a high purpose and a special calling.

When Jesus ascended into heaven, I'm sure the disciples were startled, sobered, even a little terrified. Jesus is now gone and they are left behind, they are left in charge? And He's left them with the most amazing responsibility and job description ... to be His witnesses throughout the world? Personally, I think the disciples were just stunned by all this. They just stand there staring up in the sky, thinking, *"How can THIS be? He isn't leaving US in charge of this, is He?"* They just stared up into the clouds, sort of like pets do when the master leaves the house. They just stare at the door, and kind of cock their heads in confusion: *"Well ... surely he's coming back. Clearly he hasn't left us in charge of this place."* As these disciples are all gazing up into heaven, suddenly two angels appear and say, *"Why are you looking up into heaven? Someday He will be back; when that happens is the Father's business. Meanwhile, you have a job to do, don't you? Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, remember? You got left behind for a purpose! You've been fed long enough, now it's time to take off the bibs, put on the aprons and go to work! **You** will bring about the kingdom!"* Now, the angels didn't really say all that; I'm reading between the lines. But contrary to the highly dubious "theology" of that Christian horror movie/science fiction series of the same name, ALL disciples of Jesus Christ get LEFT BEHIND ... we all got left behind to do the work Jesus calls us to do, and we are to keep on doing it until He comes back. Again, worshipping the One *"who rides upon the clouds"* ... as well as the One who disappeared into the cloud ... directly involves our moral and gracious and loving and caring and active, hands-on service here on earth.

The sermon title is a bit of a reach, as are many of my sermon titles. You may have heard it said of some young man, *'he is tied to his mother's apron strings.'* Usually this is said in derision, yet had you thought that it might also be a compliment? Columnist John R. Gunn wrote, *"It depends on the mother and the type of strings which tie her son to her. When we speak of mother's apron strings, if we mean mother's love, her teaching, her example, her influence, so mother's apron strings may be the strings of example and faith that bind us to God and the higher things in life. In a log cabin in southern Indiana, a mother was dying - 'Abe', she said to her nine-year-old son, 'love everybody, hinder nobody, never lie, never drink, never steal and some day the world will be glad that you have lived.' It was a long distance from that little cabin in the woods of Indiana to the White House in Washington, but the apron strings of Nancy Hanks Lincoln reached all the way. Years later, Abraham Lincoln said, 'All that I am, all that I hope to be - I owe to my angel mother.'" Apparently, Abraham Lincoln was proud to be tied to his mother's apron strings ... by her love, her teaching, her example and influence - strings that held him fast to the important values of life. Like Abraham Lincoln, I'm sure many of us here, myself included, are proud to be tied to our mother's apron strings ... her example, her teachings, her faith in God, her faithfulness ... all virtues which still guide our lives. And we all should be proud to be tied to the apron strings of our Mother, the church ... just about every Mother's Day for the past twenty-plus years, I've included in our prayer of intercession: *"We pray for the mother of all the faithful, the Church, the Bride of Christ ..."**

Let's don our Mother's apron, tie the strings, and get to work as our Lord would have us serve.