

Holladay United Church of Christ
September 27, 2009
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To the Top of the Mountain and Down again –

Isaiah 65:17-25

To the ancient Hebrews – a mountain was a holy place – its reach to the heavens made it holy – The ancient world view consisted of three levels, three stories – the underworld, the earth, and the heavens. The gods lived on the top layer, the people and creatures in the middle, and the dead spirits were in the underworld, in Sheol. Everything in this world had a place and a role to fulfill. Order was found in the created world, and the chaotic waters were held outside of the world by a boundary. Rivers and rain were holes in the boundary which let in the waters of chaos into the world. For the Israelites, God was the creator of this three story world. There were two miles in between the upper world of the Gods and the lower world of the Sheol, with the human and creatures of the earth in between.

That makes God very close the humans. God was accessible – especially on a mountain. The mountains actually touched the realm of the heavens and held up the realm of the heavens. Mountains had heir role too. And in particular there was a mountain which ran through the axis mundi, the line which went through the center of the world. This is where they placed the temple, on Mt Zion, because it was considered to be on the axis mundi. And the asix mundi went through the temple of Yahweh in the heavens, thus the early temple resembled as closely as possible the temple in the heavens.

We can see this world view as we read the texts as in Psalm 104 – You set the earth on its foundations so that it shall never be shaken. You cover it with the deep as with a garment, the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they flee. You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills giving drink to every wild animal;. By the streams the birds of the air have habitations; they sing from the branches. From you lofty abode you water the mountains, the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

What stories in scripture come to mind when you think about mountains?

Transfiguration

Moses on the Mountain

Elijah going to the top of the mountain to receive the word of the Lord

Abraham taking his son to the mountain to be sacrificed

Jesus at the Mount of Olives
Jesus retreating to the mountains
Johns feeding of the five thousand on a hillside

Different events – but they speak to the familiar association that was made between the mountains and the voice of God – over and over again God is revealed to the people on a mountain...

So when we read this text from Isaiah – I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth – we are not talking a brand new planet – at the time – it was this layered world – a new heavens and a new earth – meant a restored earth – a restoration of that created order – it is as if what happened in the fall is reversed in this new heaven and new earth – – people shall eat the food they produce – they shall live long lives – lion and lamb shall live together - and the toil and the suffering are going to be transformed –nothing shall be destroyed on this holy mountain – all shall live in peace – and none shall be harmed -

This was the vision for the ancient world as Isaiah saw it –a vision of hope, prosperity, security and wholeness –

What does this evoke for us today?

Certainly anyone who has walked among mountains can understand why our ancestors considered them holy - once you have breathed crisp clean air, laid your eyes on a field full of wildflowers or stood beside a river of melting snow you have been in the presence of something sacred. Mountains have a way of getting inside your bones - the unpolluted, free, wild, alive, living, breathing, majesty takes you in – and you find yourself touching a stillness and a power that is hard to put into words.

So while our world view may have changed our draw to the mountains has not. They are as much a spiritual necessity today as they were back then. There is something in particular about mountains that strip away any illusion of control and grandiosity – you are at the mercy of the land and standing below a 14000 foot peak the mountain speaks truth that no billboard will remind you of - you are small.

Such vulnerability builds compassion and demands humility. It also opens up the possibility of discovering things about ourselves that only the rocks, rivers, and trees can help us find. The mountain itself becomes a teacher. A mentor. I often

wonder what a mandatory 5 day backpacking trip might do for all legislators - at the very least they would have to depend on one another

A couple of weeks ago a group of us from the Faith and the Land project traveled to Orin Hatch's office in Provo to talk with one of his advisors, Ron Dean, about the spiritual importance of the wilderness. In the hour long conversation we conveyed our common conviction as people of diverse faiths that wilderness is a place of profound inspiration and spiritual necessity. All of our faiths call on us to protect and care for the land – not only for our use and our own spiritual renewal, but for the generations to come and for the land itself.

He agreed with us that the wilderness has an important place – but so too he said does industry – and he pointed to the table and the chairs that we were sitting on and the building we were talking in – and said we couldn't have all this without mining and cutting and using the earth – I wish I would have the wherewithal then to say yes – and there is reason that this office is scattered with images of the natural beauty of Utah – its canyons and rivers, mountains and lakes – we need it to be there - it calls to our senses, it invigorates our imaginations – it speaks to us in a way that a chair and a table and a rug never can.

Mountains can also remove us from the many distractions that clamor for our attention and reconnect with what is important to us. For the ancients chaos was held at bay on the outside of the firmament – I think we of the modern world would agree that chaos found its way in – chaotic schedules, chaotic streets, chaotic cities, chaotic minds full of distractions, chaotic lives in search of meaning – to put on your skies for a day, thrown on your hiking boots, pull out the leash and take a dog for a walk – even if its just for a couple of hours – some small sense of sanity and serenity can be found – we catch a moment of awareness that connects us to something bigger – something beautiful – something infinite and powerful –

When you are surrounded by rock carved over millions of years – you gain perspective. Essential separates from non-essential - The trees sift your thoughts until your mind is clear, your heart is free and you once again feel the ground beneath you.

Id be lying if I said the thought of being a hermit in the woods never crossed my mind. You know a nice little cottage, with a storage shed and a burning stove – a solar panel or two with a rain water collection tank - a place away from the craziness of our world where everything could remain simple, straightforward, connected.

When the disciples were on the top of the mountain with Jesus they had a similar thought – cant we just put up some tents and stay up here? As tempting as that sounds, I think for most of us the journey to the mountain isn't meant to be an escape – it is meant to teach us something, give us something that will help us live back down in our everyday world.

When Moses, and Elijah and Jesus all went up to the mountain the separation between heaven and earth disappeared and they were met by the presence of God. – they found something up there that changed they way they lived down here – They didn't leave that experience on the mountain. They brought it back with them. They came back down the mountain.

Whether we are on top of an actual mountain or a metaphorical one – it is often there that we too will catch a glimpse of a new heaven and a new earth – where all separation fades away and peace pervades all things. Whatever it is we experience on the mountain – we don't have to leave it there – it can come back down the mountain with us – to our everyday lives – and become part of our center that holds. We can simplify. We can prioritize. We can put time into the things that matter to us. We can discover that what we found on the mountain we can find anywhere. That beautiful sweet space of connectedness and wholeness is all around us. Sometimes we just need a mountain to give us our first taste. Amen.