

“When swords become plowshares”

Isaiah 2:1-5

Wayne Eberly

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The prophet has good news for us today, this first Sunday of Advent. Our Advent journey literally begins on a high note. How high is it? So high that nothing is higher. Nothing compares. Nothing even comes close. The high note is the mountain of the Lord. Proclaiming one of the greatest and grandest promises of scripture, Isaiah tells us, “The mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” (Isaiah 2:2)

In the rare air of this holy mountain, the Lord himself will be there teaching us all how to walk in his ways. Every footstep will be filled with faith. Every dispute will be resolved. There will be no conflict or disagreement, no arguing, no yelling, no shouts of anger, there will be no fussing or fighting my friend, because we will all see things God’s way. The great sign and symbol of this peaceful reign of God, the great sign of harmony, the great sign of divine reconciliation is that the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. If you want to learn the ins and outs of warfare, and to master defense systems, and manufacture a huge arsenal of weapons, you will be plum out of luck on the mountain of the Lord. When that mountain, that highest of mountains, when the mountain of the Lord is established, wars will cease once and for all. We will not train for war anymore.

If all of this sounds too good to be true, you would be absolutely right. There is no mountain of the Lord, at least not the mountain of the Lord Isaiah wants to tell us about. That mountain of the Lord will not be established until the last days. That is precisely what the prophet proclaims. “In the last days the mountain of the Lord will be established.” The last days are not here yet, so you would be absolutely

right if you said, “There is no mountain of the Lord.” But those who say, “There is no mountain of the Lord” would be absolutely wrong if they did not add a very important word. While it is absolutely true that there is no mountain of the Lord, unless you add this very important word, you would be absolutely wrong.

The prophet is looking to the future. The prophet is looking to the last days. This is not the fanciful ponderings of a prophet. The prophet is proclaiming the word of the Lord. And the Lord says that day will come. That day won't come until the end. But it will come. God said it and so you can depend on it. God's word does not return void. The prophet is going to let us know that piece of good news in the 55th chapter of this book of Isaiah. Listen to what the prophet tells us about the word of the Lord.

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me void, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10,11)

The word of the Lord accomplishes what God desires and achieves the purpose of God. So when God says in the last days the mountain of the Lord will be established, you can take that promise to the bank. Or in terms of faith, you can trust that promise. You can trust that promise completely. Yes, someone would be absolutely right if they said, “There is no mountain of the Lord”. Nevertheless, they would be absolutely wrong if they did not add one very important word, a word that is so small it is just three letters long, but a word so powerful that it ignites a fire of faith that has burned brightly for thousands of years, a fire that never dims, a flame that never never dwindles. That little tiny word is the word, “Yet”. Just three letters. But if you leave that word out when you say, “There is no mountain of the Lord”, you have said something that is absolutely wrong. Here is the correct thing to say when you read Isaiah chapter two. “There is no mountain of the Lord yet.” That

mountain is not here yet, but you can hold God to his word and put your complete trust that what God promised, God will make true. “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established.” For that good news as we begin our Advent journey, we can all say, “The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.”

Advent takes that little word “yet” very seriously. Advent invites us to live our days in watchful anticipation of the day when we no longer need the word “yet”. Advent calls us to live with hope, the firm belief that one day that mountain will be established. In anticipation and in preparation for that day, we dedicate ourselves and we devote ourselves to living into the fullness of all the soaring promises imagined in the beautiful image that comes to us in the mountain of the Lord.

We cannot make our way up the mountain of the Lord, because that mountain is not here yet. But we can start doing some serious training by trekking up some of the mountains the Lord has already established. Hitch up your hiking boots. Strap on your backpack. Bring plenty of water. Lather up the sunscreen, because we are going up where the air is fresh and clear, up where the sun shines bright. We have an Advent Adventure ahead of us. What mountains am I referring to? What mountains has the Lord already established?

Let’s start with a journey to Jerusalem, that city set on a hill. That is where the tribes go up. Three times a year, the Israelites would go mountain climbing, a steady stream of God’s children ascending the slopes and arrive at the house of the Lord. Psalms 120 through 134 are titled “The Psalms of Ascent.” When it was time to celebrate the Feast of the Harvest, the feast we celebrate even now as Pentecost, the Israelites would ascend the hill, climbing higher and higher, until they arrived at the gates of Jerusalem. Several months later they would return for a joyful reenactment of their wilderness journey. They would erect tents and live in them, just like the good old days when living in those portable shelters God guided and provided for them every single day of that 40-year sojourn. And then on the fourteenth day of the very first

month of the year, gathered by families around a table, a lamb having been sacrificed, each and every family would relive the miraculous and daring escape from the cruel bondage of Egypt. Their remembrance was so real you could taste the salt on your lips as the parted waters of the Red Sea splashed and sprayed everyone with sweet drops of freedom. The room would become an old-fashioned dance hall as they retraced the steps of Miriam, tambourine in hand, strutting to the powerful beat of salvation and deliverance. Israel knew about mountain climbing. Those Psalms of Ascent can teach us a thing

That regular routine of climbing up to the Holy City never failed to nurture the dreams of the people. Remembering all that God had done, it was natural to believe God would do it again. God did it before. God will do it again. Oh yes, the Psalms of Ascent nurtured the dreams of the people. But these dreams occurred in the midst of the down to earth difficulties that marked living daily as a people of faith. The very first Psalm of Ascent is the 120th Psalm. Pay close attention as we train to climb high mountains. The psalm begins with distress. The writer is surrounded by people with lying lips and deceitful tongues. The psalmist laments that although he is for peace, he is surrounded by people who are for war. Later the psalms will speak of being ridiculed, of enduring the contempt of the proud, suffering attacks when the anger of their enemies flared against them. The ones climbing to these high places knew what it meant to be greatly oppressed. From the depths they cried to God for mercy. Can you relate to any of these challenges as you make your journey through life? Perhaps you can relate to all of these challenges. Life can be a difficult road we walk. To make an ascent on the high mountains of faith, we must recognize the trek will not be easy and our way will not always be smooth. And yet...we are going to a place of beauty and majesty, a place of intimacy with God and right relationships with our fellow travelers.

- So instead of despair, we lift our eyes unto the hills...knowing exactly where our strength comes from.

- The Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, will not let our footsteps stumble, and he will watch over our coming and going now and forevermore.
- No wonder the journey is marked by eruptions of praise, loud shouts of thanksgiving to God. “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go unto the house of the Lord.’”
- Yes, we have been oppressed, but our enemies have not gained victory...no, they have not gained victory. Not when the Lord is on our side.
- Plowmen might have plowed our backs and made their furrows deep, but the Lord is righteous; he has cut us free from the cords of the wicked.
- We are ones whose fortunes the Lord has restored, and so our mouths are filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.
- The Lord is the one who has built our house, and so we know our labor is not in vain.
- Because of this as we journey up, as we climb from the valleys of despair and disappointment, as we make our way to the house of the Lord, we remind ourselves over and over again to put our hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is unfailing love. Put your hope in the Lord, for he is our redeemer and he will rescue us from all sins.
- We find our hearts united with our fellow travelers. We burst forth into songs of great gratitude. “Behold how pleasant and how good it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity.” Oh, we may not be able to climb up the mountain of the Lord, that mountain where sword become plowshares and spears are transformed into pruning hooks, we might not be able to summit that mountain yet, but even now we can experience the incredible gift and blessing of being one with brothers and sisters of faith. How good and how pleasant it is.
- By the time we have done this type of mountain training, we can sing the final Psalm of Ascent. “Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord...lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the Lord.

May the Lord bless you from Zion, he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 134)

I mention the Psalms of Ascent this morning, this first Sunday of Advent, the day when we light the candle of hope, I mention the Psalms of Ascent because the people made their journey three times a year, season by season, festival by festival, year after year, hoping for the promises of God to come true, longing for the Lord to establish that mountain of the Lord. The entire time they made their journey, they never even knew about Jesus. They knew the promise of a Messiah. But Jesus was only a promise at that point. Jesus had not entered the world.

We do know Jesus. Jesus is not just a promise to us. Jesus is present with us. We make our Advent journey up the mountain, anticipating the great mountain of the Lord, we make our journey with the fullness of faith found in the Psalms of Ascent...and so much more. We have Jesus, and having Jesus brings joy to our journey. Let us borrow from the psalmist and say,

- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this amazing thing, this birth of the Christ Child.”
- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go to the Jordan, and see the heavens part and the Spirit descend like a dove upon Jesus.”
- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, walking with him through Galilee as his preaching and teaching brought good news to the people...as his touch brought healing and wholeness...as his tears showed us the depth of God’s kindness and compassion...as his love set us free from the bondage and brokenness of sin.”

And let us look not just at what Jesus did so many years ago, let us look at what he is doing even now, right here in our midst. Let us create our own Psalm of thanksgiving as we say,

- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us donate bicycles and send them to Providence where refugees from Syrian can mount up

on those bikes with wings like eagles, soaring the streets as they find work and attend classes and learn to live in a new world.

- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us invite our Syrian friends to make dinner for us, here at Dunn’s Corners, and let us rejoice in the beautiful blessings of Shwarmas and kabob, tabouli and fajitas, and the beautiful blessing of opening our arms to welcome ones whose lives were torn apart with the violence in their homeland.
- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us take a Christmas offering for the Ukranian families that Dorcas International will welcome to our state of Rhode Island.”
- I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord, where we can celebrate World Communion Sunday with breads from around the world, and dress in kilts and lift our voices to bagpipes as we sing of God’s Amazing Grace, and gather at the Harvest Table celebrating the God who continues to guide and provide for his children, and now as we light candles that shine in the darkness, candles of hope, candles of peace, candles of joy, candles of love, and yes, the candle of Christ.”

As we look with longing for the day when the mountain of the Lord will be established, let us pray with the psalmist who said, “I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord.”

- Let us lift our eyes to the hill where Jesus stood on the mount of beatitudes and blessed us, richly blessed us. Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, and blessed are those who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Jesus is with us on our journey to bless us and keep us.
- Let us lift our eyes to the hill where Jesus was transfigured, his presence becoming both blinding and brilliant, and where God said to Jesus, to the one we love so much, God said to his Son, his

Beloved Son, “You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased.” We lift our eyes to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.

- Let us lift our eyes to the hill where Jesus, risen from the dead, set free from the grave, said to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.” Where does our help come from? From Jesus, who has all authority now and who will have all authority for all eternity. Oh, when that mountain of the Lord is established, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.
- And let us never forget to lift our eyes to the hill where Jesus gave his life for us, the hill called Calvary, where Jesus showed us that his help will be with us even when we walk through the darkest nights and the deepest valleys. He will never leave us and he will never forsake us, because on that hill called Calvary, when Jesus died on the cross, he proved his love for us in a way that captures our hearts and fills our spirits with a hope that can never be destroyed.

We cannot make our way up the mountain of the Lord, because that mountain is not here yet. But we can start doing some serious training by trekking up some of the mountains the Lord has already established. Hitch up your hiking boots. Strap on your backpack. Bring plenty of water. Lather up the sunscreen, because we are going up where the air is fresh and clear, up where the sun shines bright. We have an Advent Adventure ahead of us. Jesus is coming, and we want to be fully prepared to walk with him every step of the way, as we prepare for the great day when the mountain of the Lord will be established as the highest mountain. If we are ready to make that climb, then the Lord beckons us to come.

“Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord Almighty—he is the King of Glory.”