

# WORSHIP

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## Spiritual Geography: On the Mountain

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Matthew 28:16-20

“The mountains are calling, and I must go.” It was 1873 when John Muir wrote these words in a letter to his sister Sarah, with no way to know at the time that they would become his most famous. Today, Muir’s words have taken on a life of their own and are a favorite refrain of nature lovers and national parks marketing materials. Presbyterians have latched onto Muir’s words no doubt in part to the fact that his father was an itinerant Presbyterian minister. A quick search on Etsy results in over 1500 items – from travel mugs to posters to t-shirts – all proclaiming, “The mountains are calling.”

Like a lot of popular quotes, Muir’s words have been lifted out of context, so we miss the part where Muir tells his sister not just about his enjoyment of Yosemite but also his sense of responsibility to understand and to care for it. “The mountains are calling, and I must go,” Muir wrote, “and I will work on while I can, studying incessantly.” Studying incessantly is not what most of us think the mountains are calling to do, yet here we are.

Muir *was* on to something when he penned that line to his sister. He spoke from his own experience and vocation, and he also managed to speak to a broader truth of humanity. There *is* something deep in us that is drawn to nature. We can have the conversation about whether you’re a beach person or a mountain person (I’m a mountain person because I’m less likely to come home as red as a lobster), but either way, there’s an innate understanding that spending time in the presence of the ocean or the mountains is good for us.

For as much as we like to be in charge and to have things under control, for as much as we like to be the ones who know the answers and find the solutions, there is something incredibly freeing, life-giving even, about standing on the top of a mountain and seeing the beauty of the world existing without needing anything from us. It’s humbling to be confronted with how little we really know about the world in which we live and to be reminded of our very small part in it.



There's a reason that people seek out mountains, that we travel across the state to visit Grandfather Mountain or across the world to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

For one, the mountains have a kind of permanence to them that we crave – not for ourselves necessarily. They remind us that the world existed long before we ever were a twinkle in our parents' eyes AND that it will go on existing long after we are gone.

There's also the gift of perspective from the mountaintop – the change in location of being up above the hustle and bustle of everyday life and the subsequent clarity on what's important that comes with having some distance from the details.

Mountains “rise up from the plains of our lives to invite majesty and awe; wonder and fear; to call to mind the heights of the heavens above and the reality of the valleys below.”

So, yes, we agree - the mountains are calling, and we must go.

This call to the mountains; it's not new to us. It's been part of our spiritual DNA for a long time now. As members of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are mountain-people in that we trace defining stories of our faith back to a land and a place marked by mountains. In ancient thought, if you wanted to be close to God, then you got yourself as close to heaven or the sky as you possibly could, which meant you got yourself to the top of a mountain. Being on the mountaintop put you in a prime position to hear God speak, and the pages of Scripture are filled with stories of mountain-climbing women and men who wanted to hear God speak.

We've just heard two of those stories – Moses and the burning bush on Mount Horeb and Jesus giving the great commission to his disciples on a mountaintop.

We meet Moses in the middle of an ordinary workday. He's taking care of his father-in-law's sheep, and he wanders over to Mount Horeb where he sees this incredible sight of a bush on fire but not burning up. Moses has the wherewithal to realize that something unusual is happening, and he steps away from his work. God sees that Moses is paying attention and takes advantage of the opportunity to tell Moses who God is: a God who observes, who listens, who delivers, who promises to be with God's people, who is worthy of worship.

Moses spends as much time in the mountains as almost anyone else in Scripture. First it's Mount Horeb with the burning bush, and then it's Mount Sinai, which is God's chosen meeting place to talk with Moses about the Israelites, God's chosen people. Moses makes the trek up Mount Sinai at least eight different times for these one-on-ones with God, the most memorable of which involves Moses carrying two stone tables etched with ten commandments for how the Israelites are to live.

On top of Mount Sinai, God shows up in fire and smoke, gives Moses a glimpse of his back, and writes and rewrites commandments on tablets of stone – stone that is as hard as



the mountain itself and as unchangeable as God's love for God's people. And when Moses comes down the mountain, his face is so bright with the glory of God that the people have to shield their eyes.

Scripture is filled with stories like these, stories of God's presence made known in mysterious ways on mountaintops.

Before Moses, there's the complicated and troubling story of Abraham and Isaac. God promises Abraham that his descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky, which seems like a pretty audacious promise for God to make given Abraham and Sarah are in their 70s at the time. Years – decades actually – go by with some missteps and doubts on Abraham's part until Sarah finally has a child, Isaac. Never before has a child been so prayed for or so loved.

And then God sends Abraham up Mount Moriah with instructions to sacrifice his only son, and Abraham makes what must have been one of the most difficult journeys of his life to the mountaintop with Isaac. At the last second, while Abraham stands poised with a knife in his hand, God intervenes through an angel who commands Abraham to stop what he's doing. Whether it was a test of faithfulness or something else, God reveals something about God's self to Abraham on the mountain that day.

The prophet Elijah does what prophets do – he tells the truth and gets in trouble. He's on the run from Queen Jezebel when he takes refuge at Mount Horeb, the same mountain where Moses saw the burning bush generations before. Elijah hides in a cave and pleads for God's protection. God comes to him on the mountain not in the great wind or the earthquake or a fire, but in the sound of sheer silence.

Fast forward to the first century BCE, and we find Jesus spending a lot of time in the mountains too. He preaches on mountains, retreats to mountains, and prays on mountains.

Jesus' most incredible mountaintop moment is his Transfiguration. He's been traveling and teaching with his disciples, and he asks Peter, James, and John to go up a high mountain with him alone. They make their way to the top, and when they get there, suddenly Jesus is "transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." Moses and Elijah are there too, and a voice from heaven thunders, "This is my Son the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

If Jesus said anything in that moment, Peter, James, and John missed it because they had fallen to the ground in fear. Jesus comes to them and speaks familiar words, "Get up and do not be afraid." On their way down the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples in no uncertain terms not to tell anyone about what happened until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. I imagine that Peter, James, and John were partly okay with that instruction because if they wanted to talk about it, they would've struggled to find adequate words.



Later, after Jesus had risen from the dead, he meets his disciples again on a high mountaintop, this time with an instruction – make new disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and a promise – “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

It’s difficult to underestimate the significance of the mountains for our faith tradition, and we would do well to pay attention to that. God is calling us to the mountains, and we must go.

Ultimately, the call is to go to the place where you can hear God speak. Maybe the actual mountains are that place for you; maybe you’re more of a beach person or a back porch person. That’s okay. Find your metaphorical mountain. Your mountain is the place where you can breathe deeply, where you are aware of your own smallness, where you don’t feel like you have to have ready answers and you can listen for God’s still small voice instead. Go to the place that gives you perspective on the world and your role in it. Be intentional about making time to go to this place because Lord knows it’s easy to lose perspective with screens held close to our faces and the incessant chatter that surrounds us.

For all of the lure of the mountains, the hunger for the mountaintop experience with its renewed vision and clarity of purpose, there’s a caution here too: It’s tempting to romanticize mountaintop experiences, to remember only the beauty of the view from the summit of the mountain and to forget what it took to get there and back.

A friend of mine shared a story recently about going on vacation with her boyfriend. They planned to go on several hikes, and one particular trail – they knew – was going to be challenging. The guidebook said the hike would take about seven hours from start to finish and would cover at least that many miles. Hiking was more her boyfriend’s thing than my friend’s, but she was up for the adventure and was determined to be a good sport.

The hike started out okay but got progressively harder. Evidently, they learned, one of the reasons the hike was estimated to take so long was because much of the ascent involved not just steep trails but scaling the bare face of the rock.

After several grueling hours and a few falls along the way, the couple sat down to catch their breath. He looked at her and said, “You know what? I think we should turn around.” She admitted she felt some relief at his suggestion, but she also knew how much this hike meant to him. She offered to go with him until the tree line and then wait for him while he went up to the top to see the view. He declined her offer, insistent on staying with her, and they made the decision to head back down the mountain together.

“We went up the mountain because I love him,” my friend said. “We came down the mountain because he loves me.”



There's a good chance that your experiences on the mountain – proverbial or otherwise – will ask something of you, that the gift of whatever God has to say to you will also involve a call to live differently. That's the way it seems to go on the mountain; a new perspective invites a new way of living.

We know this is true because of those who have gone before us have come back with holy words and invitations:

“Take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground.”

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me.”

“This is my Son the Beloved...listen to him!”

Over the past five weeks, we've worked our way through a spiritual atlas together in worship. We've covered a lot of ground in that time. Some of that ground has been metaphorical, like our wanderings of exodus and exile. We've been called out of places that been our homes and led to new places God has chosen and prepared for us. We've been in exile where we've been forced out of our homes, out of the spaces and places that we have made our own and involuntarily relocated/displaced into foreign land where everything is unfamiliar and strange.

Other places included in our spiritual atlas are literal – like the Sea of Galilee where we spent that night in a small boat with Jesus and the disciples in the middle of a terrifying storm. We traced the outline of the Sea of Galilee on the atlas page and anchor ourselves in the ancient reminder of God's gifts of faithfulness and community. Later we joined some disciples on the road as they made their way to Emmaus, and we got to eavesdrop on their conversation with the risen Jesus as they recalled recent events and asked big questions that we still wrestle with like, what do we do with our faith now?

We end our journey on the mountain this week, but we know that we are not to stay here. There is more ground to cover, and God sends us down the mountain, into God's world among God's people to share the good news and to remember Jesus' words – “I am with you always even to the end of the age.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

