

Mountain Sunday (2Sept18)
Exodus33:18-34:8, Mark9:2-10, Psalm48

The mountains are calling and I must go...

We could think with mountains just of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the Mount of Olives. Or of Sir Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay, the first to scale Mount Everest. Or Pachamama, the indigenous Peruvian mountain goddess who gets combined with the Virgin Mary. But for the voice of mountains, let's hear from Wisconsin-raised John Muir, who led the call for protecting several of our earliest National Parks and camped with Teddy Roosevelt and founded the Sierra Club. John Muir's words will guide our reflection today, in concert or dialogue with Scripture and our faith.

"The mountains are calling and [we] must go" is a good phrase from him to get us started. It may fit with God beckoning Moses up the mountain, and the retreat of Jesus and the disciples, to get away from pressures of labors for solitude and recreation. Plus, that's the vista where you can see visions. We are in this for a mountain-top experience!

You may know the feeling I had as a 6th grader flying over the Rockies, seeing a snow-covered range for the first time and yearning to go explore more. Or the sense of driving into Colorado or Montana and just waiting for the craggy peaks to appear in the distance. Or the return to flat land when clouds on the horizon make you look twice expecting that soul-filling grandeur.

Walk away quietly in any direction and taste the freedom of the mountaineer. Climb the mountains and get their good tidings, Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. Cares will drop off like autumn leaves. As age comes on, one source of enjoyment after another is closed, but nature's sources never fail.

Expanding on enjoyment, as stress and cares depart, this is often our reaction to mountains, of getting away on vacation. Muir also said, though,

that "in God's wildness lies the hope of the world." This sense not only compels us to get out and explore, to find rejuvenation away from too-controlling and human civilization, but also propels us to preservation, that we need to be caring for these things. Hope for us, and for them.

Again, Muir could declare that few are deaf to the preaching of pine trees, that "Their sermons on the mountains go to our hearts." Those sermons, Muir said, are about not clear-cutting forests, so their preached message includes self-preservation, but also means conserving these wild places because they are good for us, too, like in this quote:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountains are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

Still, this highlights a distinction. Though I'd reject the strict Christianity of Muir's father and am eager for us to hear his voice for our view of the mountains, it isn't totally the same focus as what we say here in church. When he says the trees on slopes have sermons and the mountains convey "good tidings and Nature's peace," we have to ask if that's the same tidings of good news proclaimed in a sermon or is different than the peace of Christ we share here. When Muir said Beauty is synonymous with God, we'd say love is more representative in embodying God.

Again, I share Muir's message to try to bring some the feel of the mountains into this very tame and calm and orderly setting. But I remain unconvinced that you can get the same good news and hope by being outdoors on a Sunday morning. Moses couldn't take the full terrifying view, but with his back turned had to trust proclamation, that our God intends to be known as a God of steadfast love and kindness, whose promise abides to the thousandth generation. It's a perpetual question of where you look—or listen—for God. I believe you need to be here for a clearer word from God spoken in your language and into your

own being that you can't discern from a mountain message. The "fountain of life" isn't simply what naturally exists around you, but at its heart the fountain of life is God in Jesus, and we should listen to his proclamation. We can extrapolate from Jesus to nature, but not so clearly the other way.

Still, from John Muir's natural perspective and these Season of Creation weeks, we celebrate beauty with clarity that everything made is good, a unity of the whole. Here's Muir on our place amid a much grander family than we usually recognize, and which Muir himself says he had overlooked:

Never before noticed so fine a union of rock and cloud in form and color and substance, drawing earth and sky together as one; and we shout, exulting in wild enthusiasm as if all the divine show were our own. More and more, in a place like this, we feel ourselves part of wild Nature, kin to everything.

Those words of a divine show—a Godly spectacle!—were from Muir's first year in the Sierra Nevada mountains, about a sunset on this very day 149 years ago: September 2, 1869. Because we so often separate ourselves and see creation as other, here's another passage on the same theme of family:

Yosemite Park is a place in which one gains the advantages of both solitude and society. Nowhere will you find more company of a soothing peace-be-still kind. Your animal fellow beings, so seldom regarded in civilization, and every rock-brow and mountain, stream, and lake, and every plant soon come to be regarded as brothers [and sisters]; one even learns to like the storms and clouds and tireless winds.

It's interesting he's able to see not just animals but also plants and waters and the rocks themselves as siblings. That can help us hear relationships when Jesus says that if we're silent about these things, instead (as we sang last week) "every stone shall cry" out.

Muir also directly offers words from Jesus here—of "peace, be still," from Jesus calming a storm. Yet that may show a distinction, since Muir favors the tempest and delights in the destruction. He sees death as no enemy. He learns to like the storms. He climbed to the top of a 100-foot pine whipping in a fierce windstorm so he could feel as the tree did and hear the music of the needles in the wind.

That, versus how we may be intrigued by extreme weather events, but only to a degree. At Holden Village, I liked snowshoeing up a snowfield alone, but was intimidated and ready to turn back from the crash of avalanche noise and the footprints of a mountain lion. I admit I enjoyed biking through the downpour after the Worship Team meeting Tuesday, but was also ready to change into dry clothes at home. You may wince at every forecast and dread it and look for escape rather than delight. That may seem a place for faith: that we seek in God shelter from the storm. Or, better, remember that God's abiding and enduring love is so much more than terrors, as terrifying as they may be.

There's another edge of faith, too, that's not about escape, but about engagement. Here's a bit toward that:

Here is the eternal flux of Nature manifested. Ice changing to water, lakes to meadows, and mountains to plains. And while we thus contemplate Nature's methods of landscape creation, and, reading the records she has carved on the rocks, reconstruct, however imperfectly, the landscapes of the past, we also learn that as these we now behold have succeeded those of the pre-glacial age, so they in turn are withering and vanishing to be succeeded by others yet unborn.

This describes John Muir's discovery that glaciers and not volcanoes formed the scenery of Yosemite. He was reading the clues left long before, that they slowly carved away the mountains. I pair that with words from Jesus, that faith can say to a mountain "be thrown into the sea." We tend to picture that as meaning you could say a little prayer and move mountains. I'm

favorably inclined to Muir's geo-logic that sees the stretch of God's work over eons, that mountains are indeed being carried into the sea, and the new mountains arise through the still-little understood process of plate tectonics, that these moving mountains are, after all, a vision of our faith, from 470-million-year-old Appalachians to eruptions in Hawaii, God still creating.

People ought to saunter in the mountains - not hike! Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, 'A la sainte terre,' 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently.

Our task today has been to see these journeys not just as sightseeing or diversionary little outings, but reverently, as holy pilgrimages to encounter the mountains, and to encounter God. Finally, we return to the extended rest of our opening:

The mountains are calling and I must go, and I will work on while I can, incessantly.

With John Muir, then, on this Labor Day weekend, we remember that this isn't escape. It's not vacation. It's not a peace just from pause. It's a peace through engagement, from work, being aware of our place amid connections. Whether with Jesus we go back down from the mountain or with John Muir we work incessantly above, our vocations remain. God calls us to work. As we say at the MCC, this is the practice of living faithfully and lovingly with God, neighbor, and creation. That's God's work and labor, too. So one more good one, to let Mr. Muir have the last word:

Standing here, with facts so fresh and telling and held up so vividly before us, every seeing observer must readily apprehend the earth-sculpturing, landscape-making action. And here,

too, one learns that the world, though made, is yet being made; that this is still the morning of creation; that mountains long conceived are now being born.

Quotes are from *John Muir: Nature Writings* (Cronon, ed.) and

https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/favorite_quotations.aspx