

The Mountain of the Lord

Isaiah 2:1-5

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First Sunday of Advent—Hope

Reading about this inspiring vision of the Mountain of the Lord, I came across a phrase that was new to me. One commentator wrote that this passage is “often called the floating oracle of peace.”¹ This name was apparently given because it also appears in the prophetic writings of Micah, chapter 4 and verses 1-3. In other words, the passage floats between these two prophetic writers.

I like that image of a floating oracle of peace. While the mountain of the Lord is filled with inspiration, it can feel far away. It will be established “in the last days.” We don’t know when the last days will be, but it certainly is in the future. The mountain of the Lord can also feel far away in terms of how far we are from it. Do these images seem close to you?

- Nations streaming to the mountain, the nations all headed in the same direction with the same goal and the same purpose.
- Nations longing to be guided by God’s teaching and desiring to walk in God’s path.
- Nations beating their swords into plowshares; and their spears into pruning hooks.
- Nations who no longer lift up sword against other nations, and don’t even spend one more minute studying war anymore.

Someone who studied this passage asked the one preaching to pay attention during the reading of the scripture. They wanted to know if anyone laughed during the reading. Why would someone laugh? If you pay attention to what this passage promises and to where our world is right now, then the person is right. This passage might well sound absurd.² It is far away not only in the sense of a distant time, but it is far away from the reality we experience.

It is for that very reason that I am drawn to the image of a floating oracle of peace. Isaiah and Micah, the two prophets where this floating oracle touches down, were both experienced with national struggle and strife, with international conflict, with deep and desperate times. These images undoubtedly felt just as far away to them, far beyond their reach and their grasp. But here is the beauty. Somehow God brought this image into their minds and gave them a vision for God’s ultimate purpose and intention. God’s floating oracle of peace touched down upon these

¹ Bruce E. Birch, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume I*, p. 3.

² Paul Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume I*, p.5.

prophets and settled down deep within their soul. They had a vision of the mountain of the Lord, and that vision inspired, encouraged, equipped, and enabled them to embrace this vision of God in ways that transformed their lives.

Maybe it will be that we who gather here today, on a day when these words seem far away...far away in terms of time, a time that is described as the last days, and far away in terms of the reality, far away from peace and harmony among humans and faithfulness and fidelity in our relationship with God...maybe this oracle of peace will float in among us, will pause over us, will touch down upon us, and will transform within us, so that we are inspired, encouraged, equipped and enabled to embrace this vision of God in ways that transform our lives.

A preacher got up and told about being invited to speak for an intergenerational event at a church. It was a midweek meeting, and all the ages were going to come together. The topic was communion, the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Someone had the bright idea that the church would all gather together, members of every age, the youngest to the oldest, and they would all learn about The Lord's Supper. But these events tend to be hands on, and so on this evening after learning about The Lord's Supper, they were all going to join together and make homemade bread. This working with your hands would seal the event in everyone's mind. I guess what happened probably did seal the event in everyone's mind.

The preacher said he gave a great message, hitting all the high points about The Lord's Supper, and receiving quite a heartfelt round of applause when he finished. Then they handed out the flour and yeast and water and whatever else goes into a loaf of bread, and everyone set out to make their very own loaf of bread. Things went well for the first few minutes. But it takes a while to make bread. It takes patience. Patience is something which was soon lost by some in the group. They got restless. Soon some were grabbing handfuls of flour and playing with it. It wasn't long before someone took a handful and blew on it, watching it waft across the room. This elicited a blast back, and it didn't take much for this bread baking bunch to dissolve into chaos, with flour flying everywhere and on everyone.

The preacher admitted maybe he was making it out to be worse than it really was, but nevertheless things were not being done decently and in order. The final task of the preacher was to give the benediction, and as he stood up he raised his voice and spoke over the bursting puffs of flour to say, "May the peace of Christ be with you." It was right then that something happened that totally surprised the preacher. He had been focusing on what seemed to him to be chaos. But in reality the kids and the adults were all engaged, all sharing together in this, they were bonding together, laughing together, and loving together. I guess it might have been a little like that Day of Pentecost, when to the outside observer it all looked like chaos. Anyway, when the preacher raised his voice and said, "May the peace of Christ be with you," one young boy stood up, his face covered with flour, but a

smile shining through that coating of white. When the preacher said, “May the peace of Christ be with you,” the young boy literally shouted back with a joy in his heart that spilled out of his mouth, “It already is.” And the preacher sat down acknowledging in his heart, “The peace of Christ was already there.”

The preacher couldn't see it that day. For him the peace was far away, very distant as he sat among the exploding powder kegs of flour. But for that little boy, in a way that will always be strange and mysterious, the floating oracle of peace descended upon his heart, and that little guy knew the peace of Christ was already there.

When I was a youth pastor a college aged young man started working with the youth group as an intern. He had a heart of gold, but he hadn't learned yet how to shape and mold the behavior of the junior high youth. In other words they ran all over him. A rumor circulated among the other youth leaders that once when he was left in charge of the youth group all by himself, the others returned to find him tied up to the post in the center of the room. I don't think at that particular moment that the floating oracle of peace descended on him. But there was something I will never forget about this fellow youth worker, a guy we called Sparky. Long before anyone else arrived for the youth group meeting, Sparky would come and set the room up. We had something like 75 kids at the youth group, and he would unstack the chairs and put them all in place. And then after youth group, when everyone else had already left to go home, Sparky would carefully and quietly stack up every single chair.

The psalm that accompanies our Isaiah passage in the lectionary is Psalm 122. “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go unto the house of the Lord.’” Psalm 84 describes in depth the gladness of being in the house of the Lord. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God...Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.” And as that sweet psalm draws to a close we hear the author laying clear the desire of his heart. “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” A doorkeeper is a servant. There is no great honor in that. But when what you are doing you are doing for the Lord, then any job, every job, is done with the most humble and grateful heart. “I would rather be a doorkeeper.” I don't think the floating oracle of peace descended on Sparky that day the youth group tied him up to a pole. But I bet there were many a night when he was working alone, all by himself, stacking and unstacking chairs, one by one by one, just him and the Lord, doing the work of a servant, I bet there were many a night when that great and wonderful floating oracle of peace descended on that humble child of God.

I wonder how many times the floating oracle of peace is related to the presence of pets in our lives. I grew up in the day and age when big boys didn't cry. Good luck trying to follow that maxim when you read "Where the Red Fern Grows." I was hiding in my bed late at night sobbing with sadness. Years later, when I was a father, I opened the door to kiss our little boy Alex good night and he sort of turned away when I entered the room. I looked at the book he was reading. Sure enough, it was "Where the Red Fern Grows". And his eyes were red from crying. For just a brief moment the floating oracle of peace descended on us as we shared that tender story of a boy and his dogs.

The sign on the door said "Puppies for Sale" and so the little boy went inside to look.

The man running the pet shop showed him five little puppies who were ready now to leave their mother. They were about the cutest dogs the little boy had even seen.

"How much are they?" the little boy asked.

The man replied, "Some are fifty dollars, some are more."

The little boy reached into his pocket and pulled out some change. After counting it, he said, "I have a dollar and forty-seven cents."

"Well, I'm afraid I can't sell you one of these puppies for a dollar and forty-seven cents, little boy. You'll have to save your money and come back next time we have more puppies for sale."

About that time, the pet store owner's wife brought out another puppy that had been hidden in the back of the store. It was smaller than the other puppies, and had a bad leg. It couldn't stand up very well, and when it tried to walk, it limped very badly.

"What's wrong with that puppy?" asked the little boy. The pet store owner explained that the veterinarian had examined the puppy and had discovered it didn't have a hip socket. It would always limp and be lame.

"Oh I wish I had the money to buy that puppy!" exclaimed the little boy with excitement. "That's the puppy I would choose!"

"Well that puppy is not for sale, son. But if you really want him I'll just give him to you. No charge."

But the little boy got quite upset at this. He looked straight at the pet store owner and said, "No, I don't want you to give him to me. That little dog is worth every bit as much as the other dogs you have for sale. I'll give you a dollar and forty-seven cents now, and I'll give you fifty cents a month until I have paid for this dog in full."

The pet store owner was perplexed. "You don't really want to spend your money on this little dog, son, He is never going to be able to run and play with you like other puppies."

Then the little boy reached down and rolled up his pant leg to reveal a badly twisted, crippled left leg, supported by a big metal brace. He looked up at the pet store owner and said, "Mister I don't run and play too good myself. I figure this little puppy is going to need someone like me to understand."

When disabilities and disappointments give way to kindness and compassion, when sadness turns to joy, when a little boy finds just the right pet that he can pour out his love to, the floating oracle of peace has a marvelous way of descending on our lives.

Maybe hearing about a church having a flour fight when they make a loaf of bread and a humble guy stacking chairs or sentimental stories about little boys and their dogs leaves you still feeling like the mountain of the Lord is far away. I get it. The scope of hurt and heartache, the depth of evil and hatred is so extreme little stories might not seem to move us any closer to that mountain of the Lord. But maybe that isn't the point. It isn't that we move closer to the mountain of the Lord as much as it is being reminded God brings that mountain to us in ways that help us realize peace is not always far away. And the little bits and piece and fragments and fleeting moments are not false...they are real. In the last days the mountain of the Lord will be established and it will be chief among all the mountains. It will rise high above all the other mountains. The healing and reconciliation will encompass all of God's creation.

And it isn't just little boys and their dogs or churches trying to bake bread or chairs getting stacked at the end of a late night meeting. Sometimes it happens in places where the very fabric of life is ripped apart. In April of 1994 a reign of terror descended on the African nation of Rwanda. In the space of three months, a million Rwandans were killed in what the United Nations belatedly termed genocide. What made the Rwandan genocide such a thing of horror is that the killing was between Christians. The stories that emerged from Rwanda in those days make the mountain of the Lord feel particular distant, such that it seems a completely different universe.

It wasn't that everyone was evil. Some found themselves put in impossible situations. During the early days of the killings the Hutus, who were in power, went on a slaughtering spree against the Tutsis. A man named Saveri was a Hutu. Saveri was not a soldier, but when a community leader led Saveri to where a woman and her two children were hiding, Saveri was instructed to beat the woman and her children to death. If he refused, he would be beaten. Saveri took a spiked club and pummeled the woman and her two small children until they died. The

woman's name was Christine. Christine had a sister who survived the genocide. Her sister's name was Rosaria. Rosaria not only lost her sister Christine, she lost her husband and all of her children. Rosaria survived, and nine months after the genocide began she gave birth to a baby girl, and named her Cadeaux. In reading the book about the genocide and the ones who survived, a book with the almost unbelievable title of "As We Forgive", I came upon a story of hope.

A little twelve year-old girl was curled up on her side, sleeping peacefully. Her mother stooped to wake her. The girl awakened with a smile. In return the mother smiled back and said, "Time to..."

"...wake up and pray," said the daughter, as she finished the sentence.

"And why do we wake up and pray?" the mother asked her young daughter.

"Because we are not like the cows, which just wake up and go," said the daughter. "God made us to talk to him."

Oh that we would all learn what that twelve year old child has learned. We are not cows. We do not simply spend our days searching for food, for shelter, for comfort, and for pleasure. If we were cows we might well follow the counsel of those who say eat, drink, and be merry. But we are not cows. God made us to talk to him, to be in relationship with him, to speak and listen and praise and pour out our hearts to him, so we awaken to the new day and pray. The little twelve year old girl who woke up ready to pray was the same little girl born just months after the genocide. The little girl was Cadeaux. Her mother, the one who awakened her to pray, was Rosaria, whose sister Christine was murdered by the man named Saveri. Twelve years after the devastation of genocide, a mother and daughter who survived woke up and the first thing they did was pray. There is some kind of power in a faith that deep, that strong.

When Rosaria, the mother, woke her daughter Cadeaux up that morning to pray, it was a very special day. In many ways that special day was to be a day of resurrection. Twelve years after the genocide, Rosaria, the mother, whose hand was now withered as a result of torture from the war, looked at the crop before her and knew she needed help to do the work of threshing her crops.

"As she surveyed the work, she heard the sound of a group approaching. She went to the gate and peered down the alleyway. Rosaria's heart leapt at the sight of such a crowd."³ Dozens of people had come to help her thresh her harvest. When the threshing was done they gathered all of her belongings and moved her and her daughter into a new home in a new community. Those who had come to help

³ Catherine Claire Larson, *As We Forgive*, 45.

included some who were Hutus, the very people who had attacked her family. And leading the way was Saveri, the man who had killed her sister. Genocide is the epitome of hatred and violence and destruction. But somehow, in some way beyond human explanation, signs of healing came upon the people of Rwanda. Signs of reconciliation emerged from the division and desolation. And we can even say signs of resurrection sprung to life as Hutu joined with Tutsi to help a woman and her child thresh the harvest and move into a new home.

The story doesn't say all the nations streamed to that new home. But as ones who have witnessed a long season of terrorism and war and racist actions and the murder of law enforcement officers and natural disasters that devastate communities, when we see this type of deep healing, this type of restoration and reconciliation, when we see this type of resurrection, we can celebrate those precious moments when the floating oracle of peace descends.

During this Season of Advent let us hold firmly to our hope that this is God's ultimate intention. Christ Jesus came to reconcile this world. Christ Jesus came to bring new creation. The old is gone and behold, the new has come. In Christ Jesus there is resurrection and there is life. Because of that we believe that for one brief shining moment the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. The floating oracle of peace descended on this earth. Maybe the nations did not stream to him, but there was a whole parade of people who were broken and bowed down with the heavy burden of life, with the disappointments of life, with the rejections of life, with the animosities and shattered relationships of life, with the crushing burden of sin and the helpless feeling of being lost and alone, and these people flocked to him. With each touch, with his tender words, as he gently dried their tears and, with every life he healed, that floating oracle of peace descended, bringing hope and bringing joy. Advent is a time of watching. Advent is a time of waiting. Pay attention, people of God. We are not alone in this world. Watch and wait, for surely our Lord is at work even now. And you never know just when it might happen, when the floating oracle of peace will descend and touch our lives. O come, O come Emmanuel. Your people eagerly await your coming.