

MOUNTAIN SUNDAY

Scripture Readings: Mark 1:9-13, Romans 12:1-2; Isaiah 58:6-9. Psalm 121

Mountain chains wrap around the world like a collection of lumbar spines both above and below sea level. Mt. Everest is 5 and half miles into the sky. Now imagine it under water. There are many, largely unexplored mountains chains submerged in the oceans. The major mountains systems of the world are evidence of a living planet, ever changing. Even as most mountains are being eroded many are continuing to rise every year such as the Himalayans, the Andes, the Sierra Nevada's and the St. Elias range, Alaska. The reason for this incremental march upwards is because of the jamming of the plates they ride on. These are known as mountain building events and when this occurs the existing rock is literally modified in to a new form by heat, pressure and chemical processes. Known as metamorphism, this is the process where rocks become completely new rocks. For instance, Shale morphs into slate, Sandstone morphs into quartzite. The hills around us are made of limestone which when heated and put under great pressure turns into marble. And marble has been used by man over the centuries to build palaces and monuments and so many headstones. Metamorphosis means to change.

There are many high places and mountain-scapes across all religions that are revered and considered holy. John Muir, the conservationist, wrote "The Mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thought and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains."

After his baptism Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit (not to the Holy Temple Mount in Jerusalem) but into the desert for 40 days culminating on Mount Quarantania where Satan came and tempted Him 3 times. This mountain desert terrain the Holy Spirit led Him to, is part of the Judean Mountains characterized by a Badlands and Karst topography. That is, layers of limestone, sandstone, and shale eroded into rounded mountains, with steep rocky slopes, and

arid with very little vegetation. Last year on a trip to Palestine we were given an opportunity to view a portion of the terrain believed to be where Jesus spent time in the wilderness. The backdrop to this are the Jordanian Mountains to the east. Honestly, I don't know what would be worse, the lack of food and water or the lack of shade. It was almost barren except for some small sticky brush. But it raised far more questions for me. Coming off the holy high of being baptized why go to the desert? I've tried to give this some real consideration from the few lines of scripture given to us about his time there. 40 days is long time and this is not the Garden of Adam. Jesus was roaming around a different kind of creation – the stark landscape of who Jesus was to become. Perhaps he went there because he was deeply burdened. Maybe even scared. I imagine he spent time under a cliff overhang or in caves during the day trying to escape the relentless sun. Was he led there to sweat out ego and so many doubts, in order to receive? Did the very rocks around him tell him “love thy neighbor”? Did the scorpions teach him how to speak in parables because humanity is not black and white? On Mt. Quarantania there was a deep wrestling between His humanity and his Divine spirit. Have you ever felt like that? After thwarting the temptations of Satan, I imagine he stepped out, shivering, to behold the night sky, seeking comfort and was reassured by the expanse of the Alpha and Omega? This holy time in the Judean desert and mountains is believed to have marked the beginning of his ministry. I suspect He looked back often on this time for strength. I believe Jesus was not only changed, but healed and in turn healed many.

The bible is peppered with mountain experiences where perspective is given, whether preparing for war or receiving a call from God. It seems in all these stories there is yearning to be with Yahweh, as close as possible and clearly the inverse, Yahweh wanting to be with us, with you. For me personally, when I go to the mountains there is a simultaneous stirring, an awakening of possibilities. I feel I am being invited to explore and to rest. Invited into joy and marvel and to be still, and to let go of something and be free. Perhaps it is the humbling that pours down on

us, standing at the mountain foot or the view afforded from its slopes that quietly prepares us to listen for God. These type of experiences may require more than a few hours of down time. They may require intentional pilgrimage. Or devotion to listening. Creation is the voice of God. And when we listen we are guided by what Paul says “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove through testing what is the will of God”.

When we go to listen to God we are changed; not only do we hope for this, but we must seek it out. Open authentic seeking is a necessity for development of our emotional and spiritual intelligence. Our spirits need to leave the comfortable echo chambers of our friends and families, to a place to listen and to be moved. Mankind needs a place to reflect and test all things against love, and leave behind fear. From John Muir again “Thousands of tired, nerve shaken, over civilized people are beginning to find out going to the mountains is going home, that wilderness is a necessity.” But we know now that mankind truly has dominion over the earth. Just within the past 150 years we have gone from battling nature to domination. I can't think of a better metaphor for this than the trash strewn slopes of Mt. Everest. The quest to make it to the top has left it littered with ropes, oxygen bottles, clothing, food (both eaten and uneaten), and the remains of some unsuccessful attempts. The side of the highest peak in the world has become a dump site. If we deny creation and its limits we deny our very selves and its destruction becomes much easier.

Why did we come here today? Why not gather in a conference room at home. There is an inherent call to be a little more open, vulnerable in nature. Yes, we came here to dream about the future and share these dreams with one another. Please try to take something home from this place with you. A prayer, a shared smile, the sound of the refreshing river, the strength of the cypress trees. We are one of many churches trying to interpret the future and a lot of churches are just trying to stay alive. The loud haranguing fears of our culture wars have

permeated the body and is dividing the larger church. Maybe we are being tempted. The verbal bomb throwers of today seek to push us back on our heels, to get us to focus on our differences instead of the common human condition we are called to serve. No.....this is not the first time. For millennia, regardless of self-serving governments and religious circles, vexing policies and cultural anxieties, and in spite of any personal demons, God continues to inspire us through our divine spirit dreams. God reigns! So let's turn from these gross distractions and go to the mountain of renewal with our Creator, with the monotony of everyday lives, with our fears, hopes and dreams, and let Him heal us. Let Him change us. All of Creation tells us God is waiting. Hallelujah!

Amen.