

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Creation Time

September 21, 2014

Scripture

Ezekiel 34:11–16; 25-30

Luke 6:12-16

Thin Places

There is something sacredly special about mountains (just as there is something sacred about all of God's creation). In biblical times, mountains were seen as what we might call "thin places" (borrowing from Celtic tradition), a space where people felt closer to the Holy presence, God's home even. References to mountains and hills are made over 200 times in the Bible. Something about the mountains brings wisdom and insight to those who aspire to see it. (Isaiah 2:3) says "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. Mountains are a place of rest for Jesus and the disciples and many prophets. They are a place of escape from enemies and places for prayers. Moses and Jesus met with God on the mountaintops. Even the transfiguration happened on a mountain.

Today, mountains are still experienced as "thin places," worthy of pilgrimages. We still use the term mountaintop experiences when we have experiences of great faith and joy, or epiphanies of sorts. In many ways, looking to the mountains has always been a way of seeking God's intelligence. In our little church in Smithers there was a stain glass window front and centre with Psalm 121 "I look to the mountain, where does my help come from?"

I wonder if any of we could share a mountain top experience this congregation has had? Has Squamish United Church had any mountain top - transforming experiences?
Does anyone want to share a personal mountaintop experience?

When I was thinking about these questions I realized what good questions they were. In the next weeks I want to encourage you to think about What the mountaintop experiences for this congregation have been. I would love to hear them from you. What if those experiences became the stories we shared and lived out of in this community of faith.

What does a mountaintop experience mean in your context and for your family and/or community? Sometimes it is good to look back and realize the hopes and dreams we have accomplished. Faith for me often includes a look in the rearview mirror. When we are in times of desert, or in times of wondering if God is really there it can help to look back and remember the journey, and how you have been carried through.

To get to the answers one might need to start with the questions What is a valley experience? What valley experiences have you had? Where and how do you seek wisdom when in the valley or when on the mountaintop?

I find it interesting how easily these metaphors and images change and intertwine the literal and the symbolic but that is what scripture often does. When Jesus goes to the mountains, or calms the seas it is done in a context of story and sometimes Jesus and we literally find ourselves discovering wisdom from God on the mountaintop, and at other times one might have a mountaintop experience, laying in bed praying.

Life and creation are full of Thin Places, places where we seek God's wisdom, understanding and care. In the Hebrew reading, Ezekiel provides an example of good leadership by reminding the people of God's leadership style as the good shepherd. God not only cares for us within the heights and folds of the mountains, but ensures that the hills become a blessing to us under God's care.

Throughout the Second Testament we are reminded of the significance of mountains. Jesus teaches, transforms, and feeds others on mountains, and today he prays on the mountainside before calling his disciples.

I love this about Jesus. He is often very practical. Even Jesus seeks out sacred time and space before taking steps in ministry. Even, Jesus gives us many examples of how to spend time in the thin places, seeking out the holy.

How do we be attentive to those 'thin places' and times? How can we seek the full benefit of these places? After a night on the mountaintop, together scripture tells us Jesus chose his twelve disciples and then shortly thereafter Jesus preached the Beatitudes. Had the mountain been a source of quiet reflection, wisdom, and calling? It seems it had.

I'm sure many of you have stories of experiences such as these. I remember when I lived in Switzerland I would spend most of my afternoons hiking through the mountains. I was there in a time of transition in my life and I remember one very specific hike I took one day. I was walking and singing and praying as I did almost every time and on this day the struggle was deep. I was questioning my faith, I was feeling alone, I was feeling guilty for being on the other side of the world because my father had fallen very ill in the midst of a move from our family home and there I was discovering myself in Europe. Also a close friend of mine had just been killed in a motorcycle accident and there I was in a foreign in country having no one to speak to, confide in, or even pray or grieve with. A couple months prior I had chosen to stay 6 months longer in Europe because I felt I had nothing to go back to and on this day I was starting to regret that decision. It was a hot July day! I was sweating and the horseflies were biting, and although I was surrounded by beauty I was missing it. And then in the heat of the summer suddenly out of nowhere a warm rain began to shower me. (thank God for mountain weather). Now normally one might have panicked but this was just what I needed. I sat down and I let the showers of

blessing (as I soon came to discover they were) wash over me. They melded with my tears and cooled my body and spirit all at the same time. If I am honest I don't remember exactly what I decided in that moment, and maybe I didn't come to any great conclusions except that this is one of those mountaintop moments that I look back on to know that God is always with me. That it is within God that I live and move and have my being. It was in that moment that I was reminded of how blessed I truly am. And I imagine that it was in that moment that I decided to come home and even dare to live with my family again recognizing the gift that they were.

Joyce Rupp wrote "Tears come daily when something of Earth's beauty surprises or astounds me. The inherent mystery and unspoken magnificence of the simplest things can move me deeply. It is humbling to experience Earth's treasures. In being so awed I realize what a gift it is that I could be privy to such loveliness.

The tears arise because of the intimacy inherent in the experience. At times Earth's beauty unites me with a presence that is as near as my own soul, yet enormously more expansive. It is as if, in that experience of recognition, I leave my "self" and travel into the beauty that is before me. At times like this, Earth draws my being toward the Great Being and invites me into the cosmic motion.

Long ago I fell in love with Earth and am deeply grateful for all I have come to know and experience of this incredible planet. Earth is a precious part of my life, a wonderful nurturing mother to me, always providing for my needs. Every day she offers me food to eat, air to breathe, and beauty to behold. I recreate in her parks, hike her mountains, and swim in her seas. I find delight in her colours, shapes, and sounds. I receive solace and renewal in her many forms of life. I discover teachings through her creatures and her seasons. No wonder I have a strong and enduring love for the many aspects of this immense and lovely globe of life."¹

Rupp, continues as she shares her experiences of living in the midwest and how she loves the expanse. I admit that even when I was in Switzerland I loved the mountains because they are a part of my life and connection with the holy but I missed the ocean terribly. I think sometimes we discover God in the places of our soul upbringing. I love creation not just for its beauty but for what it teaches me of life and of the creator.

I have been thinking about "mountain top" experiences lately. Maybe it's because of the summer lag that turns into a sudden September craze. It can be hard to focus and catch up on faith, and clear thought. But it is up to us to allow these experiences to happen. People say there is no God. People say "I'm spiritual but don't believe in religion." I admit I understand that because even as a Christian pastor I sometimes wonder - how is faith changing the lives of people in our church and community? "When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments he was a changed man. He had come close and talked to God. He went up the mountain in a faith and life struggle, in a 'thin place.' And he came down

¹ Rupp, *The Cosmic Dance* pg. 59 © 2002

a changed man the experience was so profound he couldn't hide it. The light was literally shining through him, and the people gathered at the base of the mountain could see it.” What about the story we shared a few weeks back when Jesus went to the mountain top to pray having sent his disciples out in the boat. When he returned with his experience with God he was so uplifted he walked on water out to meet his men.

In the last weeks we have been talking a lot about direction and purpose for our congregation and I am thrilled by the energy and excitement and purpose and yet I wonder if we can make sure we remember who is carrying us, where our energy, vision and drive must come from. This isn't our church, this is Christ's church. Our mission is not important. God's mission is what counts. There's nothing wrong with a church putting an ad in the paper or putting out a new sign. But if we really want people to come to church and faith than we have a role to play in living and loving differently. A few weeks ago I asked these questions that I am going to ask again. What if we were to glow with joy because of our faith? What if we were so transformed by the holy in the 'thin places.' our lives were different. What if we were so filled with love and joy that you could see it shining through us. I long for that kind of faith. I long for us to be that 'thin place' where people from the Sea to Sky come to meet with God, dare I say come to have a "mountaintop experience" of faith. If someone looks at you, can they see that you have been changed by God's love? Does the light shine through you? Do you have a peace they want? Do you live a life filled with grace? If so, good news! That is who we are called to be.

Thank God for the mountain tops and for the Thin places.

May we always discover more of your love and grace and truth within creation.

Amen.