

Mountains are places you're sent to, or sent down from, places you're forced to flee to, or make a temporary encampment in. You might meet God there, but that was an awe-inspiring, fear-inducing thing, not a reason to go there by choice. No, you sent your leader up the mountain to do that *for* you.

It's not entirely clear what the Old Testament writers are referring to when God references "my holy mountain" here in Isaiah 65. There are two mountains that are significant in the story of the Hebrew people: Mount Sinai (called Mount Horeb in some books) and Mount Zion. Mount Sinai was the mountain where Moses received the tablets of Law at the community's beginnings, and Mount Zion was the goal or end-point –literally and symbolically.

Interestingly, "Mount" Zion, which is right outside of Jerusalem, is not very high. It apparently used to appear higher, before the valley below it became built up with the city of Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives, also outside Jerusalem (where Jesus prayed, and from whence he ascended), actually reaches a higher elevation than Mount Zion.

But Zion was the "holy mountain" where God was seen to have dwelt, making the transition from being a God who dwelled in the remote and perilous mountains to being portable and joining them in the tabernacle in their post-Exodus wanderings, so significant. They dreamed of the day when they could worship God on the holy mountain again. Perhaps it was more comfortable to have God stay put on the distant mountain, rather than travel with them so closely!

The God we are shown at the end of Isaiah is not very happy, at least not in the verses before and after today's passage. These verses are part of the last two chapters of Isaiah, and God has been voicing great displeasure with the people. It's not clear what the exact things are that were so displeasing, as the references are very culturally embedded in that time. They seem to have to do with specific dietary and ritual/liturgical choices.

What is clear, though, is that the people were using religion to justify what they're doing, and they were actively *not* trying to hear God speak. So, the writer of late Isaiah claims, God wanted to start things anew – a new heaven and new earth.

The God of the Old Testament has had this desire before – and acted upon it before. Think: the flood. Think: the smiting of Sodom and Gomorrah. And here in Isaiah, in chapters 65 and 66 there's definitely language about those who call themselves "holy" but aren't actually listening or looking to God coming to violent ends.

Isaiah 40 is often talked about as a fore-shadowing of the Messiah, but Isaiah 66, literally right after today's passage, imagines God coming in a fiery chariot. Not so "turn the other cheeky."

So, how *does* a new creation come to be? Must it be violent? Is that the only way that tables turn?

As Mennonites, we have said an unequivocal "no" to that. We have said we that we seek not only a Peaceable Kingdom, but one that is achieved *peaceably*. I wonder if the mountains might not have some answers on this one.

How does a mountain change? What can possibly effect change upon a mountain?

I think of the classic kids' game – Rock, Paper, Scissors. It never really made sense to me that rock loses to paper. But if I think of paper as a combination of wood and water, it's true that wood and water will eventually wear down a mountain, if you give them enough time.

I think we need look no further than the Grand Canyon to see what water can do, given a few eons. And trees, specifically tree "throws" (when fallen trees are left to decompose where they fell) contribute to the eventual breakdown of bedrock that creates soil. And every once in awhile – due to convergences of weather events and gravity and erosion and external disturbances, there can be events like avalanches and rockslides, that can suddenly and radically change a mountain.

Still ... these are great examples of other phenomena in Isaiah, such as the valleys being exalted and the mountains laid low. *But are these examples of creating a new thing?* This breakdown of a mountain does eventually create soil, which builds up below ... so, maybe it creates something new?

I think this slow mountain-change is exactly the kind of change that our souls most often exhibit. I think often these days of the passages in Exodus where Pharaoh is said to have a hardened heart. I wonder about the hardness of our hearts, of the disparaging of compassion as a value, of the use of "bleeding heart" as an insult.

Human hearts, so prone to hardening into stone, need the slow work of water, the slow work of the gardens we tend in our lives breaking down the bedrock below.

But I have deep skepticism about this kind of change for *systems* rather than individuals, because I look around at a lot in this world that needs to be made new – un-made, re-made, made from scratch, and I feel grief at the pace of large-scale change, and fear that it might not come at all. And grief that so often death is a part of change – whether it's the death on a cross in our own sacred story, or deaths such as Emmett Till's, the horrific-ness of which greatly activated the Civil Rights movement, or deaths of dearly-held notions and beliefs that belonged to beloved ancestors, but must be relinquished if found to be toxic upon examination.

I think of the great drama unfolding in the news this week, in which the confirmation of a Supreme Court Justice weighs in the balance between whether the violation of a woman's body and will matters or not.

Has there been enough erosion, enough rainfall? enough ground-shaking, and rock-sliding that could mean that a great landslide is coming in terms of our longstanding power structures?

These cultural myths – mountain-sized and mountain-aged as they are -- regarding the worth of a woman's body, the veracity of her voice and experience, were created and maintained by communities of people, men *and* women, over millennia.

Hollywood actress Anne Hathaway, in a recent speech at a Human Rights Campaign event said: "I know that there are very real obstacles that block the path to true equality. And I know that removing them is easier said than done. But I also know that myths are destroyed by the same thing that creates them – a community.

A community that believes. A community that is conscious. A community that claps back.”

Interestingly, the phrase she used to describe the message of the Human Rights Campaign, which she summarized as “Love is love,” was: it’s a “seismic, imperative message.” Seismic – ground-shaking; earth-quaking. She believes love, when wielded by community, is seismic force – a seismic message.

Do I still believe that?

I found another unexpected inspiration as I was pondering the magnitude of the mountains that need to be leveled, and that was in a quote by Muhammed Ali:

“It isn’t the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it’s the pebble in your shoe.”

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Looking at the mountains right now is wearing me out. And that’s an understatement. But maybe the part of the mountain we can do something about, is the pebble in our shoe.

Mark and Malinda Clatterbuck didn’t seek to singlehandedly save the environment, but when they got a knock on their door saying a natural gas pipeline was slated to go through their property, they said, “Wait! Ummm ... no.”

They attended to the pebble in their shoe, and now they’re part of shaking down mountains.

When Doug Reesor felt the discomfort of knowing that the Muslim community in Lancaster had no formal house of worship, and lacked funds, all the while knowing that there was plenty of money in the local Christian community in Lancaster, he attended to the pebble in his shoe when he organized the fundraiser here last night and now he’s a part of moving a mountain.

It’s sort of like the fairy tale about the Princess and the Pea. I used to hate that story. What an uppity, picky little girl. Why couldn’t she just be happy on that pile of mattresses, after all it’s one little pea, all the way down.

Now I think it’s a tale about knowing and experience. About not denying or lying, despite the socialization pressure to ignore inner discomfort, the pressure to shut up because what we know or remember or feel happened too long ago, or is buried under too many mattresses. No, this story celebrates the oh-so-simple, but unbelievably audacious act of saying, “No, darnit, there’s a pea under there.”

A pebble in the shoe, and don’t tell us there’s not.

We *know*. We *all* know these things.

Such wisdom resides in humans of all genders, although I think especially feminine wisdom (or wisdom that comes out of a female mouth) has been called into question at best, dismissed and even vilified at worst.

But what is the voice we listen to? The one that says, “you’re imagining it!”? The one that says, “even if it’s there, it doesn’t matter! Get over it.”? or the one that says, “there’s something down under all this, a true thing, and it’s not going away -- you need to get it out before it makes us all lame!” Which voice??

What is the mini-mountain in your shoe? The pea under the pile of mattresses on your bed?

What new thing might be able to come into being if you addressed that pebble? called out that pea? Allowed yourself to break the stride of all the daily should and obligations and stop to attend to that pebble? Stopped trying to pile on more and more mattresses in an attempt to sleep through it?

Believe your inner Princess when she tells you there's a pea, and learn, too, from your inner Muhammed Ali, when he reminds you: "It isn't the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it's the pebble in your shoe."

¹ Dakota Jones, www.irunfar.com/2018/04/pretty-mountains.html

² Eric G.E. Zuelow, *A History of Modern Tourism*. quoted in Dakota Jones' blog: www.irunfar.com/2018/04/pretty-mountains.html

³ Dakota Jones, www.irunfar.com/2018/04/pretty-mountains.html