

Empowered By A Holy Mountain Vision

Isaiah 65:17-25

Mark 16:14, 15

Today marks the fourth & final Sunday in our Seasons of Creation focus, a church year season inserted into the season of Ordinary Time as a way of more fully connecting our faith to creation and the pressing needs creation now faces. The first Sunday we focused on planet earth, the second Sunday was humanity, last Sunday was the sky and today the focus is mountains.

For those of us living in Minnesota, we need to be honest; we have a well deserved reputation for lakes. Every school child knows that we are the land of 10,000 lakes, which is actually an undercount. We are just being modest or Minnesotan in not wanting to blow our own horns. The Minnesota Historical Society says we actually have 15,291 lakes greater than 10 acres. In addition, we have another 6,500 miles of rivers and streams. Even without counting Lake Superior, we have lots of fresh water.

But, mountains?, well that is another story. We do make our best effort, with names like Afton Alps along the St. Croix. Someone who has actually been to the Alps of Europe and is visiting Minnesota for the first time would probably be a little puzzled by that name. They head toward Wisconsin all excited and are halfway to Chicago confused and wondering, where are the Alps? We have Spirit Mountain up near

Duluth, which is really a nice long hill with a great view of Lake Superior. Our tallest mountain is Eagle Mountain up off the North Shore and on the edge of the Boundary Water Canoe Area. It makes Minnesota number 38 when it comes to highest elevation for a state. Alabama apparently beats us out by several hundred feet.

But, what our Minnesota mountains, such as they are, do have in common with the Alps, the Rockies, Mount Denali, or any other mountain is that they give you a wider view of the world. It is because of this wider view that in Scripture mountains often are the place associated with the presence of God. The size of the mountain is much less important than is the ability of the mountain to show us the world and our lives in ways that we are unable to see on a ground level, day to day basis.

A mountain can be a place like Everest, which as one reviewer said about the recently released movie by that name, makes you never want to leave your house. But, if you have acrophobia and are reluctant to climb high places, the good news in Scripture is that the actual size of a mountain is irrelevant. The mountain that does matter in Scripture is that mountain described by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the speech he gave in Memphis the day before he was assassinated. King said, *“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a*

long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

You may have heard the speech given by Pope Francis this week to Congress. In that speech the Pope identified three other people, who like King, had been on a holy mountain on which they experienced a vision of the world not as it is, but as it might become. Abraham Lincoln saw a world in which freedom was the right of every human being. Dorothy Day could see a world in which economic justice and fairness meant dignity for the poor. Thomas Merton could see a world where violence was replaced by peace, insisting that strength through justice rather than strength through violence is the precondition for lasting peace.

A Holy Mountain is the place where our vision of our world, our vision for ourselves expands, enabling us to see our potential, who we are as human beings in new ways. "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth..." proclaims Isaiah. The prophet is speaking to people who are living in the day to day rubble of their lives. They have returned from exile with hopes of rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple after it had been thoroughly destroyed by the Babylonians. They have grown completely discouraged, are ready to give up, because from

where they stand on the ground, all they can see is a future without promise.

Surely this is what the world must have looked like to the Minnetonka father, who a few weeks ago took the lives of his children, wife and then himself. In many ways his actions are beyond our understanding, but what we can and do understand is how discouragement can set in, problems can mount, hopelessness can take hold, and we can begin to feel like nothing will ever change.

The prophet Isaiah stands on the Holy Mountain and from that vantage point says imagine a world “where there is no more crying, no more distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime.” Imagine a world where Syrian babies are not washing up on the shores of Turkey or millions of people are no longer displaced from their home or living as refugees seeking a safe place. Imagine a world beyond the world that greets you at ground level when you start your day.

I will confess that even small mountains like the ones we have in Minnesota, can make me nervous. I am among those who are not a big fan of heights. You will never see me walking to the edge of a cliff and then peering out into some steep drop that would lead to my demise if I lost my footing or a sudden gust of wind came up from behind. I’ve seen people do that. I think they are a few cards short of a full deck. I prefer to stand back and play it safe, which I think is exactly why we

tend to stay clear of Holy Mountains like the one on which the prophet Isaiah stands, looking out past the loss and destruction of Jerusalem to a new day, with a new heaven and a new earth.

Intuitively we know a Holy Mountain, this vision of love and justice, is no place to get out our I-phones and take a selfie so that everyone can see where we are. The Holy Mountain confronts us with a vision of a transformed world, a transformed life, which, of course, is what makes these particular heights scary. The Holy Mountain enables us to clearly see the losses, disappointments, heartaches, but also the possibility, the promises of a new day in which we no longer dwell on what once was, but anticipate what will be. It is one thing to simply lie down, give up, concluding nothing will ever change. It is another thing all together to have a vision for what life might yet become and know that we have a role to play in bringing that vision to fruition.

Drawing upon the vision of Thomas Merton, Pope Francis said to the congress “*Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering on individuals and society? Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money – money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood. In the face of this shameful and culpable silence, it is our duty to confront the problem and to stop the arms trade.*” The vision of a different world, either for ourselves as individuals, for us as a congregation, or for the human race, challenges the status quo we

encounter on the ground. This vision, this promise, this hope is no longer content with resignation.

All of us face the limitations of our social location, our health, our abilities and talents, our resources. No amount of dreaming, hard work, or anything else would have ever made me a neurosurgeon, an accomplished musician, or even a preacher recognized as among the country's best. I have my limitations as do all of us. Part of the American myth is that you can be anything that you want to be. There are churches that reinforce this belief by promoting positive thinking. The Holy Mountain offers no such fanciful view of the world or our lives.

Our human limitations are real. The challenges we face are real. The consequences of the damage we have already done to planet earth are real. The Holy Mountain is no place to deny those realities or challenges. What the Holy Mountain does do is enable us to see beyond these limitations to new possibilities, a new reality, that may feel beyond our grasp, but is within the grasp of God.

Imagine how things would have been different for that Minnetonka man and his family had he stood on this Holy Mountain and saw beyond his failings, losses and disappointments to a new day for himself and those he loved. The Holy Mountain enables us to see our lives, our families, our communities, our congregation our world, as we would a new heaven and a new earth. It is from a Holy Mountain, resurrection

vantage point that early Christians added a fresh ending to the Gospel of Mark proclaiming we are called to be “Good News to all creation” so that as Pope Francis reminds us we may together care for this treasure entrusted to us.

A Holy Mountain is anywhere we encounter this empowering vision of God. It can be in the quiet of your home. It can be alongside one of Minnesota’s many lakes or standing at the top of one of our all too modest mountains. A Holy Mountain can be right here in this place of worship together.

It is no wonder that Isaiah says, “be glad and rejoice forever in what I am doing.” When we discover the potential, the possibility for our lives and for our world, the inevitable response is one of joy.

Here is how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. concluded his Mountain Top speech in Memphis. *“And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!* Here on this Holy Mountain we are given a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Here on this Holy Mountain our strength is renewed.

Isaiah 65:17-25

Our first lesson comes from what Biblical scholars believe was the third prophet to speak in the tradition of first Isaiah, who lived prior to the time of Exile. Third Isaiah speaks to a people who generations later have returned from Exile and face the overwhelming task of rebuilding a life and city left in ruins by the Babylonians. Third Isaiah invites them and us to join him on God's Holy Mountain. On God's Holy Mountain we are given a vision of a world and lives transformed beyond what we can ever imagine.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Mark 16:14, 15

Most Biblical scholars believe the verses we read today from the Gospel of Mark were added by later Christians uncomfortable with the ending found in verse 8 with women leaving the empty tomb in fear and trembling. These verses speaking about the resurrection of Christ were included to reinforce the message that fear and trembling are never the ending place, but the beginning of Good News, not just for people, but for the whole creation.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.