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Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
The Transfiguration of the Lord, Year B  
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*In Face of Mystery*  
Mark 9:2-9

There's a professor of theology at my *alma mater*, the University of Chicago Divinity School. David Tracy is his name. Probably not a name that means anything to you. But you may appreciate that he holds the chair in theology that Paul Tillich once held, many years ago.

When I first began to think about going to seminary, back in 1993 or '94, they sent me a catalogue from the Divinity School. I read with interest all the little faculty profiles they had in there. And I was particularly struck by something it said about David Tracy.

Most of it was just the usual academic stuff. "David Tracy is Distinguished Professor of Theology," it read, "with a special interest in *blah-blah-blah*... He received his degrees from *blah-blah-blah*... His publications include *blah-blah-blah*... He is the winner of the prestigious *such-and-such* award..." But then the final line, which is what caught my attention: "Professor Tracy is currently writing a book about God."

Maybe I'm the only one who sees any humor in that. I mean, he's a theologian! What else is he supposed to write about?! But, you know, usually it will say, "*So-and-so* is currently writing a book on Luther's doctrine of justification," or whatever. But no. "Professor Tracy is currently writing a book about God."

Well, not too long ago, I received in the mail the Divinity School alumni newsletter. It's been—gosh—almost fifteen years since my graduation, mind you. There was an announcement in there about David Tracy's retirement from the faculty. They'd thrown a big party for him. And they had an article in there about his life and his work, all his accomplishments. The list was a lot longer than the one in the mid-nineties. More articles published, more awards won, more honorary doctorates accumulated. But then it came to the last line of the article. "In his retirement," it said, "Professor Tracy plans to continue writing a book about God." Eighteen years in the making!

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Apparently, writing a book on God is no easy task! (Fortunately, we already have a pretty good one, in the Bible.) But it's true, there's a sense in which trying to say anything at all about God is a daunting challenge. It's something you approach with fear and trembling. Because we're dealing here with—as we see in these strange Scripture readings we have today—this God of ours, is a God of deep mystery. And where do you even begin, trying to say something about God? Even a distinguished theologian hardly knows where to start!

We use language to try to get a handle on God's nature. We say God is eternal. God is omnipotent. God is triune. We use metaphors. We say: God is like a shepherd. God is like a mighty fortress. God is like a father, Jesus says. God is like a mother, Isaiah says.

All of these tell us something important about God, but none of them exhausts the fullness of who God is. Because God is so far above us, and beyond us, and beyond all our linguistic categories, that we're just kind of feeling our way along the edge of mystery.

One way the Christian tradition has of speaking about God comes from the theologian Rudolf Otto. He wrote in the last century about the Divine as being what he called a *Mysterium*

*tremendum et fascinans*. In Latin, “A mystery, fearful and fascinating.” Something that inspires in us awe and reverence and even fear, maybe. But also something which beckons us closer, and draws us irresistibly toward itself. There is a sense in which the God of the Bible is like that.

*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans.*

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Our Scripture readings today, on this Transfiguration Sunday—more than any other Sunday on the liturgical calendar—highlight that mysterious, numinous dimension of God. This God who remains hidden in mystery, and yet at the same time reaches out to us, and seeks to draw us into that mystery.

In the first reading, Moses goes up the mountain, at God’s invitation, and stands in the very presence of the Holy One. It says a cloud overshadows him. The glory of the Lord settles upon the mountain. And forty days and forty nights, Moses spends up there, caught up in the cloud.

Now that sounds just a little bit spooky to me! Enveloped in a cloud. Trying to feel your way along the path. The mists, swirling around you. But that’s what the Bible says Moses did for forty days and nights. That’s what being in the presence of God is like.

And then, in the New Testament, there’s Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration. He invites Peter and James and John to come along with him. And while he’s up there, the cloud overshadows them again. The glory of God shines bright. And the disciples are reduced to stuttering and stammering, as they fall to the ground in fear.

I like how, on the way down the mountain, Jesus says to them, “Now don’t tell anyone about what you’ve just seen.” As if they could do that!?! I mean, how would you even begin to describe it? How could you possibly convey an experience like that in words?

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In some respects, that’s what we try to do in here every Sunday. In the hymns and the anthems we sing, in the prayers that we pray, in the words that I try to offer, in the music and the silence, the symbols and sacraments we share. We try, somehow, to find language and images adequate to give expression to the awesome holiness and the glory and the sheer otherness of God.

I once heard an experienced pastor and preacher who was meeting with a group of seminarians. He was there to impart some of his wisdom to the group. And one of the seminarians asked, she said, “I get nervous when I’m up there in the pulpit. I start sweating, and my voice kind of wavers a little bit. Is there any advice you might give on how to overcome that nervousness?”

He thought about it for a moment, and he said, “I’ve been in ministry for forty-five years now, and I still get nervous every single time I get up in the pulpit.” He said, “And if I ever stop feeling nervous, I’ll know it’s time for me to quit. Because we must never forget that we are standing in the presence of God, you and I are. And we are daring to address God, and daring to speak a word from God. And if that doesn’t make you nervous,” he said, “I don’t know what will.”

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The way I figure, if our worship doesn’t contain an element of mystery, and reverence, and wonder before God—the kind of thing that drove Peter to his knees up on the mountain—then we’re probably not doing our job.

That’s one of the main issues I have with “contemporary worship,” by the way. I know some people really connect with that. But my problem is, when they take away all the mystery

and all the central symbols of the liturgy, you're left with a place that has all the transcendence of a high school cafeteria. I mean, where's the mystery there? Where's the sense of wonder? Where's the "take-off-your-shoes-Moses-this-is-holy-ground" kind of thing, that the Bible speaks of?

I think our Eastern Orthodox friends get a lot closer to being right here. You know, they've got candles burning everywhere, walls covered with icons, plumes of incense billowing around the altar, priests chanting in obscure languages. Now that may not be very "user-friendly." People may not understand it all. But in a way, that's precisely the point! These are people who have some regard for the holiness, the otherness, the mystery of God. These are people who understand that when you come into God's presence, you're entering a holy place. You're climbing up the mountain, and entering the cloud.

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I don't know what Peter and James and John took away from their encounter up on the mountaintop. I don't know how they were changed by it. Jesus was the one transfigured, of course. But I can't help but think that his disciples must have been transformed in some way, also.

I do know they were afraid up there. The Gospel says they were "terrified," in fact. And I know that continues throughout the Gospel story.

Jesus helps them land a miraculous catch of fish. *And they were afraid*, it says. Jesus calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee. *And they were afraid*. Jesus appears to them on Easter in the upper room. *And they were afraid*.

That was something the disciples never completely got over, that sense of fear in the presence of Christ. But, you know, maybe that's not a bad thing. It says somewhere in Scripture: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." And there's something true about that. Not *fear* "being afraid of God" kind of fear. But *fear* "standing in wonder before God" kind of fear. If David Tracy ever gets around to writing his book on God, that might not be a bad place to start.

But I also know—in spite of the fear, and uncertainty, and sense of mystery they were grappling with—the disciples did stay with Jesus after that. They kept following him. And maybe that vision—that experience on the mountaintop—had something to do with that.

It was still a Mystery they were contending with, to be sure, and One they could never completely fathom. But it was a Mystery that was reaching out to them, calling to them, beckoning them along, inviting them to discover more and more of who God is—and more and more of who they are—as they looked into the face of this One in whom God's glory was shining.

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I remember, when I was a kid— The church I grew up in had a great big, neo-Gothic sanctuary. These vaults, that seemed to reach right up to heaven itself. And they had these stained glass windows in the church, installed in the seventies. Kind of modern. Kind of abstract. They were images from the life of Christ. Or at least that's what they *said* they were. The little plaques underneath, that said *The Baptism* or *The Crucifixion* or *The Wedding at Cana*. But you'd be hard pressed to look at one of those windows and see *The Wedding at Cana* anywhere, because they were like paintings by Kandinsky, is what they were. Just a bunch of abstract shapes, and colors, and the light kind of dancing through them.

I remember, as a kid, I would sit there during the service. Sometimes, I'd get a little bored, or kind of tune out of the sermon for a little while. (I know that doesn't happen here, but I

used to do that every now and again.) And I would stare up at those windows, and try to figure out those images. I'd turn my head this way, and then turn my head that way, and kind of squint at them, and really focus in on them. Every now and again, you think you'd see a figure, or something that kind of looked like something. But then just as quickly, it would disappear.

There was something maddening about that. And I wasn't the only one. From time to time, it would come up in the church. "How come we can't have some normal stained glass windows like all the other churches?" people would say. "We just want some pictures of Jesus, that you can understand what they are. Carrying a sheep, or whatever." And at the time, I probably agreed. But in the end, the church always decided to keep the stained glass windows they had. And you know, I'll never be able to thank them enough for that.

There's a sense in which I'm probably here today because of those windows. Because they taught me one of the most important things you can ever learn about God. And maybe it's not unlike what Moses learned on Mt. Sinai, and Peter, James, and John learned on the Mount of Transfiguration. And that is that there is a mystery about God—a wonderful mystery—that we will never completely figure out. If we had a thousand lifetimes, we couldn't do it.

And yet, it is that very mystery that keeps us coming back, that keeps drawing us closer, keeps beckoning us, keeps inviting us to go deeper and deeper. Until you get to the place where you realize that—in the end—it's not about knowing all there is to know about God. It's about being known by God. And it's not about shining the light on God, and seeing all there is to see. It's about allowing yourself to be illumined—allowing yourself to be bathed—in God's transfiguring light. Amen.