



April 18, 2010
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THE VOLCANO GOD

Exodus 13, Exodus 40

I could hardly believe my eyes. I was in Spokane this week for a Whitworth board meeting. We were electing a new president. *[By the way, his name is Beck Taylor, he is 40 years old, he's a Southern Baptist...and he's going to be great.]* I was in the middle of a meeting and I got an email from Rich Jasper. A volcano in Iceland had erupted. A cloud of ash had settled over most of Europe. All trans-Atlantic flights were cancelled...which meant that our speaker for the weekend, John Lennox, was stuck in Britain.

We all went to work. We rebooked, rescheduled, rearranged, re-prayed. If John could get out on Saturday, most of the weekend could be saved. **But he didn't.** And when I got back into town on Friday and went over to the church, I saw our whole building set up for a conference that would not occur and Rich and Sandy Jasper standing there, greeting the stray folks who showed up because they hadn't gotten the word.

It made me sick at heart. All of that work, all of that prayer, all of those expectations, thousands of people who were planning on coming, many of them unbelievers attracted by Professor Lennox's reputation. I was so disheartened.

All because of a stupid volcano. All because of a stupid dust cloud. **I found myself** struggling to find a response. **How should I pray?** How should I **feel?** What do I **say** to you this morning in a hastily-constructed sermon I wasn't planning on preaching? Then a passage came to mind from the story Moses:

Exodus 13:

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." ¹⁸So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle...

²¹By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. ²²Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 40:

³⁶In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; ³⁷but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. ³⁸So the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels. PRAY

"If the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted." 86 times in the Bible the word "cloud" appears. Almost always, the cloud represents the presence of God. Especially in the Old Testament, the great God Yahweh, whose glory could not be seen by human eyes, graciously hid within a cloud so that he could be present with his people. **Every time the cloud dropped down upon the Tent of Meeting in the wilderness, the people knew that God was in the house!** When the cloud moved, they followed. When the cloud stayed put...they stayed put. As long as necessary. Because they were not about to head out without God's presence and permission. They didn't dare! It was dangerous out there.

Surely, sometimes the people must have been frustrated at the pace the cloud moved. **For instance**, we are told that the cloud led them the long way around Mt. Sinai. Wouldn't the short way have been better? Didn't God know the shortcut? Why waste time meandering about? **If they'd taken the shortcut**, they would have been that much closer to the Promised Land.

But God had his reasons. And as far as we know, he never explained his reasons to the people. **The cloud moved...when** God wanted it to move...taking God's people **where** he wanted to take them...for his purpose...without explanation. **If they wanted** to be his people, they would trust him and follow him. **If they didn't want to be his people**...well, they could go their own dangerous way or they could go back to slavery.

"If the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted." **This weekend, the cloud did not lift.** It still hasn't. The airspace over Europe is closed down. It is a mess over there. **John Lennox** is hugely disappointed. He has already promised that he will do everything he can to get back here...maybe next fall. **But we also have folks** getting ready to head out on a mission to Israel next Tuesday. Will the cloud lift? Who knows? But they will not set out...until the day it lifts.

How do we deal with such disappointing disruptions in our lives? When we **pray** and ask God to move the cloud...**when it makes sense** to us that God would **want** to move the cloud...and he doesn't...what do we do with that? **Maybe volcanoes are bigger than God.** Maybe God doesn't have the power to stop a volcano or scatter an ash cloud? **Or maybe he can do it...but just doesn't care.** Doesn't care if our great plans are stymied. Doesn't care if people's lives are disrupted.

Well...I don't believe the volcano is bigger than God. God is Great. He can blow away that cloud like the fuzz off a dandelion. But he hasn't done it. **And I have been frustrated with God**, honestly, that he isn't using his power to respond to our prayers. **I have been praying like this:** (clenched fists) I've been praying like David sometimes prayed in the Psalms. Frustrated. Angry. Yelling. Duking it out with God lately.

And it's not just a cloud around the Oxford weekend. I've been duking it out with God about other things, too... like church finances. I am so frustrated about this...and so worried. I get it that many people have no pay, have lost their home...have nothing to give. But I'm frustrated with the hundreds of folks in this church whose paycheck hasn't changed and who regularly partake of our ministries, **but choose to give nothing**...or a pittance... to their church **at a time when we really need every person's support. I don't get that!** I've asked God to inspire them, to prod them, to convict them...to zap them (just a little zap...to get their attention)...and it still looks like we are facing further staff and program cuts that, I promise, will be very painful to this congregation and to our witness. **"God...why won't you do something about that? Are you asleep up there? Is there something you want us to learn or notice or figure out?"**

Even more furiously, I've been duking it out with God about Karina Robertson. Beautiful, young, faithful follower of Christ...fighting for her life with cancer; **a fight we thought we had won.** But it's back. Cyndi and I joined more than a hundred over believers at Harbor Covenant last Tuesday, begging God to save Karina's life. To heal her. **"God...you can do this! Why aren't you doing this?"**

And now...after all this work, prayer and high expectations, Lennox...stuck in Britain. So...I've been frustrated with God. **Angry, even, that he is not answering prayers that seem reasonable to me.** Now...the Bible gives me permission to wrestle with God. He's can take it. **But honestly...I don't find this a very satisfying place to stay.**

And this week, as I was thinking about that cloud hanging over Europe...I was brought back to the central tenet of our Reformed faith: **the sovereignty of God**. "Sovereignty" means ultimate authority. Complete control. **And no one lifts up the sovereignty of God like Presbyterians do.** God is God. God is Great. God will do what God does and it will all be right and good and loving...even if we can't make sense of it at the time.

So...I've decided I've got to pray differently. I've got to go from this (clenched fists) to this (on my knees.) If the cloud of God doesn't move, it isn't because it **slipped his mind** that we were waiting on him. God hasn't forgotten us. If the cloud doesn't move...**even though it makes perfect sense to us that the cloud should move...**it is because our sovereign God **sees things in a way that we don't**. And is weaving together the stories of millions whose lives...millions who love and trust him...he is weaving all this together to accomplish-- not their agenda, not our agenda...but **his agenda, his mission, his purpose...****even if it makes no sense to us**. And it doesn't have to make sense to us.

Is God God or not? Do we trust him or not? If so...the most we can do...the best we can do... is bow our knee before our sovereign God. **To declare again what we all know to be true: this is your world, not ours; this is your church, not ours. This is your conference, not ours. This is your daughter, Karina.** She belongs to you. And so...we will keep asking because that is what children do. **But we will also bow before you, trust you, believe you, wait upon you, submit to you... because you are God and we are not.**

I wrote an email to our Oxford team yesterday just to thank them for their hard work and to encourage them. Here is part of what I wrote:

"...So let me remind you of what I am reminding myself and will remind our congregation tomorrow. God is God. When we bow our knee to Jesus as Lord it means that we bow to his sovereignty in all that he decides to do...even when it doesn't make sense to us; even when it disappoints us; even when it seems crazy of God not to do something about it. God is God. We are his beloved children...but also, we are his servants. He doesn't need to explain himself to us and usually, doesn't. But his faithfulness down through the ages reminds us that he IS still faithful and **will** be faithful, no matter what we might wonder or feel."

I wanted God to get John Lennox here because there were thousands who needed to hear his message. I want God to make his people more generous so that our ministries might continue. I want God to heal Karina because we love her and want her back, whole and well. But most of all...I want to remember that God is God. He loves us; he cares about us; he is all-powerful, all-knowing. He is faithful and constant. **He is good and He is great.** And because he is all these things, I can trust him. We can trust him. Even when things are cloudy and our sight is obscured...we can trust him. **And we will stay right where we are until that cloud moves.**

I suspect that everyone here this morning needs to be reminded of the sovereignty of our God. So...for the rest of the service, we are going to bow before him. If you can, I invite you to literally bow. Come forward and kneel here. Or go to your knees in your pew. At least, bow your heart. We will declare together...once again... that God is God and we are his and we will take some time right now to lay our lives before our sovereign God. Some come. Let us kneel before our God, our maker. (Psalm 95; Psalm 46)

A Time of Prayer

April 11, 2010

Call to prayer: Psalm 95: 6-7

Come, let us bow down in worship
let us kneel before the Lord our Maker;
for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture
the flock under his care.

Take a moment to come into God's presence:

get comfortable so you won't need to move around for about 5-8 minutes
relax your body
take a deep breath in, hold it a moment, let it out slowly;
open your hands before the Lord.

Greet God in prayer silently . . .

Here we are, Lord, bowing before you, some of us on our knees, some with our heads lowered before you, all of us waiting upon you. Send your Holy Spirit to help us to pray.

Tell God something you believe about who he is . . .

The Psalmist said these things about God (Psalm 95: 3-5):

The Lord is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks—the volcanoes—belong to him.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

Do you agree with the Psalmist?

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." All authority belongs to Jesus, to no one else.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, the life." The risen Jesus is at the right hand of the Father, and all things have been put under his feet, under his power and authority.

Do you agree with Jesus, or do you think there are other authorities, other powers, other ways and truths, that are equal to him? Tell Jesus whether you agree with him or not. Don't fib—it's not like you're going to fool him.

If you agree with God that he is sovereign over life and death, over nations and peoples, over the earth, the planets and the stars, the One with power and authority over you and your life and your relationships, then tell him that you acknowledge his sovereignty . . .

Any exceptions or "yeah buts"? Any frustrations with the way God is running things in your life or in this church or in the universe? Anything you want to shake your fist at God about? Tell God about them.

As Pastor Mark said, don't hold back—tell God the truth . . . he can take it. (30-45 seconds of silence)

Be still, now, and ask God if he's got anything to say back. Listen.

Let's talk with God who has power and authority about some of the big things in our lives, in the church, and in the world.

Let's begin by listening instead of talking.

Our lives: God is sovereign over your life—all of it. Ask God what he wants to do in your life now.

Maybe it's something about your relationships. Or your finances. Or your children. Or your relationship with him—your growing up to maturity in Christ. Ask what's on God's list for you at this time. Listen.

Now tell God what's on your list—on your heart.

Loved ones who are sick: God is sovereign over our health and our lives. God does not always heal, does not always give longer life—if he did, no one would ever die. Ask God what he wants to do, is willing to do, in the lives of people precious to you who are sick. Some for a long time, some not very

sick, some desperately sick, some dying. Listen. Now tell God what's on your heart, what your prayer is.

Chapel Hill: God is sovereign over this church—it's Jesus' church, not ours. Ask God what he wants to do at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church: what's on *God's* list of things to do *in* us?

What's on God's list to do *through* us . . . for whom? Listen. Now tell God what's on your list—on your heart.

Ask God about Chapel Hill's financial situation: sometimes God says, "I want you to have less, not more." That's not something I like hearing from God. Is that what God's saying. Sometimes God says, "I will trust you with more." Sometimes God says, "There are some things you must learn, then we'll talk about money." Ask God, please, about our financial situation at CHPC. Listen. Now tell God what's on your list—on your heart.

The world: God is sovereign over the world—every part of it, every people, every nation belongs to God. Ask God what he wants to do in the United States. Please, don't tell God what you want. Ask and listen.

Ask God what he wants to do in the Middle East where we'll be sending a Go Team from Chapel Hill this week. Listen.

Ask God what he wants to do to bring people to Jesus in Gig Harbor, Port Orchard, the peninsula, Tacoma, whatever city you live in, wherever you go to school. Listen. Now tell God what's on your list—on your heart.

Submission: Now, there is a part of Psalm 95 that's almost never read—it's the part about whether we will submit to God, whether we'll be obedient to what the sovereign God sends or asks. I'm going to paraphrase it to make sure we get what is being said to us. Listen to verses 7-11—it's pretty serious stuff.

Today, if you hear God's voice,
do not harden your hearts as you've done some other times.

God says, "Don't do what other believers have done in the past
when they put me to the test and tried my patience
despite all I had done for them.

Let me remind you: I was angry with a whole generation of my people who did that.
I said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they have not known my ways.'

So, I made a promise in my anger: 'They shall never enter my rest, never enter my peace.'"

God is serious about his right to run things his way. Serious about our obedience.

Take a moment in silent prayer. Tell God the truth about whether you are willing to submit to him:

in your life and marriage and relationships your growth in Christ . . . Is there something you will hold back?

will you submit to the Lord about Chapel Hill: it's finances, it's mission and ministries, your participation in it's life and work?

Is there something you will hold back?

will you submit to the Lord about his longing for the world—its peace, it's brokenness, it's lostness?

will you submit to the Lord about his longing for people at your school, in your neighborhood, in the community you live in?

Is there anything you will hold back about the world, this country, your school, neighborhood, community?

Our Father, the truth is that we have a very hard time submitting to you. We love you, we believe in Jesus, we know you are the Creator and we want you to save us and give us eternal life. But we really do like running things our way: we think of everything as belonging to us: lives, relationships, money, church, world, politics. The thing is, Lord, we want things to go the way we think they should go, we want things to turn out the way that makes the most sense to us, that seems best and right to us.

Help us to be able to say with Job, "Lord, you give and you take away. Blessed be the name of the

Lord.” To say with Daniel, “Even if he kills me, still I will trust him.” As we promised in our marriage vows, “in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, for better for worse” so we want to promise you now: you are our God, whatever comes.

You, O Lord, will have the last word about everything: heaven and hell, rulers, powers, nations; sickness, injustice, oppression, evil so bad we can’t bear to think of it or name it, small wickednesses between people; random acts of kindness and love, faithfulness, goodness and beauty—you will have the last word about every life every act every word.

Lord Jesus, whose words we don’t always like, whose will we don’t always submit to, we confess/agree that we have nowhere else to turn but you, for you have the words of life. And you will have the last word about each of us. Repeat it to the Lord after me: “O Lord Jesus/ you will have the last word about me./ Let it be your word of forgiveness/ of your righteousness given to me/ your words of eternal life.

The Lord’s Prayer (on the screens—tell people it’s okay to look)

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.