Mountains that speak to us

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The work of Elaine Enns and Ched Myers has profoundly shaped my journey as a Korean American peacebuilder and the ministry of ReconciliAsian, a peace center based in Los Angeles.[1] For almost two decades, their friendship, their writings, and the community of practitioners I have met through them have offered encouragement and challenge in what it means to follow Jesus. Their book *Healing Haunted Histories* has been especially pivotal, offering a framework for engaging the intersections of faith, history, and place. The three threads they name—landlines, bloodlines, and songlines—parallel and deepen the work we do among immigrant churches. Of these, the most formative has been the invitation to remember our landlines.

Enns and Myers define landlines as "places of personal, communal, and ancestral inhabitation, past and present. They are geographies and landscapes of memory, struggle and contestation, affection, sustenance, and identity—and hold deep stories of peoples' placement and displacement."[2] My first awareness of the importance of landlines came when I was eight years old. It is unimaginable in this current political climate with its anti-immigrant sentiments, but in 1980, my aunt, who was already living in the United States, sponsored over twenty Park family members to come to the United States. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act revoked the national quota system and made family reunification possible for families like ours, enabling them to leave a Korea under military coup and seek a better life in the United States. On my last day of second grade, I went to say goodbye to my teacher. I no longer remember her name, but her words remain etched in me: "Remember this land. Don't forget the land you came from." That night, I took a spoon into the backyard, scooped a handful of dirt into a plastic bag, and tucked it into the one suitcase I was allowed to carry. I did not understand the gravity of being uprooted from my homeland, but there was a part of me that knew that the ground I was on was shifting and that I needed to take a piece of the land with me.

Coming from a homeland where approximately 70 percent of the country is mountainous, settling in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains in California was strangely familiar and comforting. When I lost my bearings in

1 ReconciliAsian, https://www.reconciliasian.org/.

2 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021), xxv.

the new country, I faced the mountains to find north. They became not only a compass with which to recenter my body, but they became my emotional and spiritual anchoring too. I remember being afraid to walk home alone after school, not knowing if I would be harassed by bullies on bikes because I was one of the few Asians in the school. I quickly discovered in the new land that racism was learned at an early age for both the dominant group and the minoritized groups. One of the ways I found courage in my steps was to look toward the mountains as I headed home and quietly sing Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." The San Gabriel Mountains oriented my body and soul, grounding me and teaching me that the power and mystery of the Divine was near.

This call to remember landlines has become a core work in the ministry of ReconciliAsian. As part of the Korean diaspora, we grapple with the pain of a motherland that was divided over seventy years ago. In 1945, foreign powers drew a line at the thirty-eighth parallel without the consent of our people.[3] This arbitrary boundary scarred the land, ruptured families, and inaugurated decades of militarization. Growing up in a country without a permanent peace treaty has profoundly fragmented the Korean psyche and body.

One of my most profound experiences from the past thirteen years in the ministry of ReconciliAsian was preparing for a reconciliation forum with officials from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). After years of building trust and strong relationships with the help of many friends who had paved the way in the past, the proposal to co-host a reconciliation forum was miraculously granted by the ministers in the DPRK (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea). However, the plans to go into the DPRK in the late fall of 2017 came to an abrupt halt when the United States took a hostile stance on China and imposed a travel ban to North Korea. We were very disappointed at the prospect of canceling this event that we had been planning for so long. However, we pivoted our plans and decided to hold a reconciliation forum in Yanji, China, with members of the Korean diaspora from across Asia and North America. No delegates from the DPRK were able to attend, but it was an important gathering of global peacebuilders working toward reconciliation on the Korean peninsula.

After the forum the delegates headed to Mt. Baekdu (백두산), which sits on the border between present-day North Korea and China. This majestic mountain is more than just the highest peak on the Korean Peninsula. In Korean mythology, it is revered as the birthplace of the Korean people and the spiritual origin of the nation. The trip up Mt. Baekdu was

3 Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (Modern Library, 2010).

harrowing, with multiple bus stops and a slippery jeep ride to get to the top in freezing temperatures. Due to severe weather and icy winds, we were unsure if we would be able to make it to the vista and if we would be able to see the actual crater lake on top. Miraculously, the delegates made it safely to the top and saw Heaven Lake (천지) open up. Standing on this holy and mystical mountain entranced us, and our emotions swelled with awe and reverence. Simultaneously, we also felt deep sadness in realizing that we were standing on the China side overlooking the Heaven Lake and unable to enter from North Korea. We felt like every tear and prayer longing for reunification and reconciliation was held in that body of crystal-blue water, and mother mountain was holding them all. The realization that land holds our stories was palpable while standing there.

A few days later, the Korean American delegates flew from China to Jeju Island, the largest volcanic island in South Korea, located southwest of the Korean Peninsula. There we climbed Mt. Halla, the tallest volcanic mountain in the country, which stands at the center of the island. It is a sacred site, often symbolizing a place that bridges earth and heaven. In spite of the breathtaking beauty that the island holds, Mt. Halla and its vicinity also hold painful stories of the Jeju 4.3 massacre, in which tens of thousands were killed in the late 1940s.[4]

One of the delegates, who is a pastor and woodworking artist, secretly picked up pieces of wood from Mt. Baekdu and Mt. Halla and brought

4 Kim Jongmin, "Early Cold War Genocide: The Jeju 4.3 Massacre and U.S. Responsibility," *Korea Policy Institute*, 4 Apr. 2020, https://www.kpolicy.org/post/early-cold-war-genocide-the-jeju-4-3-massacre-and-u-s-responsibility.

them to the United States. With the pieces of wood he found on these holy mountains, he designed a reconciliation cross. The cross Sungwhan designed looks like two people embracing each other. The reconciliation cross, I think, encapsulates the ministry of reconciliation—to embrace the complex stories that the land holds and in that process find healing and hope.

Remembering landlines does not end in the motherland. Enns and Myers remind us that discipleship also means relating to the land where we dwell here and now. We are not to merely settle on the land and reap the benefits, but we must learn to live in right relationship with it and its inhabitants. For the past forty-five years, my family and I have taken root in the Los Angeles river basin watershed with the San Gabriel Mountains above us. Through Enns and Myers's connections, we have begun building relationships with Indigenous leaders who have been stewarding the Tongva land where we live. Native American and Asian American cultures share many common values, such as the importance of community, harmony, reciprocity, and ancestral connection. Thus, it has been invigorating to collaborate with Gabrielino-Tongva organizations to visit sacred sites, and friendships have deepened to the point where we have been invited by Indigenous Christians to preach at their church and we have invited them to preach at our local church.

The majestic San Gabriel Mountains that have always pointed me to the north endured a devastating wildfire in January 2025. Over 14,000 acres of Los Angeles County burned, starting at the epicenter in Eaton Canyon, only three miles away from my home. The extreme hundred-mile-an-hour winds and dry vegetation created the perfect conditions for such destruction in such a short time. Many of my friends' homes burned down completely, and the extensive smoke damage has resulted in many more families being displaced even as I write. The charred, bare mountains, excavators leveling the ground of burned homes, and haulers removing debris in the area are visible reminders that these grounds hold stories and hauntings—of stewardship, dispossession, racial disparities, resilience, and the ongoing struggle to seek restitution and reparation. The mountains have not forgotten and have held these memories. Following Jesus at this time and in this place has activated many faith leaders in the community to stand in solidarity and to

center the needs of the fire victims, engage with lawmakers and insurance companies to compensate those impacted, and re-examine how we build in times of climate disaster. This work of repair and restoration toward healing and hope is an essential part of Christian witness and discipleship.

For the past several years, the ministry of ReconciliAsian has included co-leading Hidden LA tours with my daughter, Lynn. It is an intergenerational effort to decolonize the dominant history we were taught and to excavate the rich and restorative stories of the marginalized. We guide participants to Tongva sacred springs and to neighborhoods scarred by exclusion and resilience—Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Koreatown, and Historic Filipinotown. Walking these lands, we remember histories often silenced: the extermination of Indigenous Peoples during missionization, the lynching of Chinese immigrants in 1871, the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, the burning of Watts in 1965, and the fires of Koreatown in 1992. These lands have borne witness to these cycles of violence and resilience. And we also bear witness and retell stories of resilience and hope from people learning to not only survive but thrive communally as they help to steward the land in the present.

For me, grounding in mountains means refusing to forget the trauma and resilience embedded in Korean soil while also refusing to overlook the hauntings of Los Angeles. Both require deep work of unearthing economic, political, and ecological wholeness, and we need to find such connections to heal collectively.

My teacher's words—"remember this land"—still echo after four decades. I long for healing in the San Gabriel Mountains where my children and I have made our home. I long to stand one day on Mt. Baekdu from the Korean side, to touch the soil of my ancestors before borders divided them. Enns and Myers remind us that decolonization is lived discipleship: remembering haunted histories, transforming inherited structures, and practicing restorative solidarity. Mountains embody this call.

About the author

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