

Mountains of the Bible: Panorama of the Promised Land

*Bless the Lord, mountains and hills, sing praise to God and highly
exalt God forever.*

—Daniel 3: 75

Now away we go towards the top. Many still, small voices are calling 'Come Higher':
-John Muir

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When you reach the five-car-limit parking lot on the winding, gravel Route Sixty-Six in Waltham, Vermont, you've found the right spot. Exiting your vehicle, you might have to walk up and down the road a bit to find the trailhead. It's unmarked, and hidden behind a bramble of highbush cranberry and goldenrod. It looks like little more than a deer path, of which there are a few in the area that might lead you astray at first. About thirty yards into the trail though, the path widens and opens under a canopy of hardwoods—maple, beech, poplar. The entrance proper is marked by a green and gold sign tacked to one of the few white pines at the base. Alerting the hiker that they are entering private property, the owners of the Buck Mountain trailhead welcome you to enter this mountain with care and reverence. "We consider this forest a sanctuary," they write, "and expect all who enter to treat it with respect."

With that word "sanctuary" slowing my steps and measuring my thoughts, I continue up a path that has become a favorite hike of mine over the last years. "Hike" is perhaps too strong a word for it, as Buck Mountain is a modest peak at 883 ft. I think of Buck Mountain as a younger sibling to Snake Mountain to the south and Mount Philo to the north as the Taconic range splinters through the Champlain Valley. "Saunter," is perhaps a more apt word for the way I like to move up and down Buck Mountain, recalling John Muir (himself recalling Thoreau's essay "Walking"), as Muir compares sauntering and hiking, and playfully derives a folk etymology for "saunter":

"Hiking - I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains - not hike! Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, 'A la sainte terre,' 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them."

“A la sainte terre,” “To the Holy Land,”—a wonderful mantra, I think, for any journey out the door and into the world, and perhaps especially for exploring mountains. From the Biblical perspective, at least—from Moses’s view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo, to the mythical longing for Mount Zion, to the final revelation of a new heaven and a new earth being established as a city on a high mountain (Revelation 21)—there’s a clear connection between paradise and mountaintops, and a clear conviction that the world to come, the world perfected and made whole at the end of time, will be a mountaintop world. “God’s holy mountain,” as the psalmist dreams of it, “beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth.” (Psalm 48: 1)



Moses was 120 years old when he climbed his last mountain. At the end of his 40-year wilderness expedition, nearing the land that God had promised to bring Moses’s people, God leads Moses up to the top of Mount Nebo:

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants;’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.” Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

–Deuteronomy 34: 1-8

This is one of the most poignant, thin-veil-type moments in scripture. After his years of wandering and leading his people, Moses is granted a view of the Promised Land, but not entrance into that land himself. He gets close enough to see it, to lay his eyes on it, but not to step foot on it, not to touch the dirt, not to smell the grass, not to taste the water. Moses on Mount Nebo speaks to the limits of our reach in this life, and to the limits of our longing. Moses on Mount Nebo speaks to how we’re all here on this earth for a finite time, which means that our deepest dreams and hopes, which are imbued with the infinite, the perfect, the complete, will remain ultimately incomplete and unfulfilled. Moses on Mount Nebo reveals that what we most long for lies just on the other side of what we’re able to accomplish in this life.

“The secret to life,” as sculptor Henry Moore put it, “is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!” The journey to the Promised Land, which was the journey to freedom, which was the journey to God, was that task for Moses. 2nd-century Rabbi Tarfon put it similarly—“It is not up to you to finish the work of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to avoid it.” *Tikkum olam* is the Jewish ethic that develops from this perspective—from Moses on Mount Nebo, getting close enough to see paradise, but not reaching it. “Repair of the world,” it translates.



About half way up the saunter to Buck Mountain, there is a small side trail on the east that leads you to a beaver pond. With that word “sanctuary” still guiding my steps, I consider a pause at this pond to be an essential part of the Buck Mountain climb. The pond lies on the side of the mountain as a sort of Inner Sanctum, with the *thung* of bullfrogs as the choir, the raft of wood ducks and mallards as the congregation, and the one-legged, solitary sandpiper as the odd officiant. Turtles lounge on the fallen logs and cedar waxwings circle around the dead tree trunks standing in the still water. Dragonflies chase each other while a tiger swallowtail butterfly flits its way around the pond’s edge. It’s a wonderful service, and the sermon is among the best I’ve heard. In the distance, the deep throaty *kraa* of a raven marks the benediction, and speaks of the heights and the view from the mountaintop that is yet to come.

Once back on the trail, the mountain starts to make itself known as you climb over the first ledges of exposed bedrock. Granite and quartzite mingle from the ancient bedrock of time. The trail gently rises over the course of a few fern and moss laden sweeping switchbacks. Playful squirrels and equally playful chickadees make cheerful the way. After one last sweep as the trail ushers you along the side of the exposed mountain rock, you turn the last corner and you come to the summit, bright and refreshing like a lake of sky seen through the leafy trees. Emerging to the edge of the tree-line feels like a curtain is being pulled back: a panoramic, postcard view opens before you—hawks, vultures and ravens glide overhead, sending their shadows swooping on the exposed cliff edge; the head of Snake Mountain stares back at you, and connects to Buck Mountain through a low-ridged continuous forest, a wildlife corridor separating on either side two patchwork quilts of field and forest. To the east, a newly constructed solar array shimmers like a glassy pond, seeming in some ways more natural and liquid than the metal roof on the barn to the west that glares in the sun like a signal flare.

I stand for a moment, thinking about Moses reaching the top of Mount Nebo. He had just offered his final words—known as “the Blessing of Moses”—to his people. “May God bless you,” he said as he left them for this final mountain climb, “with the choicest gifts of the ancient mountains; and the fruitfulness of the everlasting hills.” (Deuteronomy 33: 15) Having blessed them one last time, he then left the group and hiked up Mount Nebo alone with God.

I imagine the view opening up before him as he reached the summit. Mount Nebo rises in western Jordan to a height of 2,740 feet, although its perch seems higher as it looks down on the

Dead Sea, 1,385 feet below sea level. Across the Dead Sea Moses would have looked out at a sweeping landscape, taking in the Jordan River valley, with towns like Jericho and Bethlehem, and, on a clear day, Jerusalem in the distance. God offered Moses a view of his heart's deepest longing—a panorama of the Promised Land. I imagine Moses lingering with that view for a while, not wanting to leave it. And perhaps he never did. Moses breathed his last breaths somewhere on or near Mount Nebo. In the fourth century, a monastery was built there to commemorate his view of the Promised Land, and to mark his grave.



Instead of the Dead Sea, I look out on Lake Champlain. In place of Bethlehem and Jericho, I look out on Addison, Bridport, and Weybridge, and on a clear day, Middlebury and Middlebury College shine at the base of the Green Mountains. Buck Mountain is one that I always bring my binoculars to. Without them, the Weybridge Congregational Church steeple disappears into the trees. With them, the slender white spire rises to its humble perch on the side of a wooded hill. About the same size as the trees, the white steeple looks like a lone birch tree surrounded by a circle of maples. It's beautiful, one of the most beautiful churches I've ever seen, although I might be biased as I've been the pastor of this country church for the last seven years. Focusing my binoculars on the steeple from Buck Mountain today near the end of August, I verge on tears of joy and gratitude as I enter my last week of being the pastor of this church that will always have a special place for me as my first call. Unlike Moses, who was granted a panoramic view of the Promised Land that he would see but not enter, I gaze from Buck Mountain today on a panoramic view of the actual landscape that I've lived and labored in. I look out on the roads I've crisscrossed; the homes I've visited; the rivers I've fished and paddled; the hills I've sauntered and hiked; the cemetery that I've buried people in; the sanctuary that I've preached in. This church community, with its Open and Affirming, Creation Justice ethos, and this landscape, with its stunning beauty, have been the inspiration and in many ways the coauthors of this writing project. The trees, the clouds, the rivers, and now, finally, the mountains—it's all here, all part of the whole, the glory of the world that I've been eager—and have prayed to be worthy—of reporting on.

Among the many allures of mountains, the panoramic view from the top holds a special appeal. Panorama comes from the Greek roots *pan* (all, total) and *horama* (sight, spectacle, that which is seen). It means something like 'the view of the all', 'the total-view', 'the whole-view', 'all-embracing', 'comprehensive', 'entire', 'complete'. From the tops of mountains we look down on a world that is both the world that we know and at the same time like a map of the world that we know. Like looking down at puzzle pieces, we can see how the world fits together. Like looking at a map, we can see where things are in relation to one another—we can see how all things are related, and all things are connected. And save airplanes and skyscrapers, mountains offer us the best vantage points from which to see the most of the world that we can. Although never the total globe, mountains give us the closest-to-total view of the earth that we land-based creatures can get. Mountains offer us a glimpse of the Whole, the All—a panoramic view of the earth which speaks to the soul of a panoramic vision of the Promised Land, the puzzle of the world put together as it should be, where all things belong, where the sun shines upon it all, and where the

beauty of God shines through. “Out of Zion,” the psalmist writes, again dreaming of that holy mountain of the world-to-come, “the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” (Psalm 50: 2)



On April 3, 1968 The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took Moses’ hike with God up Mount Nebo, except in this case the Holy Land Mountain was a pulpit in the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. The hike was almost called off on account of weather—a thunderstorm covered the city, with threats of tornados swirling in the area. It wasn’t just the storm that was threatening—the city was on edge as racial tension and unrest were reaching a peak. Prefiguring today’s Black Lives Matter call, the African-American male employees of the Memphis Department of Public Works had gone on strike using the slogan “I AM A MAN.” King, who had recently outlined his broadest vision for justice yet—speaking out against the Vietnam War and what he called “the three major evils” of racism, militarism, and economic inequality—had arrived late to Memphis that day, his flight delayed because of threats made on his life. As the storm raged, King contemplated staying in that night, exhausted from the travel and feeling under the weather with a sore throat. He sent his friend Ralph Abernathy to speak to the crowd in his stead. Surprised to find a significant turnout, even with the storm (estimates are of a 3,000-person audience), and feeling the disappointment of the crowd that King wasn’t there, Abernathy called King on his hotel phone and asked him to reconsider speaking to the crowd that night. And so King arrived, 90 minutes late, and without notes began what would turn out to be a 45 minute sermon, known today as his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, or for short, “The Mountaintop.”

From the start, he spoke from the pulpit as if looking out at the world from a mountain. He begins with an account that he describes as a “general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now.” He lingers his attention at important moments in the history of humanity, beginning with Moses escaping bondage in Egypt (foreshadowing the end of the sermon), continuing with Plato and Aristotle debating truth and meaning in Athens, with stops along the way with the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the U.S. Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. King follows the panoramic perspective all the way up to the present moment, saying that if he had to choose when and where to be alive, he would choose right here, right now. “Something’s happening in Memphis,” he said, “something’s happening in our world.” “Something’s happening in Minneapolis,” we might say this summer after the murder of George Floyd has furthered the racial awakening and call for justice in our country. *Something’s happening in Minneapolis; something’s happening in our world.*

King’s speech continued in this panoramic way, covering topics from war and peace, to economic justice, criminal justice, civil disobedience, local, national, and international politics, human rights, and freedom of speech. References to Moses and the Exodus are sprinkled through like salt. He ends the speech telling the story of one of his brushes with mortality, when in 1958 he was stabbed in the chest with a knife while autographing books in a New York City bookstore. He says that the blade came so close to his aorta that the doctors told him that if he had sneezed, he would have died. He reads a letter that he received after his recovery, written to him by a

ninth-grade white girl in White Plains, New York. "I'm simply writing to you to say," she wrote, "that I'm so glad you didn't sneeze."

King pauses after this story. It's a similar pause to the one in his "I Have a Dream" speech before he first reveals that beautiful dream to the world. King looks back and forth across the audience. He blinks multiple times, perhaps with the beginning of tears in his eyes. And then he tells about what he sees from the mountaintop, like Moses on Nebo, before he collapses, exhausted back into his chair:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. 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 I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

First-hand witnesses said that King had tears in his eyes when he took his seat. Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, his friend sitting behind him during his speech, helped him collapse into his chair. "He preached himself through the fear of death," Kyles said about this moment. "He just got it out of him. He just...dealt with it." Martin Luther King Jr. was killed the next day on his hotel balcony.

Like Moses, King went to the mountaintop with God and he saw a panoramic view of the Promised Land. He looked out over all of human history, and he used the mountaintop perspective to witness to the greatness of human capacity, to show ourselves what we're capable of at our best. "The arc of the moral universe," as he said in another panoramic speech, "is long, but it bends towards justice." His journey to the mountaintop was one of perseverance and courage, and taking in the view from the top, he spoke to the world his message of prophetic witness and radical, panoramic hope.

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*"On the tops of mountains, as everywhere to hopeful souls, it is
always morning."*

-Henry David Thoreau, first draft of *Walden*

I linger out the afternoon on the top of Buck Mountain, sitting on the summit, trying to take in the panoramic whole. Cloud shadows drift over the back of Snake Mountain. Farm trucks labor

under the weight of their carry, leaving contrails of dust like the contrail of the airplane that moves overhead towards Montreal. A scarlet tanager zips across the summit, a sudden streak of red against the blue and white sky.

For a moment, everything feels in its proper perspective. Everything belongs and everything belongs to everything else. The way everything seems to fit together when viewed from above, it makes sense that when the Biblical imagination envisions the world made perfect, it pictures a mountaintop scene. Known in scripture as “Mount Zion,” “God’s holy mountain,” “the new Jerusalem,” “the city that is to come,” “the mountain of the Lord’s temple,” the Bible sees in mountains a glimpse of the more beautiful world that is to come, the future justice, the future glory. And then at the very end of the Bible, the vision of “the new heaven and the new earth” that signals a second Eden is seen when an angel of God leads John “to a mountain great and high,” (Revelation 21: 10) and gives the Bible its benediction—the world that is to come, coming down on a mountain out of the heaven of God, and God shall be with the people, and God will wipe away their tears and weeping and mourning and death shall be no more. If you want to see paradise, the Bible seems to say, go climb a mountain and look out, and shining through the landscape of this world, you just might glimpse it—everything fitting together—perfection perfected for a moment—an intimation of the Promised Land—a panoramic perspective on this earth as the sanctuary, as the holy land that it is.