

## *Jesus on High*

Isaiah 65:17-25; Psalm 48; Romans 8:28-39; Mark 16:14-18

Mountaintops in scripture are where humans draw nearer to the divine, and blessings are carried back down. The Bible records a number of mountain top moments. Moses receives the ten commandments on top of a mountain. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives the people some of his greatest wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Later, Jesus' face shines like the sun on top of the mountain, as awestruck disciples watch him converse with Moses and Elijah. Mountains are set apart.

As someone who spent the early years of his life in the mountains of British Columbia perhaps, like me, you might feel that it is seldom possible to look toward the mountains on a clear day anywhere and not be awestruck by beauty, strength, and grandeur. It is this vision of unmatched strength and grandeur that the prophet Isaiah invites us to consider as we imagine God's "holy mountain." The mountain is the New Jerusalem where the former things of violence, death, greed, threat, and exile are forgotten and a new possibility is presented. It is in this text commonly known as Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66) where the soundtrack changes from oracles of judgment and pessimism about how people are living to promises of restoration and peace at every level of existence. However, it is not intended to be a new heaven and new earth that comes as a result of the former creation being completely destroyed. Rather, it suggests God's transformation of the old into something new, a world teeming with God's delight and desire. Perhaps the "holy mountain" best describes this movement of the new arising up from the destruction of exile, violence, instability, and lack of relationship with God.

Jesus commission in our reading from Mark, is a text not studied in depth; rather we usually read the commission of Jesus from Matthew 28:18–20 where Jesus commissions the disciples to

proclaim to all nations. The emphasis in Mark is to make known the good news and way of Christ to “the whole creation.” While “creation” is often interpreted as humans, its original meaning is sun, sky, Earth, and all creatures. Christ’s saving work is for *all* creation. We move from the sky and the cosmos of last week to the mountains back on earth this week. This is heady stuff. The great theologian Karl Barth said that there is a sense in which the closer you come to Jesus, the more you know about him, the more distant he becomes, the less you know. Jesus is a great, unfathomable mystery. He keeps challenging us to grow in our understanding of him not because he delights in being arcane and elusive but rather because he is none other than the Son of God and Son of Man. None of us comes into the world or comes before Jesus knowing what those designations mean. Rather, he has to teach us.

“Are there any questions?” asked the professor at the end of his totally incomprehensible, turgid, opaque lecture.

Questions? Where on earth do we begin? I thought to myself.

There were no questions, I assume because nobody understood enough of the professor’s lecture to even ask a question about it!

Have you ever been in that situation?

Besides, it not only takes some modicum of understanding to ask a question of a teacher, but it takes courage as well. Who wants to look dumb in front of the whole class? Have you ever been in a situation where you ventured a question only to have everyone else in the class laugh at your silly, stupid question—to which everybody else, it appears, already knew the obvious answer?

It’s particularly galling when the teacher says, “Now what I’m going to explain to you is so obvious, so easy to understand, that anybody, no matter how thick-headed, can get it. I hesitate even to take valuable class time to explain so obvious and self-evident a solution.”

You think I would ask a question then and reveal to everybody my thick-headedness?

It takes a great deal of security to ask for help in understanding. To ask a question is to admit that we do not get it, that there is some sort of gap between what we are attempting to understand and our actual understanding.

Children don't seem to have that problem. Children seem to arrive among us with questions. Where did I come from? Where do butterflies go in the winter? How long before Christmas?

Sadly, as children grow older, their questions get smaller. Eventually children learn to be careful in asking questions. They don't want to look stupid.

We return once again to that point when Jesus turns to his disciples and asks a fateful question, "Who do you say that I am?" When you think about it, that's the most important question. Perhaps that's the question you ask when you come to church, or the question Jesus asks you. "Who is Jesus?" What does he mean for us? What does Jesus mean for you?

Once again, Jesus attempts to teach his disciples that the "Son of Man" or the "Human One" (that's the designation that Jesus takes from the Old Testament and applies to himself) must be betrayed, and suffer, and die. The Son of Man was a sort of divine-human figure who would initiate a new age, bring in God's reign, and establish God's rule in the world. A world like the vision of Isaiah.

In order to do all of that, the Son of Man would need to be a cosmic, powerful person. Thus, when Jesus begins to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must be betrayed, and suffer, and die, well it's quite a jolt.

If you were here last week you will remember that I said that Mark told us up front, in the first verses of this Gospel, that he is presenting us Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God's Son. And we, like the disciples, thought we knew what that meant. Jesus is coming to fix what's wrong with our world. Jesus is the answer to all of our problems. Jesus is the fulfillment of our hearts' desires.

It's a jolt to our expectations of Jesus to be told that this Messiah, this Human One, must be betrayed, suffer, and die. A suffering Son of Man? It's unthinkable.

"But [the disciples] didn't understand this kind of talk, and they were afraid to ask him" (Mk 9:32 CEB). Why were they afraid to ask? Perhaps they were afraid because last time in Mark's Gospel, when Peter tried to answer Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus rebuked Peter for his response.

Or maybe they are afraid to ask because they fear what Jesus would say to them: I am not a wonder worker, a solution to all of your problems; I am the suffering servant, the one who will be rejected by the world, the one who will be cursed and killed by the powers that be.

So they did not ask him anything because they were afraid. I hope that you won't be afraid to ask Jesus the earnest question, "Who are you? Who are you for the salvation of the world? Who are you for me?"

Many have noted that in Mark's Gospel, the Gospel we have been reading throughout this year, the disciples don't come out very well. They come across as misunderstanding, uncomprehending knuckleheads who never, ever get the point. They have been wrong about Jesus so often that now they are afraid even to ask a question.

And yet, if you are a person full of questions, then this is the Gospel for you! The disciples in Mark are not there as examples for the rest of us, role models for us to emulate. They are there (I believe) to encourage us. It's encouraging to know that, from the beginning, the people who were closest to Jesus had questions. They had difficulty getting the point, figuring out who Jesus was and what he expected of them. Though Jesus asked them before, "Who do you say that I am?" they must have asked him dozens of times, "Who are you?"

It's fine if you are here this morning thinking, I'm committed to the way of Christ. I'm familiar

with scripture, and I believe that Jesus is my personal saviour.

But this morning's scripture also encourages those of you who are here this morning thinking, This is all very confusing. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who is the God that he is? What has being a disciple of Jesus Christ gotten me into? I can't believe that I've been following Jesus most of my life and there are still great gaps in my understanding. But the good news is that rather than only meeting us on the mountaintop Jesus comes down to us speaks to us helps us to truly see God, to wrestle with tough questions.

I think Mark's Gospel wants to tell us not, "Try to be like Jesus's first disciples," but rather, "Try to be better than Jesus's first disciples. Don't fear your questions, and don't fear asking for answers from Jesus."

So go ahead. Don't be afraid to ask your deepest questions. Jesus will not reject you for your questions any more than Jesus rejected his first disciples for their fear to ask questions. Go ahead. Bring your doubts and your questions to church. Lay open your heart to Jesus. Ask. He will not forsake you because of your questions.

You have nothing to fear from the one who loves you and has called you to be his disciple. Go ahead. Don't be afraid to ask. Thanks be to God. Amen.