

I Lift My Eyes To The Mountains

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church September 6th, 2020 for Season Of Creation – Psalm 121)

I once worked with a client from Hungary who with her family had fled Hungary during World War II as her father had worked as a Court Judge and was in danger. Every week she would quote the first verse of Psalm 121, to me – I lift my eyes to the hills from whence my help comes. It would give her great comfort and remind her of the hills she had skied down in Budapest as a child.

In 2000 I entertained some people from Nagaland in North East India. I showed them around the state and took them to Geelong and showed them the You Yangs (the closest thing to mountains near Geelong). They laughed and said that's not a mountain, that is hardly a foothill! Guess when you live in the shadow of the Eastern part of the the Himalyas, the You Yangs hardly compare!

Mountains – awe inspiring, they move us to wonder and praise. From the tops they expand or view and perhaps give us a clearer perspective. Paul Collins calls such places God's cathedral, a sacred place that reminds us of our relationship to the whole cosmos.

I am always amused at what we call them. The photo you are looking at is the Stirling Ranges in the south of Western Australia near Albany, which was burnt out last summer. We name them after people, some are now given their Aboriginal name, the Grampians are now known as Gariwerd. In Victoria we have Mt. Disappointment, Mt. Despair, Mt. Warning – just to name a few. Their names tell something of their story too.

Dorothea MacKellar in her poem spoke of the rugged mountain ranges in our midst. Albert Namitjira painted those rugged ranges. Edmund Hilary had to climb the tallest one - Mt. Everest and now countless people each year attempt this as well.

Can you hear Julie Andrews singing Climb Every Mountain in The Sound of Music? We talk about having Mountaintop Experiences – moments of awe. When facing challenges, we talk about the mountain being too high to climb.

Mountains figure in our faith story as well.

In the Hebrew Bible, the mountain is very significant. Moses received the Ten Commandments there and then later looks out toward the Promised Land.

In the Psalm we have read – Psalm 121¹, the Psalmist looks to the hills and asks where does his/her help come from and then answers the question – well of course it comes from God who created both heaven and earth, who will not sleep and guards our comings and goings. Such a comfort, a picture of the stability and the power of God. Some commentators have suggested this Psalm was written at a time that the mountains had been taken over by the worshippers of Baal – altars and images had been built amongst the trees, obscene practices taking and offerings made. In this situation the Psalmist question is slightly different – when I look at what is happening in the hills I need to ask where is God, from where will I get my help. Two different interpretations, two similar answers – my help comes from the one who made all creation and guards my every move.

¹ This idea is found in "Where Does Your Help Come From" by Dr Phillip W McLarty

In the New Testament, the mountain is also significant. It is the place where Jesus is transfigured, it is the place Jesus goes to pray, it is the place where he delivers the Sermon on the Mount, teaching the people what it means to follow him, Jesus is crucified on a hill outside town. A place of awe, a place of testing, a place of teaching, a place of tragedy.

Martin Luther King Jnr in Memphis, Tennessee in 1963 one of his famous speeches speaks about the mountaintop.² In this speech he talks about the times in which he lived and the change that is at hand. Supporting sanitary workers in their call for a fair go, he calls for freedom and unity. He gives thanks that God has enabled him to be part of this history and then he says “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind ... I just want to do God’s will and He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I’ve looked over and seen the Promised Land. So I’m happy tonight, I’m not worried about anything, I’m not fearing any man(sic). Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”³ He was assassinated the following day.

So, mountains in our story, particularly our faith story are symbolic – inspiring, a reminder of God’s power and care, a reminder of both tragedy and ecstasy, a place of refuge.

Our reading from Matthew is about how we make things right with each other, how we might bring back someone into the community after they have done the wrong thing. I wonder that it might mean if we extend this to the creation – how might we be restored to the community of God when we have done the wrong thing by God’s creation. What is our responsibility? How do we make things right? What is our responsibility toward the earth, toward the mountains, to all that is part of the web of life created by God?

In this Season of Creation, how should we relate to this inspiring part of creation, how we should relate to these places that remind us of the awesome presence of God.

Who might we be in the shadow of these magnificent mountains?

Will we be the ones who respect them?

Will we be the ones that care for them?

Will we be the ones that ensure they are not destroyed?

Will we be the ones who are entrusted to care for them?

Will we be the ones who see them as sacred spaces or places?

Will we stand in God’s great cathedral, and wonder and know our interconnectedness with it all?

Matthew also reminds us about prayer. When two or more gather and pray, God will answer their prayer.

Let us this day lift our eyes to the hills, let us give thanks for them, let us pray for their care and let us commit ourselves to care for them. Amen.

² ‘I’ve Been To The Mountaintops’ by Martin Luther King Jr, April 3, 1968 in Memphis Tennessee

³ ibid