

BEYOND MOUNTAINS THERE ARE MOUNTAINS

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 25, 2024

There is an old Haitian proverb that is known by everyone on the island, and regularly comes up in conversations – “*Dèyè mòn gen mon*” – Beyond mountains there are mountains”. In Haiti, and where most of us grew up, we know what mountains look like. I grew up in Boulder Colorado next to the foothills of the Rockies. I often hiked the hills and mountains of Rocky Mountain National Park and Arapahoe National Forrest. I was very familiar with the meaning of this Haitian saying, “Beyond mountains there are mountains”. Often I would hike up a hill, and see only its top and the blue sky beyond. But since I knew the terrain, I knew that once I reached the top, another rise would come into view, and then still another summit beyond that one. Beyond mountains there are mountains.

For the Haitian people, beyond mountains there are mountains means metaphorically, that beyond their current struggle in life another one will loom up before them, and beyond that one, yet another obstacle. “*Dèyè mòn gen mon*”. But for them, this phrase is not some fatalistic statement of despair. It is more like a statement that acknowledges the harsh reality of their life. It is a proverb that gives them strength, and hope grounded in the community around them to face the struggles of life. This metaphorical meaning is true for you and me as well in our struggles of life. Yes, we encounter struggles, and sometimes struggles beyond struggles. But we find strength and hope in our faith, in our families, and in our church community.

Today I want to give another metaphorical meaning to this proverb, beyond mountains there are mountains. For many religious and spiritual people over the centuries, mountains – high places if you will, have been important

places of religious and spiritual significance to many cultures and communities and religions. The book of 1 Kings speaks of the Hebrew people sacrificing at the high places. We read these words:

“Solomon...sacrificed and offered incense at the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, for that was the principal high place”. The Gospels too speak of various high places, the Mount of Beatitudes and the Mount of Transfiguration and just two. Jesus and three of his disciples ascended to the top of the Mount of Transfiguration. There Jesus was transformed and shone like the sun and Moses and Elijah appeared to them. Being familiar with religious high places, Peter asked to have a High Place set up on that mountain; he asked Jesus if he could set up three tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

High places of worship. High and holy and sacred places. It is no wonder that heaven is often thought of as high above us in the sky where the greatest of all high places is found; where God dwells. Metaphorically and spiritually, we could say that the highest of all high places; the highest “mountain peak” for us is that Realm and Reality beyond all time and space and beyond death where the full presence of God dwells. But in this life, we also climb mountains spiritually, and beyond mountains, more mountains. The scriptures tell us that we are all being transformed “from one degree of glory to another”, until we find ourselves at last in the full presence of God.

Sometimes we may think we are ascended our last mountain peak before walking through death into God’s full presence. We may not realize that there are still higher and further spiritual mountains yet to climb in this life. In the 1970’s I was a teenager living a teenager’s life, climbing that life towards adulthood and a job and whatever lay beyond. At the time it meant the Marine Corps. But my vision of the mountains changed radically one day in 1977 when I encountered God. Suddenly, in an instant, a brand-new mountain appeared ahead of me. I now saw my life, and all of life in a

brand-new way. I came to realize that I was saved, and that Jesus was my savior; that he was the one who saved me from my sins and assured me, through his death on the cross, of eternal life in heaven. Well, for many years I walked up this new mountain of Christianity. At the time I thought that I was ascending my final mountain this side of death.

I had no comprehension then, that there might be many more spiritual mountains beyond my current one. I was young in the faith, and had limited understanding and vision of this spiritual journey. I had also only seen the scriptures in one straightforward and simplistic way. I was unable to grasp at the time that the scriptures held many deep and mysterious layers of metaphorical meaning. I knew Jesus as my savior and teacher, but I didn't understand what it meant for him to also be my *moshel meshalim*, my great wisdom teacher. Even now, these many years later, I still consider myself only a beginner in glimpsing the further layers of meaning in our scriptures. I suppose you could say that I am just beginning to catch sight of a new mountain summit ahead of me.

Let me ask, what mountain are you currently ascending religiously and spiritually in your present level of conscious awareness? Have you ever thought that there might be mountains beyond mountains? As you consider the summit of your current mountain, might there still be more mountains and summits that lie beyond; new levels of spiritual and conscious awareness; deeper understanding and intimacy with God yet to be grasped?

“Dèyè mòn gen mon” Beyond mountains there are mountains. Sometimes we do not see any further spiritual mountains beyond our current understanding. Jesus' disciples as well had a hard time with this. They had grown up in the Jewish religious structure with its priests and Levites and Pharisees and scribes and the familiar temple liturgy and synagogue teachings and routine. They knew this one and only mountain they were on

that held to the Law of Moses; the sacrifices and offerings and cleansing and recitations and prayers and purity codes. Jesus was also steeped in this beautiful tradition. But he was different, he was able to see something beyond, he had a much greater spiritual vision. He saw spiritual mountains beyond mountains. But his challenge was in figuring out how to communicate this larger reality to the Jewish people; how he could open their eyes and increase their awareness.

These past weeks we have been working our way through the Gospel readings about bread, and bread, and more bread. We have seen Jesus trying to stretch the vision of his disciples as he repeatedly spoken in the imagery of manna and bread and life eternal. Last week Jesus said: *“I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.”* The words had shocked his followers.

Today it all comes to a climax and hits its crescendo. Many of his disciples were gathered around Jesus. Then, in one final attempt to open the spiritual eyes of his disciples – to get them to see this new mountain – Jesus’ symphonic words rose to one final crescendo as he said: *“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.”* A shockwave of confusion and disgust and revulsion must have landed on the crowd at that moment! Eat my flesh?! Drink my blood?! They said: *“This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?”*

Then Jesus said: *“Does this offend you? Then what will you think if you see the Son of Man ascend to heaven again? The Spirit alone gives eternal life. Human effort accomplishes nothing. And the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”* Sadly, at that moment, many of his disciples turned around and walked away. They deserted him.

So, what was going on that long-ago day? We might understand it as a struggle between two ways of seeing, two modes of awareness, two theological and spiritual and philosophical systems that were competing for the minds and souls of the people.

One way of seeing was represented by the Jewish tradition and their religious teachers the Pharisees. The other way of seeing was through the words of Jesus, this great wisdom teacher. The Pharisees vision was focused on teaching the Law of Moses and doctrine and liturgy, warning the people not to venture outside the Jewish faith, outside their current level of spiritual awareness. But Jesus, who deeply respected and honored his Jewish heritage, also saw something much more. He spoke so that the people might see a bigger and fuller picture, with grander vistas. Beyond mountains there are indeed more mountains.

Many people in his day could only see the first way of seeing, that taught by the priests and Pharisees. A system that encompassed the Jewish temple and synagogue system, a system that was beautiful, steeped in ancient tradition that gave clarity and stability and security and a sense of community to the people. But this way of seeing was also a closed system. It was a system that looked at things as black or white, either you are this, or you are that, either you are a Jew, or you are a gentile. Many of Jesus' disciples were part of that system, Jews who could not bridge the gap to what Jesus was trying to reveal. They were incapable of moving beyond their either/or system. Unwilling to glimpse a possible new mountain peak that lay beyond their current Jewish mountain that they were accustomed to and were currently climbing.

But not all of Jesus' disciples belonged solidly in this first camp of Judaism. You see, there was a minority of Jesus' disciples who were willing to stretch and endure, what amounted to an incredible amount of internal struggle

and disruption and dissonance, to possibly consider a different and fuller way of seeing; a broader way that wasn't only black or white, EITHER this, OR that. A way that could consider BOTH this, AND that, BOTH the parts of the Jewish faith that would fit into this new system, AND Jesus new teaching.

Many of Jesus' disciples turned away from him that day, but not all. Jesus looked searchingly at those who remained, at those of his closest followers. He asked them: *"Are you also going to leave?"* Then Peter spoke up, blessed Peter. Here was a man who, despite all his imperfections and flaws, had a real depth to him that was truly glorious. Peter responded for the rest of the twelve: *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."* These twelve had, just like the others, been shocked and repulsed by Jesus words. But despite their mental reservation and confusion, something they heard from Jesus tugged at their heart, it seemed to ring true somewhere deep in their souls. It seems that Peter and the other eleven had caught just a tiny glimpse of this further and broader wisdom teaching, this further mountain if you will, that Jesus was trying to get them to see.

Jesus is trying to get you and me to see it as well, to see that there are further mountains, deeper truths and wisdom. That there is still more to see and understand; more hidden mountains yet to climb. *"Dèyè mòn gen mon"* –*"Beyond mountains there are mountains"*. Lord, open our eyes to see.