

**El Camino: The Way**  
**August 12, 2018**  
**Jerrell Ross Richer**

**Proverbs 3:5-6**

Trust in the Lord with all your heart;  
do not depend on your own understanding.

Seek his will in all you do,  
and he will show you which path to take. (New Living Translation)

**Matthew 17:1-8**

Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

Peter exclaimed, "Lord, it's wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I'll make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

But even as he spoke, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him." The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.

Then Jesus came over and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." And when they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone, and they saw only Jesus.

(New Living Translation)

Good morning. I bring greetings from the leaders of the Cofán churches living on the banks of the Aguarico River: Hiter and Irene Yiyoguaje of Zábalo, Pastor Ramón Umenda of Sinangoe, and Wilson Criollo of Dureno.

This morning I'd like to share:

- A few thoughts on today's scripture
- a story from our family's time in Ecuador
- a dream that was recounted to me by a church leader there, and
- an invitation.

If you've ever wondered where the phrase "mountain top experience" comes from, this might be it! Jesus and a small group of disciples make it to the top of what Matthew calls "a high

mountain”. Hiking at altitude is physically demanding, and I imagine Peter, James and John need to sit down once they reach the summit to recover their breath and give their legs a rest.

Then, all of a sudden, Jesus takes on an otherworldly appearance:

- His face shines like the sun!
- His clothes are as white as light!

A moment later, two others join them – where did these two come from? Woo, it’s Moses, and Elijah!

How interesting that Jesus was joined on the summit not by Israel’s great kings, David and Solomon, but by the wilderness guide who delivered his people from slavery, and the prophet who worked miracles.

And what happens next? Peter, bless his heart, says:

“Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Oh, Peter. What a busy body! Do you really think these three shining and supernatural figures need shelters? Can’t you just chill out and enjoy the moment?

There is another account of the transfiguration in the Gospel of Mark. Tradition has it that Mark was a companion and translator for Peter later in life. And Mark certainly has the inside story when he writes, “Peter said this because he didn’t really know what else to say, for they were all terrified.”

In any case, the next thing the disciples hear is a voice in the clouds above:

“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.”

In other words, “No, Peter. This is not the time to build things, to try to turn the top of the mountain into a place that looks like the villages below, to make yourself busy with projects and to-do lists.”

You see, when you finally make it to the top of the mountain (either literally or metaphorically), it’s time to experience a new perspective, to listen, to open your heart and mind to new understandings and new possibilities.

And, pretty soon you need to get back down the mountain again, before storms roll in, lightning strikes and hail starts to fall. Your friends, your family, your community, your work, they are all waiting for you down below.

Now to be fair to Peter, it would be good to provide some context. We need to know what happened just before the climb.

But first, a little geography. Where did this whole thing happen? Check out this map.

## 11. The Holy Land in New Testament Times

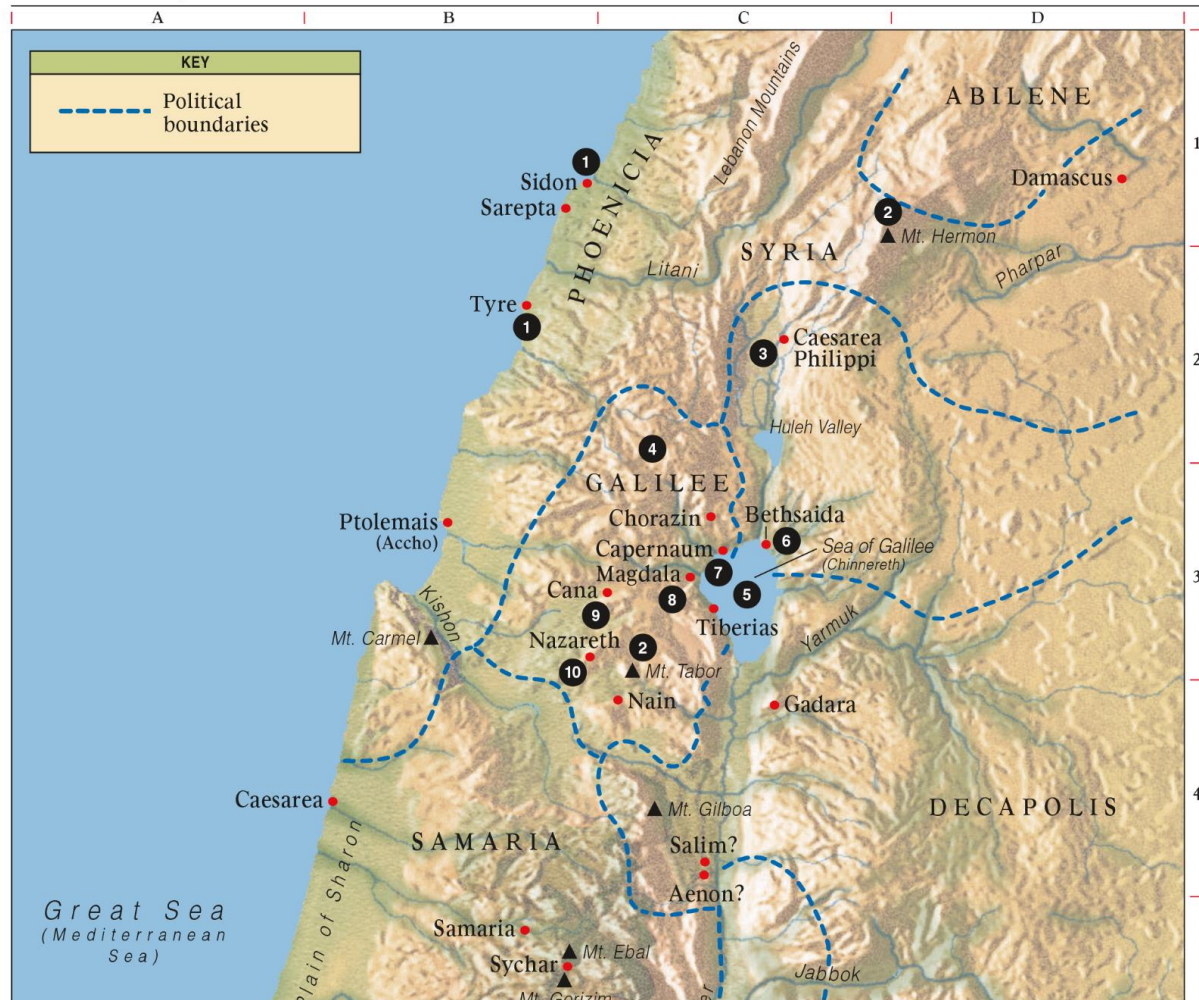


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Much of Jesus' ministry happened right here, around the Sea of Galilee. If you think Goshen, Indiana has a low elevation -- 801 feet above sea level -- you may find it interesting to know that the Sea of Galilee is more than 1,400 feet lower (1,494). How is that possible? Galilee actually lies 693 feet below sea level -- good thing there are mountains between here and the coast. So, Peter, James and John, who were originally fisherman at this lake, were definitely not acclimated to high elevations.

Let's zoom in a little to focus on the upper part of this map.

## 11. The Holy Land in New Testament Times



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Tradition has it that the transfiguration happened here, atop Mt. Tabor, which is close to 2,000 feet above sea level (1,886). But many people, myself included, think it probably happened here, atop Mt. Hermon, elevation 9,232 feet, enough to get your blood pumping. That's a "high mountain".

The passage we read today begins with the words, "Six days later..." , which begs the question, "Six days later from what?"

It turns out that just before the climb begins, Jesus and his disciples travel here, to Caesarea Philippi, one of many centers of political power in the Roman Empire.

It is here that Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

And it is here that Peter answers: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

So, Peter already knew that Jesus was God's son. But evidently, he needed a mountain top experience to hear it from God's own voice.



“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.”

It is not surprising, I suppose, that the God of Love would affirm not just Jesus’ identity, but God’s feelings for him. And given Peter’s human tendencies, God added the part about listening to him!

That’s good advice for all of us. Especially those of us who are more inclined to talk rather than listen.

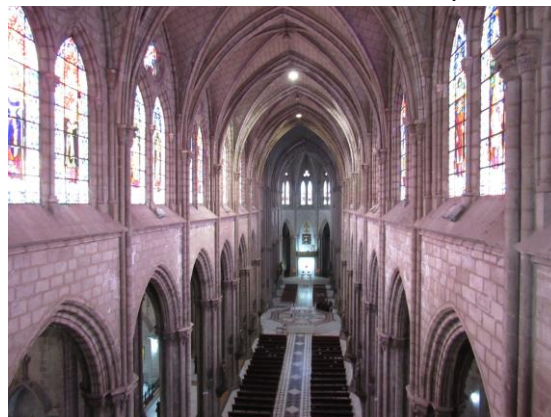
## **The Youth Retreat**

In February, during a weeklong break from school, we had a chance to organize a six-day youth retreat with a group of native Cofán from the village of Zábalo: 9 youth, 4 leaders, and our family.

The year before we had taken a similar group of youth on a shorter retreat that involved a rafting trip on the Jondachi River. On the way back home, the clouds parted and we had a great view of a volcano. One of the young men, Charles Yiyoguaje, said he wanted to climb a mountain. So with support from members of this congregation we decided to honor Charles’ request and provide him and his friends with a mountain top experience of their own.



Like the disciple’s trip to Mt. Hermon, we first went to the nation’s capital, Quito, to see the



center of power, both political, and \*\*\* religious. Then we went to Cotopaxi National Park to experience a whole different kind of power,

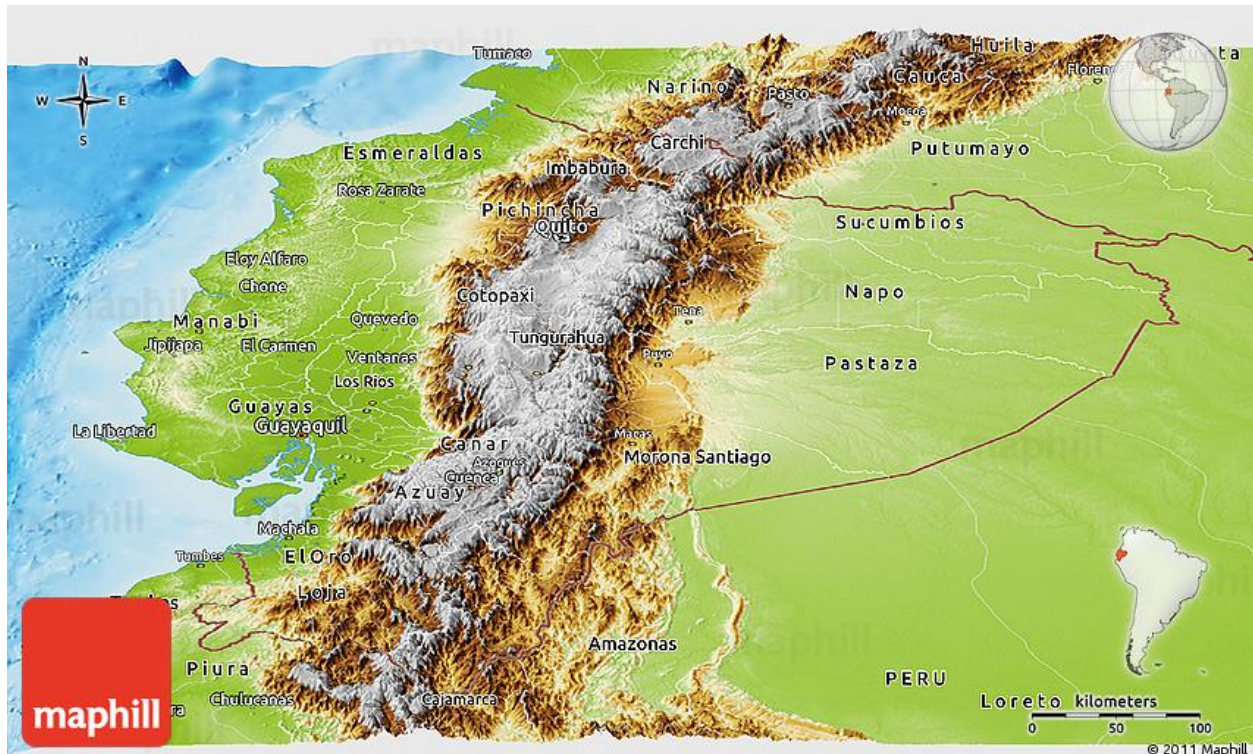


the power of a Creator

God who made the earth and declared it “good, very good.”

As beautiful as it was, our time in the mountains turned out to be hard, much harder than we had imagined. Our entire seven months in Ecuador, in fact, brought challenges that we had not anticipated.

For one thing, the elevation is incredibly high.



This is Ecuador. The Andes Mountains divide the coastal region to the west from the Amazon



rainforest to the east. This is the tallest mountain range in the Western Hemisphere. (Zábalo is here, only a few hundred feet above sea level.)

The capitol city of Quito is as high as Mt. Hermon, and Cotopaxi volcano is twice that high,



topping out at over 19,000 feet above sea level (19,347 feet).

For another, the temperatures were cold.



Check out the ice on our tents the next morning.

So, for our climb,



we chose this peak: Rumiñawi, the Kichwa word for Stone Face or, better, Rock Face. It's only 15,489 feet above sea level, and since we're on the equator there is no snow on the summit.

Even so, most of the youth we brought with us didn't make it to the top.



The trail

was steep, the air was thin, we were definitely out of our comfort zones.



This experience was so different from the youth retreat we had organized the year before, a rafting trip on the Jondachi River, where all you have to do is paddle, hold on tight, and get back in the boat if you happen to fall out.



The only way to hike a mountain is to put one foot in front of the other, over and over again, and keep going. And it helps to have a guide who has been there before,



or at least friends to walk alongside and make sure you are on the right path.



Check out these photos of our ascent...





















As I think about it, maybe it doesn't matter that most of the youth didn't summit that day. Most of the disciples didn't either. And maybe product-oriented people like me can learn something from our process-oriented brothers and sisters who are not obsessed with goals like "making it to the top."

Everyone spent the same amount of time on the mountain that day.



And while I was breathing really hard, working to pass safely across the rocks and sand that surrounded the summit, it is likely that others were experiencing God's creation and communicating with our maker in ways I wouldn't even understand. We don't all travel the same path in the same manner.

### **The Dream**

Several months after the youth retreat, Jane and I were visiting Hiter and Irene in their home. After some conversation, Hiter shared a dream he had the night before. Here is what he recounted to us:

Hiter discovers that just outside his home lies a high mountain. It's not just a hill seen off in the distance. It looks a lot like



Cotopaxi,

the place we had visited in February. The mountain looms directly over him, almost straight up. It is steep, tall and covered in snow.



Hiter goes back inside his home to finish something he's been working on.

But his children, who are playing outside the house, call to him: “*Yaya*”. When he emerges, they point up into the sky and show him what appears to be a huge bird,



circling slowly as it descends, coming closer and closer to the ground.

Hiter thinks it's a *papagayo*, a blue and yellow macaw. But the coloration is different; it's darker. He takes a closer look and realizes it's not actually a bird, but a set of wings coming down from the sky, right next to the mountain.



Hiter is struck by how high this mountain is, how it looms above him. Near the top, he sees winds that appear white



as they blow snow off the peak. Clouds come in and cover the mountain, then the mountain



appears again.

Hiter pulls out his cell phone to take a photo, but the phone is not charged, so he can't.



He

realizes he must climb the mountain but wonders how he can possibly do this. He's not ready. A while later, reflecting on the dream, Hiter realizes he is facing a challenge for which he does not feel prepared:



raising

up the once dormant church in the village of Zábalo. Hiter never had the opportunity to attend high school. He feels small, *shipiri*, and the task of raising up the church looms so large.



One needs

preparation and specialized tools to climb mountains like Cotopaxi – ice axes, thermal parkas and insulated boots with crampons come to mind.





Then Jane asks a question: What does Hiter need from us? He says that he needs more education, training, and tools to help him take on the work of leading, preaching and shepherding others. We can help with that.

And remember the falling bird, or wings? Could that represent a gift from heaven to help Hiter on his journey?



Hiter could also use some companionship to help ward off the feeling that he is not alone. We trust that the weeks



we spend in Zábalo – getting to know his family,



participating in worship, reading the Bible with Hiter, Irene, their son Charles and their daughter Kendra,



and spending untold hours with their younger children – are a blessing to the family.

I also sense that Hiter and the rest of the village deeply value the visits they receive from their

### Learning and Fellowship Tour – March 2018



brothers and sisters up north,



such as the members of the Learning and Fellowship Tour that visited Zábalo in March. The group was made up of members from Waterford and College Mennonite Churches, as well as several Journey International volunteers.











## Goshen College May Term 2018: Ecological Economics in Ecuador



And then there were the 29 Goshen College students who spent a week in Zábalo as part of a May Term course this year, including four young men and women who grew up here at



Waterford.









## Mennonite Mission Network -- Youth Venture 2018



And near the end of June we hosted a Youth Venture team with 9 members that visited Zábalo and participated in 3 worship services in 3 consecutive days.





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## El Camino

Our time living among the Cofán people in a remote village in the Amazon jungle has given us opportunities to learn as well as to teach. And, we have learned a lot.

Accompanying the leaders of a young, indigenous church makes me wonder what it must have been like to be part of the early church, the church described in the book of Acts.

Do you know what the early church was first called? Long before following Jesus took on the name Christianity, it was called *hod-os'* in Ancient Greek,



ὁδός

*hod-os'*

way

road, journey, path

(Source: Strong's Concordance)



the language of the New Testament. Here is the phonetic spelling.

Growing up in an English-speaking country, I always understood this word to mean, “the way” -- a way of believing, a way of understanding who I am in relation to God and others.

But my time in South America has helped broaden my understanding of what it means to follow Christ. In Spanish the Greek word *hod-os'* is translated “El Camino” -- the road, the journey, the path, or the trail.

Life in Christ is a journey, a step-by-step process that we live out each day.

During a visit to the Ninawachi Mission Institute, Jim Gascho, a member of this congregation and one of the Learning and Fellowship Tour participants, referred to us as “God Followers”.

Following God involves both an understanding of who God is and a forward movement as we take this understanding to new heights, new places, new people. Both faith and works. Both belief and praxis.

When Jesus lived here on earth, he was constantly moving from place to place. As God’s followers,



we have opportunities each day to move forward as he and the disciples did, climbing new mountains, discovering new truths, embracing new challenges, making new friendships.

Following the path is not always easy. How much farther uphill until the trail flattens out? How can I keep from getting my boots wet? Where will I find a little shade?

We encounter steep climbs, cold temperatures, lack of visibility and places where various trails intersect ... and we wonder which one to take?

### **Closing**

We are gathered here today as seekers. And I wonder: As we seek to follow Christ right here – in Goshen, Indiana -- and right now – in August 2018 – how will we know we are on the right path? And once we think we’ve found it, how will we have what it takes to sustain us on our journey?

The answer is as old as the Bible in your hands. As the proverb says, “Seek God’s will in all you do, and God will show you which path to take”.

And, honestly, I’d rather not do this alone. I don’t think I can do it alone.

Will you join me?