

Mountain Sunday

Isaiah 65:17-26; Romans 8:28-39; Mark 16:9-18

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I grew up in southern Ontario amid acres and acres of flat, fertile farmlands on one side, and miles of open water on the other side. So it's not too surprising that I was simply blown away when I first encountered mountains.

Mountains are so hugely, enormously, big!

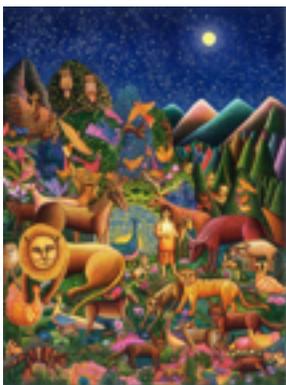
Mountains are places of great beauty and wonder, snow capped, cloud wreathed, carrying glaciers those great rivers of ice that are hundreds and thousands of miles deep. The rivers that run down from their peaks water the earth and give life to

plants and animals and humans. Mountains are challenging. The higher you climb the colder it gets. The air becomes thinner, and it gets harder and harder to breathe. Mountains can be terrifying, the source of mudslides and rock slides and avalanches, spewing out hot molten lava, filling the sky with burning ash.



It is little wonder that many tribal peoples, both ancient and modern, think of mountains as being home to powerful spiritual forces that can give and take away life. The Bible is filled with stories of people going up into the mountains to encounter God. At Mount Horeb, Moses not only received the 10 commandments from God, but was given a glimpse of God's back. At Mount Horeb, Elijah waited out a great wind, an earthquake and a fire to hear the voice of God whispering in the sounds of silence. Solomon built God's temple on top of Mount Zion, where the ancient Israelites believed heaven and earth came close enough to touch.

Our Old Testament lesson speaks to God's people in the aftermath of the catastrophic destruction of that Temple on God's holy mountain, having returned from captivity in a foreign land, they are trying to make a new life in the midst of the ruins. We hear the prophet Isaiah speaking to inspire and energize them in rebuilding their city and their temple. It's a beautiful picture that Isaiah evokes isn't it?



It's almost as if God is saying, I have a dream... A dream of new heavens and a new earth. A dream of Jerusalem rebuilt and its people restored. A dream of life in this holy city where joy and delight will replace the sound of weeping and cries of distress. A dream of fertility and longevity for my people. A dream in which everyone lives in their own homes and works in their own fields and workshops, and enjoys the fruits of their labors. A dream in which even the wild animals are tame and find nourishment in eating green plants like they did in the

Garden of Eden. A dream in which no one hurts or destroys anyone anywhere on all of God's holy mountain.

But God's dream is not just divine wishful thinking, spinning tales, or building castles in the air. Our text from Isaiah tells us that God is already creating, rebuilding, and restoring. God's desire and intention the world, then and now, is still fruitful longevity, peaceful prosperity, and communal — even global — harmony not just for human beings but for all creatures. The salvation, healing and flourishing of all of creation is the goal and objective of God's work.

That becomes very clear in our Gospel text for today which features Jesus commissioning the eleven disciples for their post-Easter mission. Jesus appears to the disciples while they are at table, hidden away behind the locked doors of the upper room where they had taken refuge after his crucifixion. Throughout Mark's Gospel the disciples are depicted as dull and dense, slow to understand, easily confused, self-centered, fearful. Here they weep and mourn the death of Jesus, unwilling, perhaps unable, to believe the good news he is alive, resurrected from the dead. They stubbornly resist believing even though Jesus himself predicted his resurrection. Jesus describes them as lacking faith and heart-hearted, we might say hard-headed in their stubborn refusal to believe those who had already seen him. The eleven disciples represent all of us who struggle to understand, trust, and believe God's promises.



Yet, it is precisely these disciples that Jesus commissions to be his apostles, commanding them, “to go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” The good news is to be proclaimed to all of creation, to every creature, not just to all people, not just to all nations. Jesus’ message that the kingdom of God is present here and now, emerging already in our midst is good news for all of creation. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is even better good news for every creature.

In the words of Richard Rohr (Immortal Diamond, p. 148):

The Crucified One is God's standing in solidarity with the suffering, the tragedy, and the disaster of all time, and God's promise that it will not have the last word.

The Risen One is God's final word about the universe and what God plans to do with all the suffering.

Jesus Christ is good news for all of creation, and wants every creature to know and experience this good news.

The risen Christ makes two promises to all who believe/trust/have faith in the good news, and are baptized: (1) Salvation and healing — the Greek word means both of those things — to be

saved is to be healed, to be made whole, to know and experience Christ's loving presence here and now, always and forever. (2) Signs will accompany faith: casting out demons, speaking in tongues, picking up snakes, drinking deadly things unharmed, laying hands on the sick to make them better.

These signs are probably why this passage does not normally appear in our Sunday Scripture readings. Many of us have heard of Christian groups in which snake handling and drinking poison are practiced as tests and demonstrations of faith, as evidence that a person is truly saved. Let me just remind you of what Jesus said when Satan dared him to jump off the temple to prove he was God's Son because after all the Bible says that God will command the angels to bear you up so you won't even stub your toe (Matthew 4:5-6). Jesus' words, paraphrased slightly were, "Sorry old man, but the Bible says we are not to put God to the test" (Matthew 4:7// Deuteronomy 6:16). So... in Scripture it is Satan who demands risky, dangerous and potentially lethal demonstrations of faith, not Jesus.

What Jesus does is give examples of signs that accompany or follow those who believe. These signs point to the presence of Christ in, with, under and through the faithful telling and acting out of the good news. As we come to know Christ more deeply, as we come to live Christ more faithfully, and share Christ more boldly individual lives and communities will experience physical, material, emotional and spiritual healing, wild things will be tamed, and harmful, destructive and death-dealing things will be cast out, left behind and/or transformed into new things that give life. What strikes me is that these signs sound a lot like the goals of God's creative work in our Old Testament lesson. God dreams of a creation in which all creatures flourish and prosper together in peace and harmony, Christ tells us to go and make it so.

Way back in 1523, Martin Luther preached a sermon on this particular gospel lesson in which he focused on baptism as the most important sign in the lives of believers. For Luther, baptism is one of those God's work, our hands things. In baptism it is God who really claims and affirms each of us as a beloved child of God. We receive baptism as a sign of God's grace, an assurance of salvation, and a promise of God's help as we commit ourselves to being God's hands and feet and voices, showing and telling the whole world how Jesus is good news for all of creation.

Please pray with me:

By your God, eternal God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given new life in the power of your Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news to all creatures in our words and our deeds, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen.