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## Living into mystery (Mark 9:2-9)

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What are we to make of this reading? How are we to understand it?

It seems to me it sits in the realm of mystery, something like those rare times we are pulled up short and don't have the words to explain our experience. Some say it is not for figuring out, but for being drawn into and living the experience.

I am grateful to Barbara Brown Taylor whose words speak and inspire this reflection. She says:

[This story] is the luminous story of a mystical encounter, not only between God and God's Beloved but also between those at the centre of the story and those who watch. Those at the centre are Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Those who watch are Peter, James and John.

And then, of course, there are all of us watching all of them.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder how the disciples were feeling as they went up that mountain and experienced Jesus, shining.

Taylor again:

It starts with a long climb up a windy mountain in the fading light of day, hunting for a strong place to pray. No talking for once. No wall of words between you and the others. Just breathing for once, just hearing them breathe, until you can't

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<sup>1</sup> [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the\\_bright\\_cloud\\_of\\_unknowing](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20037fe/the_bright_cloud_of_unknowing)

tell whether you are breathing or being breathed. Are you hyperventilating?

Sit down. You are here to pray, so get on with it. Pray until you are weighed down with sleep. Pray until it is dark enough to see light through your eyelids where light should not be.

You don't really want to open your eyes to see where the light is coming from. But you kind of do. But you don't. Then you look.

And there he is: someone you thought you knew really well, standing there pulsing with light, leaking light everywhere. Face like a flame. Clothes dazzling white. Then, as if that weren't enough, two other people are there with him, all of them standing in that same bright light. Who are they? Can't be. Moses. Elijah. Dead men come back to life. God's own glory, lighting up the night. Now they're leaving. Now Peter's saying something.

Tents, he's saying. We need tents. He thinks we're on Sinai. Someone tell him we're not on Sinai. Now there's a cloud coming in fast that is way more than weather, a terrifying cloud that is also alive. Cutting Peter off. Covering everything up. Smells like a lightning strike. Can't see a thing.

Then a voice from the cloud lifts the hairs on the back of your neck. Fear so fast and primitive, you're bristling like a dog. What's the voice saying? Not "listen to me" but "listen to him." The Son, the Beloved. But listen to what? He's not saying anything. He's shining. Or at least he was. Now he's not. Now it's over. Now what?

If anything even remotely that strange has ever happened to you, then you know why Peter, James and John were relieved when Jesus told them to keep what had happened to

themselves. Supernatural light. Famous people come back from the dead. God talking to you from inside a cloud.<sup>2</sup>

Things like that may happen in the Bible, but now?

Has anything even remotely that strange ever happened to you?

I remember once being in a cave in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales and having an experience of the presence of the ancients. It was overwhelming. I had a sense of them singing and dancing. I don't know what it all meant but it blew me away. I have no words to describe it. Maybe it was something about being connected, being in a place that held stories enacted for millennia, and I was there and happened to tap in and recognise. Nikolai was with me but he had no such sense at that time. We did both feel it on the south coast recently.

I remember my first visit to Uluru, and particularly Muti Julu, where water comes down from the rock into a pool, a vaginal space, a women's place, I hear. For me there was a sense of more there, of mystery. I felt I was standing on Holy Ground, a thin place.. I was awed. I've been back there a number of times, but haven't had that same sense again. Is it sometimes that we are more open? Is it that mystery is only revealed on occasions? I don't know.

I wonder what it would have been like at that place and time of transfiguration? A sense of past and present and future coming together. You want to stay there forever, but you can't, you've got to get back to work, get the kids to school, put out the garbage, but something of the shimmering stays with you, the wondering, the sparkle.. You are encouraged and carry this with you into the rest of your life, to take out and ponder at times, perhaps even in

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*,

Lent, to wonder what it means, how it has changed you, who this beloved delighted in one really is, and why he's connected.. and maybe some of the delight and love and shining rubs off as the experience leaves you and you tramp back home.

What if the point of the biblical encounter is not to decode it, not to understand, but to enter into the mystery??

Taylor says:

'What if the whole Bible is less a book of certainties than it is a book of encounters, in which a staggeringly long parade of people run into God, each other, life--and are never the same again?

I mean, what don't people run into in the Bible? Not just terrifying clouds and hair-raising voices but also crazy relatives, persistent infertility, armed enemies, and deep depression, along with life-saving strangers, miraculous children, food in the wilderness, and knee-wobbling love.

Whether such biblical encounters come disguised as "good" or "bad," they have a way of breaking biblical people open, of rearranging what they think they know for sure so that there is room for more divine movement in their lives.

Sometimes the movement involves traveling from one place to another.

Sometimes it means changing their angle on what is true and why. Sometimes it involves the almost invisible movement of one heart toward another.

Certainties can become casualties in these encounters, or at least those certainties that involve clinging to static notions of who's who and what's what, where you are going in your life and why.

Those things can shift pretty dramatically inside the cloud of unknowing, where faith has more to do with staying fully present

to what is happening right in front of you than with being certain of what it all means. That's surely what meditation is all about, staying fully present, opening our hearts to mystery, then there's the meeting. There is no way to be sure, but I think Peter sensed that. When Jesus lit up right in front of him, Peter knew what he was seeing. The Bible calls it "God's glory"--the shining cloud that is the sure sign of God's capital P Presence.

In the Book of Exodus, when Moses climbed Mount Sinai to fetch the tablets of the law, the whole top of the mountain stayed soaked in divine cloud cover for six whole days and Moses came down shining.

In 1 Kings, when Solomon dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, a dense cloud filled up that huge place so that the priests could not even see what they were supposed to be doing.

When Ezekiel had his vision of the four living creatures, he saw them in the middle of "a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually."

That's what this mystery of God's glory seems to look like, apparently: a big bright cloud--dark and dazzling at the same time--an envelope for the Divine Presence that would blow people away if they looked upon it directly, so, the cloud.

Before the cloud rolled in, Peter knew what he was seeing. What he did not see was a tent of meeting, a dwelling place, like the one where Moses met with God during the wilderness years. Peter knew that he was in the presence of The Presence. He knew that God was right there, and that tent or no tent, he was standing as close as he was ever going to get to the only kind of meeting that really matters.

Today is the pivotal Sunday between the seasons of Epiphany and Lent--the day when many of us who follow Jesus realise it is time to turn away from the twinkling stars of Christmas toward the deep wilderness of Lent. We shift our gaze. We turn again towards the divine.

If you've been looking for some way to trade in your old certainties for new movement in your life, look no further. This is your chance to enter the cloud of unknowing and listen for whatever it is that God has to say to you. This is your chance to encounter God's contagious glory, so that a little of that shining rubs off on you.

Today you have heard a story you can take with you when you go.

It tells you that no one has to go up the mountain alone. It tells you that sometimes things get really scary before they get holy.

Above all, it tells you that there is someone standing in the centre of the cloud with you, shining so brightly that you may never be able to wrap your mind around him, but who is worth listening to all the same--because this one is God's beloved, and you belong to this one, and whatever comes next, you are up to it.<sup>3</sup>

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