

**Bible Study - Session 4**  
**Mountain Sunday**



**GOOD NEWS FROM A HOLY MOUNTAIN**  
**Earth Reading: Isaiah 65.17-25**

**Beginning**

The theme of this study is good news for creation. We explore the Earth readings for Mountain Sunday to discover the way God loves us and renews creation,

**Describe a moment in your life when you were on a mountain or hill and could see far into the distance. Have you ever had a sense that you were in God's presence, that the mountain was the centre of the world, that you could sense the mystery of life?**

Have you ever had the feeling in a mountain, far from human sin and the pollution of the cities, that you were in a wild world where everything was good, just as it should be, just as it was when God created the scene before you?

## **Background**

Frequently in the Bible, God's prophets had visions of an ideal future, a world where the turmoil of war would cease, a world where the dreams of the past would be realised, a world where God would create peace and harmony throughout creation.

One such period was when the people of God returned from exile and found a land suffering from generations of foreign domination. Over the years, the land had been abused and exploited by alien peoples. And the city of Zion, the mountain where their God once dwelled in splendour, was a shambles.

In that context, the people faced the harsh reality that life in their land would be difficult, the future would be uncertain, the land itself would be infertile and the God they knew less than the mighty one who had liberated them from Egypt.

This background also includes those people left behind in Judah who did not go into exile but seemed to be abandoned by their God. The prophet Ezekiel said that God left the land and went into exile with the exiled Israelites. Now the 'returned' exiles and abandoned 'ones' are facing a bleak future together.

**Discuss: When human beings dream about their world, what kind of things tend to emerge? Is it typical that people want an ideal physical world? Why? Does the land itself have a voice, or are our dreams only the wishful thinking of humans?**

## **Exploring the Text**

### ***Read Isaiah 65.17-25***

The opening lines speak of God 'creating new heavens and a new Earth'. First, we need to realise that the verb for 'create' is the same here as in Genesis One. Creation continues in the present and the future. God did not create the world a long time ago and then retire. Here the prophet announces another of God's continuing creations.

The expression 'new heavens and new Earth' could just as readily be translated 'new skies and new land'. The prophet is talking about the physical world, not some distant dream world or spiritual world.

Nor should we read into this text the popular idea that the present physical world will first be eliminated or annihilated before the new creation happens. The world envisaged by the prophet includes everyday houses, vineyards and vegetable gardens. The new creation envisaged is a transformation of this creation by removing the curses that plagued the people.

This transformed world will also include special blessings for human beings. None of them will die young; they will all live long and enjoy the labour of their hands. They will be blessed as will their descendants.

**Discuss: Is this kind of dream realistic? Is the prophet's ideal world possible? Or is this a way of promising that God will not abandon his people but eventually bring peace and security?**

*Read again Isaiah 65.17-19 and 25*

Two features of the promise deserve special attention—the mountain of God and the image of peace.

As the last verse indicates (65.25) all of this transformation happens on 'my holy mountain'. The holy mountain is the term used to describe the place where God dwells and, in this context, to identify Mount Zion in particular. The holy mountain is the sacred place where God chooses to be present in a special way.

In verses 18-19, the promise of God is that Jerusalem, also known as Mount Zion, is still the place from which God's creating power emanates. Mount Zion is the source of God's renewing presence. As a result, Jerusalem itself will be created into a city of joy. That joy, however, will not be confined to the people. It is God who will rejoice in the holy mountain together with the people of God who worship in that mountain. Ultimately, the mountain too celebrates.

The final image of peace in that mountain is similar to the scene we hear in the Advent reading of Isaiah 11.6-7 where 'the wolf and the lamb' live together. In both passages, wild creatures live at peace with weaker creatures. Lions and oxen are found eating straw. And the snake eats dust, not live animals.

The key point of the imagery is in the last line: 'They shall not hurt or destroy in my holy mountain' (Isa. 65.25). The world of God's holy mountain will be transformed into one of peace between all creatures that once harmed each other. This mountain is 'peace mountain'.

**Discuss: Is this ideal world of the text feasible in terms of the normal ecosystems and life cycles of creation? Can the entire world be transformed into a vegetarian ecosystem? Or is there a message here that transcends the queries of a simplistic ecology? Are the animals here also metaphors for human parties that fight each other?**

*Read Psalm 48.1-11*

Psalm 48 offers a magnificent poetic image of Mount Zion, the location where God dwells in the Jerusalem temple. This is the location where all the world should assemble to praise God whose name extends to the ends of Earth. This is the central location where God's wondrous love is to be found.

The imagery used to portray Mount Zion, however, reveals an appreciation of Zion as more than a humble hill in Palestine. Mount Zion is called 'his holy mountain' which is 'beautiful in elevation.' As the symbol of God's presence, Mount Zion is not a hill with a temple on it. Mount Zion is a high point in creation that all peoples can see and admire.

Moreover, it is 'the joy of all of Earth'. Zion is the centre of creation, the place from which God's presence, power and love emanate. All of Earth, not only the peoples of Earth, rejoice in Zion, in the spiritual presence that vitalises creation.

Another image employed that seems to counter a tendency to identify Mount Zion with that hill in Palestine is the title 'Mount Zion in the far North'. Geographically, of course, Zion was not in the North of Palestine, but in Judah. In that part of the ancient Near East, it was common to believe that the mountain where God or the gods dwelt was a high mountain in the North. Here, the Psalmist claims that the traditional abode of God in the North is in fact Mount Zion.

Mount Zion, then, was a historical place in Jerusalem. But it was also the symbol of the renewing presence and compassionate love of God that reaches from God at the centre of the universe into all corners of creation.

**Discuss: Is there something special about God's presence in mountains for you? Given the meaning of Mount Zion here, is it appropriate for us to find that same sense of God's presence in a local mountain we know?**

### **Conscious of the Crisis**

Many mountains and parts of the wild have been polluted by human exploitation. A classic example is the Ok Tedi mine located high in the rain forest covered Star Mountains of Papua New Guinea. This is one of the largest gold and copper mines in the world. But from these mines have flowed tailings that are full of toxins and sediment that have polluted the Ok Tedi-Fly River system, destroyed fish and smothered vegetation.

From this mountain and many others, poisonous power rather than rich renewal has flowed from the mountain. Mining activities have turned the mountain into a symbol of human greed and destruction. The mining continues; copper and lead are still part of our lives. Abuse of the wild is a daily event.

**Discuss: Give other examples of how mountains are abused. Do you have any examples of how the wild world of mountains is being restored? How could we use our understanding of mountains as sacred places to preserve mountains and the world of the wild?**

### **Exploring the Text**

#### ***Read Romans 8.35-39***

This reading from Paul is one of the most powerful words of assurance in the New Testament. Paul assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul even goes so far as to say that 'in all things we are more than conquerors through him who love us' (8.37). We often hear people say that they would like to conquer a mountain. To conquer Mount Everest is often viewed as the greatest achievement of all. But reaching the top of Everest or any other mountain is not a 'conquest'. A view

from the top reveals how utterly dependent we are on God and how God's creative power and loving care extends across vast expanses of creation.

What makes us genuine 'conquerors' is being connected with the love of God in Christ. This is not a conquest of mountains but a victory over fears and forces that could separate us from Christ. This is not a conquest that destroys but one that secures our connection with the deep love of God. No height nor depth nor anything else in creation can separate us from that love.

That also means that no matter where we are in creation the love of God in Christ is present. No matter what mountain or ravine we reach, the love of God that sustains creation keeps us connected with Christ. The love of Christ is not only a force in our hearts; it is also a powerful presence in creation.

**Discuss: Do you have a sense of the love of God in Christ sustaining you when you are in the wild? Describe ways in which you can highlight that love of God in yourself and in your contact with creation.**

### ***Read Mark 16.14-18***

This is a text that many of us may not have studied in depth. We usually hear the commission of Jesus in the words of Matt. 28.18-20. There Jesus tells his disciples to 'go and make disciples of all nations'.

The commission in Mark has a different emphasis. Here Jesus also tells his disciples to go into all the world, but he asks them to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News about God's love in Christ Jesus, to 'the whole creation.'

Generally interpreters have read 'creation' as 'human beings'. The original word, however, is the physical creation—sun, sky, Earth and all creatures. The Gospel, it seems, is not only for all humans but for all creation.

In other words, the love of God in Christ is not only for the redemption of human beings but of all creation. This creation, abused and broken by human sin, is also the object of God's loving care. This groaning creation will also be liberated, says Paul in Romans 8. Peace is made with creation through the blood of the cross, says Paul in Colossians (1.20).

### **Connecting with Christ**

Christ and creation are bound together in these texts. The Christ with whom we are connected loves us and preserves us in creation. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

But the love of God in Christ extends further than our personal lives. It reaches to the ends of the Earth, the depth of creation, the core of the cosmos. And that love which redeems us will renew creation.

**Discuss: How should our worship reflect the truth that the love of God in Christ not only reaches deep within us but to the depths of creation? How would you make Mountain Sunday a personal celebration that we are more than conquerors through Christ?**

### **Closing with Praise**

Song: This song celebrates the world of the wild and is based on Job 38-39 where God challenges Job to understand that wild world where God, and not Job, is in charge. The melody is found in *Habel Hymns Volume 1*.

## **SONG OF THE WILD**

1. Will you come back with Me to the birth of the Earth,  
Before all its life forms evolved?  
Will you sing with the heavens amazed at the sight:  
A planet with secrets to unfold?

*Refrain:*

Will you praise,  
Be amazed  
With eyes as wide as a child's?  
Will you praise,  
Be amazed  
And sing  
The song of the wild?

2. Will you walk home with Me on the way to the wild  
And watch baby birds break from their shells?  
Do you know how I serve as a mid-wife to all,  
The lion, the lizard and gazelle?
3. Will you gather with Me as the wading birds dance,  
Preparing to migrate North once more?  
Can you fathom the code I have fixed in their souls  
To navigate oceans when they roar?
4. Will you sleep with your God in the desert one night  
And wake with the creatures of the sand?  
Can you fathom the wisdom instilled in their mind  
To live without water, sun or man?
5. Will you climb high with me to a wild mountain peak  
And scan the horizon for snow?  
Can you sense in the lines of the landscape you see  
The love of your God deep below?

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*Prayer*

*Christ, reveal to us your love!*

*Show us your loving care in the wild  
and teach us to discern your presence  
as it renews creation. Amen.*

