

In the Grasp of the Mysterium Tremendum

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I've spent a lot of time outside over the past years, thank God.

It's been a blessing. But I can say that I experienced a wonderful "first" last summer.

I've always been drawn to the trees and to the dirt.

---Especially the trees and dirt in the mountains.

I've thankfully seen those clear tropical waters

waving into shores of beautifully fine sand,

But to me, there's nothing better than rocks and pine and aspen all piled up high.

There's always been a natural comfort, there, but not like I felt last year.

Last year, for the first time, I looked around, and I no longer felt like I was "outside."

Does that make any sense?

Just to explain a little further, I didn't feel like I was away from home...

...Just in a different room.

One decorated so much more beautifully... more *perfectly*

than anything I could ever put together with a bag of stuff from World Market.

I realized for the first time that we're *always* in nature,

...the only thing that changes from standing in the middle of those trees by a brook,

And standing in my living room, is the amount of stuff we use to box up our view.

---The amount of stuff we use to cover ourselves from the rest.

The drywall, the fiberglass, the shingles, the pictures, the cushions, the curtains.

It's all just a pile of things we place around ourselves
in the middle of the living world all around us, and beneath us, and above us---
---that nature which surrounds us and embraces us every second of every day.

And then, as I walked further along that dirt, in that big open room,
decorated so gorgeously with all of that breathing pine,
and all of those wonderful water installations...
.. I realized that this is the same way we are with God.

God is around us always. God surrounds every inch of our soul,
Above, beneath, from side-to-side, and even within...
... We just build up all of this stuff around our lives that sometimes blocks our view.
We find ourselves holed up in these little *shelters*...
... whether it be our work, or our obligations to family,
or the millions of other things (much smaller) which clutter up the space around our lives.

We pile up so much around our mind and spirit,
that we a lot of times feel somehow separate from God,
Even though that separation is nothing but an illusion.
A false sense of isolated space in the midst of the vastness all around us.
... A vastness in which we're just as much at home as anywhere else.
... That eternity of God in which we will always live, no matter where we stand.
No matter what piles up in front of our eyes.

And that blows my mind, ya know? It blew my mind walking out there on that dirt,
And it blows my mind to even say the words here
between all of this drywall and fiberglass.

This beautiful, unspeakable thing we call "God" ...

...It's so much bigger than our minds can imagine.

And I wouldn't want it any other way.

If I think too long about God, my eyes start to water. My breath catches in my chest.

And I feel I don't deserve to know something so great. So big.

..Being so tiny, and temporary, myself.

Our God is a Thing we cannot find a word to fully describe,
and shouldn't, if we want to still be speaking of the same Thing.

The only set of words that even comes *close*, in my experience,

Is a term I heard for God while I was a different, younger person, in college.

Got to think about and read about and hear about

all sorts of amazing things as a World Religions major.

And one of those sounds I heard from one of my professors

while I was sitting in a chair, that really stuck,

Was the term MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM.

I don't know if I've shared this with you, yet. We're into our third year together, now,

So it's possible, but if I have, this is a refresher:

THE MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM.

This was a term used to describe God.

Basically... the TREMENDOUS MYSTERY.

That larger force of Life beyond our own tiny piece of it,
which is unspeakable in its breadth,

Unknowable in Its knowledge, Unavoidable in Its grasp...

That Force of Life—which we simplify into that word “God”---

---which if we ever even began to take in, in Its actual, utter fullness,
would cause our tiny heads to just *explode*,

And every fragment of our physical being to break apart
and scatter undetectably to the winds.

That same force which surrounds us, and loves us, and cares for us,
and knows every intimate detail of who we are,

Who we were, who we will be,

And who we could have been before and might be later!

That beautiful, holy Thing which brought everything that is, to be.

And which makes up the whole of all things, together.

And I find truth in that term. One of the only ones. Because it's vast. It's unlimited.

...and to isolate the nature of God---the Infinite---to any single set of features,

(God is a vengeful, God is loving, God dislikes, God adores,

God is a DUDE...God is WOMAN)

is actually idolatry, in my very small opinion.

...To focus on only one set of ideas inside of the All, and say “that's It,”

is to carve a crude sculpture and pray to it.

---“Idol worship,” friends.

It’s to pile up all sorts of stuff around us,

and mistakenly think the largeness all around us has somehow been contained.

No, God is a gorgeous, mind-blowing mystery....so beautifully big...

...and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

The fact is, you could go on forever, talking about Eternity...

but we only have thirty minutes,

so I’ll leave other descriptions of God as a to-be continued, I guess.

But this is important for us---for you and for me---to think about together, this morning.

...Today is Transfiguration Sunday, but it’s also the Sunday

before the start of Lent, this Wednesday.

And this understanding of the bigness of God, is crucial to our understanding of both.

Let’s look at our texts.

Where did our scripture readings take us, today?

First, in Exodus, to the experience of Moses with God, on Mt. Sinai, right?

And the next, in the Gospel of Matthew, to the experience of Peter and James and John,
high up on a mountain with Jesus, in the moment of the transfiguration.

These two experiences of God take place at different moments in different circumstances, but they're the same in what way?

... Well, they both take place high up on a mountain, sure.

So ... TWO WAYS. (actually there are even several more. Amazing.)

But the most important for us to consider today,

Is that both show to us this experience of *awe*.

Both show to us that mind-blowing mystery of God---the MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM.

And how that vastness of God all around us will overwhelm us. Overtake us.

... Leave us standing stunned, right?

In Exodus, I wish the lectionary had gone just a bit further,

Because following what happened in our reading for today,

it says this, from Chapter 34, starting at verse 29:

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ... ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Only in carrying with him the trace of the presence of God,

the people were driven to fear and confusion,

So much so, that he needed to cover himself UP to speak with them. To face them.

Even this trace of the breath of God was too much for the people to take in.

(I love that part. They shouldn't have left it out)

Then in our reading from the gospel. WOW.

Once again. Awe. Amazement. The first two verses of Matthew 17:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Then that single form of Jesus breaks away into more. Moses and Elijah appear beside him.

Though here, this single form of Christ only breaks into two more,
it's still too much to handle.

Peter immediately starts trying to turn the moment into *church*, right?

I love this part, too.

Before the moment is even completely over, he goes into auto-mode.

Starts compartmentalizing....

...blabbering on about how he's going to build these shrines.

And what comes next is just awesome. Pure and simple.

God INTERRUPTS, Peter's ramblings, right? (Pretty funny, actually).

From verse 5:

5 *While he was still speaking*, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

The MYSERIUM TREMENDUM.

Just a piece of that largeness of God (God's voice) being too big to take in all at once.

Beautiful.

And Jesus, our mediator. Our conduit to God, taking his role amongst us tiny little people,

And telling us not to be afraid.

Both Transfiguration Sunday, and this season of Lent, which I can't believe is already here...

It's a time of AWE. Of appreciation. Of *adoration*...toward God.

It's a time of intimacy in loving, and trembling

at the vastness of the Infinite life of God which surrounds us always,

Even when we try to hide away.

We're deciding on our fasts, now. If you haven't decided on one yet, we still have three days to make our choice.

We've talked about the fast---and what it means between us and God---
---in detail through the last few years, so I won't dwell too much on it now.

But I will say this:

Just like we're always outside. Always in nature.

And sort of just *fool* ourselves into believing something else with all of the stuff we pile up in front of our eyes.

This is a time of remembering that no matter what it is we stack up around our lives,

We live always in the soul of God. We breathe the breath of God, each moment we pull in and pull out.

Our heart beats in the pulse of the Life of God. Always.

And just like we take time to venture out from the drywall
and fiberglass and picture frames and couch cushions in the summertime,
when the air feels just right...

... During the season of Lent we venture out from all of the shelters
we've built up around our lives to cushion our souls
from that overwhelming vastness of God all around us.

We open ourselves to explore God's soul. And the ways God fills our lives
no matter how many tinier things we so often use we try to clog up that open space
between.

The special fasts and prayers we let into our souls
during this holy season when the atmosphere is just right...

They're paths of exploration. They're moments of seeing.

They're moments of overwhelming awe,
in which the glory and beauty of God will stand right in front of our eyes.

And just like when we're finally on the top of that trail leading up the mountain,
And we take in the glory of life all around us as the mountains rise high into the sky
Covered in brushstrokes of green and purple and blue,

And we say to ourselves, 'Wow. Why don't I do this more?

...In this moment, I am truly alive..."

we're called to do the same in the heart of God,

And to remember Jesus, when he told us not to be afraid.

I hope you each have a wonderful, unspeakable,

overwhelming experience of the God who is your life,

During the weeks on their way.

Even though I probably won't hear of any of those experiences you'll have,

because they'll be personal, and they'll be quiet.

I can't wait to know you're being overtaken

by an experience of the holy mystery of God in your soul.

...Happy travels.

Amen.