

## WHOLLY HOLY

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

There are some experiences in this life that require no commentary. There are some experiences in this life of ours the only appropriate response to which is silence. Have you noticed how, after a particularly gorgeous and passionate performance by a fine symphony orchestra of something like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for instance, that there is an instant, at the end, when the audience sits in silence, almost as if savoring the beauty, almost not breathing—you can hear a pin drop—not wanting to diminish the beauty by clapping? There are some experiences in this life that are not enhanced much by efforts to explain. A musicologist could explain Beethoven's technique, the unusual pattern of the movements, the creative use of voices in a symphony, the various antecedents in the composer's earlier works, but it doesn't help much. In fact, sometimes explanation is a distraction, a detraction from the beauty. Sometimes I don't want to know. I simply want to experience the beauty—in silence.

One time something happened to three friends of Jesus—Peter, James, and John—that left them speechless, something they couldn't begin to explain. It was something so unusual, so unlikely, so mysterious, that afterward they didn't even try to speak about it. It's the incident we read about in this morning's lesson, the one known by the church as the Transfiguration. Jesus took the three of them up a mountain to pray. The way they remembered it a few decades later, when they finally got around to talking about it, Jesus' clothes seemed to shine up on that mountain. Moses and Elijah appeared, and they talked about, of all things, how Jesus' life would end. They had fallen asleep, the three of them had, and they awoke in the middle of this strange experience and Peter—you can always count on impulsive Peter—Peter starts talking. He says, in essence, "Wow! This is really great. It's so good that we are here to see this. Think about what if we missed this, but we didn't. We're here together and it's so good. Let's build. Let's construct three sanctuaries here to preserve the moment, to remember the experience. Maybe we could come back every year on the anniversary of this day." Luke, the Gospel writer, is a little embarrassed by Peter's chattering and apologizes for him: "He doesn't know what he is saying."

And while Peter's going on and on about the building project, a cloud descends—a biblical signal that God is about to do or say something. Now they're terrified and a voice says, "Be quiet. Stop talking. Listen. Listen to him. He is my son."

That's the day they learned that. Even though they couldn't begin to explain it, they learned to stop talking and listen to Jesus.

And then it was all over. Luke concludes, "They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

There are some experiences in life that require no commentary. There are experiences the only appropriate response to which is silence. I love Peter's reaction. It's so very human. He tries to reduce this experience to something he can get his mind around, understand, talk about, explain. He does what he has to do to make this experience on the mountain fit into his worldview.

So do we. William Placher, the late theologian who taught at Wabash College, wrote a book with the wonderful title

. Placher points out that since the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, Western thinking has depended on reason as its ultimate criterion. Truth can be observed, analyzed, weighed, measured, explained, and understood. Mostly that's a good thing. It is the basis for the scientific method which, in turn, is one of the foundations of modernity. But if reason is the only criterion, then that which is not explainable is not real. That's what Placher means by the "domestication of transcendence." Rather than the holy, other, transcendent God of the Bible, we reduce God to ideas, concepts we can get our mind around, or we talk about God in terms that are trivial, simplistic, and altogether too comfortable. "The Man Upstairs" comes to mind, the God who helps our football team win the Superbowl or us to find a parking space on a snowy morning. Placher says, "When the culturally dominant pictures of God have come to be simplistic, it becomes hard to arouse much excitement about the news of divine incarnation."<sup>1</sup>

Now you need to know that preachers want to get down off that mountain as quickly as anyone. Preachers want to reduce what happened to manageable symbolism: "It was the bright sun reflecting off the snow that caused a kind of mirage and it was as if Elijah and Moses were there."

But to believe in God is to acknowledge that there is more to reality than we can explain, see, observe—more than we will ever understand. To believe in God is to acknowledge humbly that we do not know everything. To believe in God, truth be told, is to confess that there is a lot we do not understand.

In his fine book on the Nicene Creed, Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "The believer affirms that there is a mystery at the heart of the world, a mystery that does not yield to direct examination, that refuses to be measured or manipulated, yet suggests its presence in every single thing that we can feel and taste and see."<sup>2</sup>

Pascal, the philosopher, centuries ago wrote: "If one subjects everything to reason, our religion will lose the mystery and its supernatural character. If one offends the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous. There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out and to let nothing else in."<sup>3</sup>

The God of the Bible is holy, other, terrible—in the best sense of the word. People are terrified, overwhelmed with awe, stunned to be in the divine presence. When Moses

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Placher,  
(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson,  
Image Books, 2004), 68.

<sup>3</sup> Blaise Pascal,

(New York:

gets too close to God, his face starts to shine, so he has to put a veil on to avoid scaring his neighbors.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes our religion itself forgets that. Sometimes the confidence with which religion speaks about God and God's will, God's position on this or that complex issue, God's political preferences, even God's chosen candidate, is breathtaking.

John Buchanan, pastor emeritus of Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago, tells of receiving a poignant letter from a woman struggling with whether or not to stay in her church. She wrote, "They take all the mystery and awesomeness out of God. They know all the answers and can tell you what God felt and thought."

And then she explained: Her oldest daughter married a Muslim. They have a baby, a little girl. The writer went on, "Each time I look at her, I see the hope of a world filled with love and tolerance—but I also worry. I worry that someday people might hate her because of her last name. Each time I look at her, I know that God loves her as he loves all the little children, but I am also angry that there are some who condemn her soul to hell because she is not of the right religion and is not 'saved.' Who has given them all the answers?"

Wouldn't it be refreshing when it comes to the big questions—such as the final destiny of all of us—if the response could be a little less certain, a little less absolute about who gets in and who does not, a little less exclusive? Wouldn't it be refreshing to have a televangelist say, "We don't know the final answers. There's a mystery here that is beyond our capacity to understand. What we do know and believe is that God is merciful and just and kind and that God's love is unconditional"?

Let's not be too quick to come down from the mountain. Most of us live very busy lives. We work long and hard. Our schedules are full, our calendars crowded, our days begin early in the morning and continue into the evening.

When we have an hour or two, there are errands to do, grocery shopping, emails to answer.

When people ask, "How are you?" most of us can't answer that question without saying, "I'm busy."

And part of what this story suggests is that we need to go to the mountaintop now and then. We need some downtime, some empty space, some silence, for the sake of our spirits, not to mention our health and sanity. We need a time and place where nothing is happening, nothing is being said, even if we use it like the disciples did, to take a nap.

Let's not be too quick to come down from the mountain. Let's stay there—in the wondrous, mysterious, awe-ful silence for a while.

But Jesus did come down from the mountain. The disciples followed him down. Instead of building those three buildings, they came down from the mountain and were met by a great crowd. And out of the crowd came a shout, a desperate plea for help from a frantic father. "Teacher, my son, my only son—a spirit seizes him. He convulses and

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 34:9f.

foams at the mouth. Please help us.” While he spoke, the young boy had a seizure and fell to the ground convulsing.

Think of the rhythm of that: from the mystical cloud on the mountain, the experience of God’s holy transcendence, Jesus’ own participation in the unexplainable holiness, down to this—to a crowd, a frantic father, a desperately sick boy lying in the dirt, convulsing.

There is something in that rhythm of the very heart of Christianity: the mysterious holiness of the mountain and the blunt reality of human life and human need and human suffering. Because we are so eager to get off the mountain, so uncomfortable with the very idea of anything we cannot understand and explain, the New Testament scholars want us to stay up there for a while, in silent awe.

But I’ve always seen what comes next—the walk down from the mountain into the valley of human need and suffering—as a metaphor, a picture of what the church is for: to bring us into the awesome presence of God, to remind us that we live our lives in the presence of God, to point to the sacred, the holy, the Godly in everyday life. And to lead us, in the name of God, into the crowd, the city, the valley of human need where little children are sick and frantic parents cry out for help. Both—And. Both worship and service: both glorious hymns that remind us of mystery and holiness and the time and money shared by churches like ours with the hungry and homeless. The quiet intimacy of the prayers of intercession on Sunday morning and the noisy chaos of a demonstration by Christians on behalf of peace in Ukraine. A gorgeous anthem by the Choir and 50 neighbors gathered for an AA meeting in the parish hall. The elegant silence of the Lord’s Supper and the man who comes to me because he is drinking too much and a once-precious marriage is coming apart.

Jim Wallis, editor of *Christianity Today* magazine, says, “In Jesus, God hits the streets.”

There is truth up there in the mystical silence on the mountain, and there is truth in the coming down from the mountain to the valley. There is purpose and challenge and mission.

We begin this week the journey of Lent, the time when we turn our attention to Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and to that final mystery, his death on the cross.

For all the mystery on the mountaintop, there is nothing more mysterious than divine, holy love walking into the city, coming fully into human life, the valley of human need, and there suffering and dying for us. What we ponder and celebrate in Lent doesn’t fit our worldview either: love that pours itself out, love that suffers and dies. There is no mystery more profound than that: that somehow the death of Jesus at the hands of the authorities after three short years of teaching and healing was far more than a tragedy of history; it was a gesture of love in which is our salvation.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” Hamlet says. God, for instance. God’s creation of the world and human life in the world. The stars and galaxies. God’s love.

And the mystery of that man, teaching, healing, loving, making his way to his cross for you and me: “And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”

There are experiences in this life of ours the only appropriate response to which is silence.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.