



## Sermons from First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor

### **“Isaiah ‘Twas Foretold It: A Mountain Most Holy”**

The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

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The First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2, 1-5 and Matthew 24,36-44

The season of Advent begins this day, and with it our journey to an obscure village in a distant land, across centuries of time, to celebrate a wondrous birth of a child, to a young mother, witnessed mostly by farm animals and few religiously and politically oppressed folks. And there we believe did God mark the pivot of human history and existence. Perhaps we're so accustomed to the story and the journey that we rarely glimpse its oddness. This day, this Sunday, also marks the beginning of the Christian year. It would be appropriate for us to be wishing one another 'Happy New Year' today, not unlike Jews do in September when their New Year begins. But perhaps we have lost the sense that we as Christians are somewhat at odds with the larger culture, and so we will most likely delay our New Year's greetings for a few more weeks lest we stand out.

And that's not all that makes the season of Advent odd. Historically, Advent was seen as a season of repentance, akin to Lent. And yet it is joy we seek and for which we yearn at this darkening time of year. For the next several weeks, we will spend a lot of time preparing for Christmas, looking back in time to that wondrous birth of our savior that we might celebrate it again. And yet, oddly, our lectionary brings us lessons this day that would have us looking forward, way forward, even unto the Second Coming of that savior. What's that about? How can we simultaneously look backwards and forwards in time without severe neck strain and profound disorientation. Wrapped up in our traditions, and wonderful they are, we can miss the strangeness of this season. Perhaps Advent is a gift to remind us that being Christian is not a "business as usual" way of living.

Isaiah shares a vision of a day to come when Mt. Zion, the mountain of God, on which Jerusalem sits but does not rest, will rise up to be the tallest of all mountains. And seeing its majesty, and the majesty of its God, all peoples will be drawn to it to learn the ways of God. Mt. Everest was climbed, said Edmund Hillary, because it was there. And perhaps this magnified Zion will draw us because it's there, and it's there Isaiah testifies that we will find the peace on earth that we cannot fashion for ourselves. Says Isaiah,

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Could the intention of God be any clearer? God will bring the nations peace, a peace not built on mutually assured destruction, a peace that is more than a cease-fire. Not a peace where the hate remains

and the guns stay loaded, but a peace where the weapons of war are converted to productive uses as imagined in that compelling statue before the United Nations building in New York City where a warrior forges his sword into a plow.

And this is a peace that passes all understanding, is it not? The human family has lived so long with war, lived so long accepting the dead and maimed and scarred, lived so long with violence as a way to achieve goals, lived so long devoting so many resources to destruction instead of creativity, that it is hard for any of us to imagine any other way. Isaiah's vision is indeed of a peace beyond our understanding, so much so that in our despair of peace among the peoples and nations of the earth, we may be tempted to try to find a personal, private peace apart from that of the world. It is almost as if we have rewritten St. John's ringing affirmation, "For God so loved the world" to say, "For God so loved me and mine." And so is the human family divided as we turn away from God's intention to bring peace and prosperity and productivity and wholeness for all. But Isaiah steadfastly says God will have it otherwise.

In my preacher files, I recently came across a faded clipping from a New York Times of February 1989, dateline - Kabul, Afghanistan. It reads: "The rockets began to hit the eastern districts of the capital shortly after 3:00 p.m. today, sending great clouds of dust into the still winter air. At the Kabul International Hotel, a man sweeping the tennis court paused for a while to watch, and then calmly resumed his work." Twenty-one years ago, the combatants were different then from those of today. But are not most of us like that man sweeping a tennis court? We simply accept the persistence of violence and war, and try as best we can to find what peace we can as we get on with our lives.

Perhaps at our best we do long to believe Isaiah's vision. Maybe we do long, and even pray, for the nations to stream to the holy mountain of God with weapons in hand and then see them walk away with farm tools. But our experience is so very contrary. Why, look at the Middle East where conflict is waged in the very shadow of Mt. Zion and onto Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and even now on the Korean peninsula. We despair. Nice picture Isaiah, but get real. Our experience runs so contrary to your prophetic vision.

But I would argue Isaiah is absolutely right. We cannot seem to live without war, and history should make us sober and somber about the human ability to fashion peace. Isaiah contends peace can only come as a gift from God. It is God who must create peace. It is God who gives us Jesus as the Prince of peace. It is God who does what we cannot do apart from God.

Okay, fine, we say. But when will this gift be given, we want to know? How long must we wait, O Lord? How many more innocents and soldiers must die? How long until the wondrous gift is given? And we turn to the gospel according to Matthew and hear Jesus, the very Prince of Peace, say "Well, I don't know. No one knows but God. Not me, not the angels, only God. I can only tell you it will come as a surprise, like a thief in the night, when you are going about activities as ordinary as working and cooking." And our frustration mounts even higher. God is going to bestow the peace we crave and cannot create, but we don't get to know when. It's like preparing for Christmas without knowing the

date, like being pregnant without knowing how long it will last, like knowing presents are coming but not knowing if we get to open them in thirty days or thirty years.

And in frustration with the timetable of God, some will turn from the ways of God and live as if there is no promise of peace, no God who will be born in and among us. I imagine many in first century Judea had become so accustomed to violence and oppression and poverty and injustice that they had given up searching for coming of God. A few had not, a few named Zechariah and Elizabeth and Anna and Simeon, and Mary.

If we've spent most of our lives here in the mostly flat Midwest, we may find it difficult to connect with Isaiah's mountain vision. We don't have much experience with mountains in these parts. For heaven's sake, we've got a city in Michigan named Mt. Pleasant that's smack dab in about the flattest section of the state. But if we've been out west towards the Rockies, or visited Seattle where we can most always see majestic Mt. Rainier, or even lived near the Appalachians, we know what Isaiah's talking about. Mountains orient us. We always know where west is when we're in Colorado, where east is when in Seattle. And Isaiah's vision is asking us to what will we be oriented. Will we be oriented towards a world that accepts violent division among the earth's peoples as inevitably normative? Or will we be oriented towards the ways of God who seeks to teach us and all of peace?

Yes, God's peace will come as a surprise. As surprising as when the Berlin Wall fell, and recall that no pundit predicted the date of that dividing wall of hostility's demise. As surprising as people of all colors being welcome on the beaches of South Africa when the man who dreamed it would be so had languished in prison for twenty-seven years. As surprising that the center of history is found in a stable in a backwater town among peasants. Will we live by Isaiah's dream or dismiss it as a pipe dream? That's our question this Advent.

Some years ago, the parents of a friend of mine were putting together their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebration in a small town in rural Kansas. They wanted all their family to be there, but that had not ever happened before, even at holidays, and would not be easy. Not easy because one daughter had married an African American man, and African Americans weren't much welcomed in that town. Another daughter had had a child out of wedlock many years before, an event not to be concealed in such a town, and it had been decades since she'd been with much of the family. The grandparents wondered how everyone would receive the outsider grandchild. And there had long been tension between their twin daughters, from birth right on up through into adulthood. And yet the long wed couple longed for everyone to be together for their anniversary.

The anniversary reunion was held, and somehow, someway, perhaps born of the prayers of all those gathered, it all worked out. The out-of-wedlock granddaughter came with her own husband and children, and forgiveness overflowed. The interracial family was there and was surprised to feel right at home as games were played and food was shared. The twins finally talked enough to admit that what they disliked in one another was what they most disliked about themselves, and reconciliation blossomed beyond all expectation. There was healing and peace and communion, a moment when the promises of God weren't somewhere, someday in a far off future, but had broken out in the present. The

longings for peace, the desire to live in peace, the prayers for peace all were made manifest in the relations among those gathered. In staff Bible study this week, Jenny pointed out that when folks climb mountains, they do so roped together. I think maybe that's what that reunited family did, roped themselves together in a commitment to be at peace with one another.

I began by observing that Advent makes clear our being somewhat at odds with the world around us. The world is oriented towards accepting the inevitability of conflict. It is committed to winning, often at tremendous cost. It is oriented towards hard facts and concrete reality and old grudges. And what about us? In the Christ who is coming, in the God who will raise up a holy mountain where all will learn of peace, we are called to be oriented quite differently, all roped together seeking to learn the ways of God. And since repentance means turning from one path to another, we are called in this advent season of penitence to ponder to what we have been oriented in the past and to what we will be oriented in the future. What vision will claim us, and name us, and guide us into God's future as surely as did a star guide the wise ones of old?

Amen +

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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