

**“The wild mountain God” a sermon based on 2 Corinthians 4:3-6 and Mark 9:2-9 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the Sunday of the Transfiguration, 14 January 2021.** Kerry was greatly helped by an online commentary on the Mark reading by Ched Myers at “God is Like a Mountain” (Mk 9:2-9) – Radical Discipleship.

When the Bible mentions mountains, we need to prick up our ears. Something important is about to happen. And when we hear about mountains in the New Testament, we need to remember what happened on mountains in the Hebrew scriptures. Two times in particular the Bible speaks of Moses and mountains. The first time, Israel camps at the foot of the mountain, where God calls to Moses to prepare the people for an encounter (Ex 19:3). Israel has “seen” what God did to free them from imperial Egypt (v. 4); now they must “hear” God’s voice (v. 5f). God “comes down” from the mountain to give Israel instructions on how to live in community, without giving in to the oppressive empire (v. 11). In the meantime there is drama up the mountain - thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, a great cloud (Ex 19:16-19). The second time, Moses goes up the mountain to receive the ten commandments on stone tablets. Many features of that story appeared in Mark’s story.

Ex 24:15-18: Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud. The appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. So what did we hear today that was in that story? Six days; Jesus led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves; There appeared to them Elijah with Moses; A cloud overshadowed them; From the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

In many cultures mountains are places of divine disclosure, so in our story today, a place of revelation. Evan Eisenberg wrote a book called *The Ecology of Eden*. He highlights the ecological significance of mountains in

the Bible. He notes that the land of these mountains, the land of Canaan, also contains the lowest dry land on the planet. There is the shore of the Dead Sea, and there are deserts and coastal plains. We are asked to notice the contrast between the lowest land and the imposing mountains, the contrast between the deathliness of that dry land and the life-giving experiences on the mountain. If we were there, we would see it and sense it, the height and depth and length and breadth of God's concern for creation.

Eisenberg notes how certain places play a central role in the flow of energy and the cycling of water and nutrients, and in the maintaining and spread of genetic diversity. Such places provide the means by which ecosystems around them are healthy for humans and other life forms. They help control flooding and soil erosion. They provide fresh infusions of pollinating birds and insects. They regulate the mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide and water vapour and they keep its temperature within bounds. They are means by which life-giving wildness brings life to places that have been shut down, hardened by human abuse. All such places are more or less wild; many are forested and from them great rivers flow. So in Canaan, as elsewhere, mountains are essential to the health of the land and thereby the health of the people. They are the cradle of life.

In the story today, here is God, in the cradle of life, pointing to Jesus, and as we stand there between the dead sea and the mountain ranges, we are to make connections, ecological connections. Here are spiritual leaders going up a mountain to experience the origin of life in order that they can bless creation and its people. Here are prophets receiving instructions on how people need to live amid the hardness of imperial domination. Here are visionaries communing with the wild God, on sacred peaks far from empire and the damage it has done to the earth and its people. And there in the middle of all this, there is Jesus transfigured, in the presence of the wild mountain God

Now there are two paths to walk from this point in the story. The path of Moses. On that path, the mountaintop experiences of Moses and Jesus cause them to "glow". The glow symbolises a profound connection to the Source of life. When Moses went up the mountain for 40 days, he came

down with his face “aglow” (Ex 34:30, 34f). The image is of one who experiences God on the mountain, so the mountain is understood as life-giving and healing and restoring. Perhaps we have had that experience, times we have been with God in nature in a way that we have felt renewed or cleansed or reoriented or freshly grounded. We have experienced the unshackled biosphere with an energy different to what we experience in busy urban lives. The poets and prophets of our faith continually point to the wilderness as a space of spiritual renewal.

There is another path, the path of Daniel, with the image of the Son of Man used in Daniel and used in Mark. Daniel saw one who was like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. Daniel has a vision of a Divine Judge who supports the oppressed. On this path the mountain is a place free of the damaging power of empire. Empire is a code word for what stops creation from flourishing and stops humankind from living abundantly. On this path, we meet a wild god who challenges imperial powers, who cannot be tamed.

It is a common temptation to try to make god an instrument of our own desires. The Mesopotamians tried to tame the wild God. In their cities they tried to reproduce the mysterious mountains “where the gods dwelled”. At the heart of every Mesopotamian city was a sacred precinct, and at the heart of every sacred precinct was a ziggurat, a stepped pyramid of mud brick. The Mesopotamians located their gods on these mini-mountains. And the people who communed at those mini-mountains were the rulers, So mini-mountains had mini-gods, used by rulers to support their oppression of the people. The gods became the patrons of empire. So we have the story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11) which is a parody of domination.

By contrast, in our tradition, God is a wild God who is encountered in the mystery of the mountain, who resists being enlisted for oppression and domination, a wild God who challenges the powers that dominate, a wild God who cradles creation, a wild God with whom people flourish. The heroes of our faith, Moses, Elijah, Jesus stand with the untameable, anti-imperial God on a shrouded hill to challenge all our efforts to control or use God. There is Moses, liberated from Pharaoh’s Egypt and embraced

by God on Sinai. There is Elijah who fled from the royal threats to gain strength to continue God's freedom struggle. There is Jesus at the misty Source of all life, being given strength for the difficult journey to Jerusalem to face the Powers.

The experience of transcendence on a mountain, the cradle of life. The revealing of a wild God we know in mystery, in a cloud. The fuelling of people to struggle for justice in hard places. The Mountain of God as a spiritual fount. The mountain of God as a challenge to the ways empires try to hold on to power. The sacred mountain, the cradle of life, where the wild God is, the one who empowers us for healing creation and resisting evil. No mini-mountain. No mini-God.

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