

“The Work of Advent”

Isaiah 2:1-5 & Galatians 5:22

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Isaiah 2:2-5 “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s house will be the highest of all—the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob’s God. There God will teach us God’s ways, and we will walk in God’s paths.” For the Lord’s teaching will go out from Zion; God’s word will go out from Jerusalem. The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

Mountains are as different from one another as people. Mountains are beautiful, awe inspiring, irregular, craggy, misshapen. One mountain melts into the next, linked together into an entire range. Climbing a mountain is a complicated affair; people spend tens of thousands of dollars and sometimes risk their lives to climb the world’s tallest peaks. I enjoy mountains that have trails that can be hiked. Even these more modest peaks are filled with their share of obstacles: switchbacks, thinning air, rocks to be scrambled over, narrow passages to be squeezed through. Not to mention the sheer altitude, the constant climb, the relentless upwardness of the ascent.

As people guided by scripture, mountains have a particular resonance with us beyond our lived experience—beyond your favorite mountain. Important things are continually happening on mountaintops in the Bible. Moses experiences God on the mountain, where he receives the Ten Commandments and where his face shines from the holy encounter (Exodus 34). Elijah discerns the “still small voice” while huddled in a mountain cave (I Kings 19:9). Jesus delivers his famous sermon from the mountain (Matthew 5-7); and later, his friends see a dazzling image of him, transfigured on the mountain, so captivating that they want to remain there.

And here in today’s text from Isaiah, the people stream to “the highest of the mountains,” to Zion. Zion means the people of God bringing the spiritual kingdom of God. This is the inaugural text not only for Advent, but for the entire liturgical year. Before we go to Bethlehem to come and worship the newborn Savior, before we flee to Egypt, before the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, before Nicodemus comes by night and Lazarus staggers out of his tomb, before the last breath escapes tired lungs on a cross, and before Jesus glorious resurrection that is transforming us all into loving people, God beckons us to come to the mountain.

And so we have come. Some of us climb the mountain of Advent with joyful steps, invigorated by every carol, card, treat, and decoration. Some of us bemoan every step, exhausted, weary, grieving, carrying heavy burdens, each step, sight and sound reminds them of loss, pain and frustrations. Some of us climb with a mix of exuberance and fear, energy and fatigue, anticipation and disappointment. Mountains wake us up, grab our attention, deepen our breath and open us to the transforming grace of God. Mountains are settings for transcendent, awe-inspiring moments—places to look out over the landscape, to take stock, and to commune with God. Every advent season makes us a different person.

It is not a break for the rigors of everyday life that propels us up the highest of the mountains according to Isaiah. This is no spiritual spa season. This is no respite, no breath of fresh air. We climb the mountain for instruction, to learn to walk in the way of God, to experience God’s wisdom, to let God point out the way we fail to love, so we can be honest with ourselves, confess and learn to love. We

climb the mountain to collect our swords and spears into great piles so we can pummel them into instruments of peace. We come to the mountain, we call advent, to work, to wrestle with God, to experience God's beautiful and unrelenting love. We come to be filled with great awe and embark on the great challenge of extravagant love.

Isaiah proclaims the terrifying glory of the mountain. There is no getting ready for it. And while you may be elated to reach the top, you are also exhausted and worn down and sore; that is in perfect condition for God to transform you into who God needs you to be. We climb the mountain not for a respite from the brokenness of the world rather for curriculum revealing how to love. God will provide instruction, teaching, wisdom, conviction, forgiveness and empowerment. Advent is preparation—receiving what we need in order to be God's people sent down from the mountain, clutching gardening tools in a world cluttered with swords and spears.

The summit of the mountain is not an escape. It's where the instruction happens. So, we lug our swords and spears up that craggy path, stopping every so often to shift it from one shoulder to the other because the weight of it is so heavy and the incline is so steep. And then we arrive and it's time to melt them down and forge new tools, but it's a scary world down there and don't we want to keep one weapon just in case? And Isaiah says, "No. God needs you disarmed and retooled."

What are your swords? Is it hate that needs to be refashioned into love, fear into courage, revenge into forgiveness, apathy into action, indifference into compassion, sadness into joy, chaos into peace, sickness into health, shame into self-esteem? Advent is a season of grueling work. Searching every fiber of your being for each imperfection, lugging it up the mountain to God and then refashioning it into an instrument of joyful, loving peace.

I prefer the image of God as the potter with me as the yielding clay. God fashioning us into beautiful masterpieces over the course of our lives. Isaiah has God giving the instructions and each of us doing the work. Gathering wood. Building a fire. Heating our spears and swords. Beating them, repeatedly, with extreme force to remold each and every spear and sword within us into a plowshare and pruning hook. It is hot, exhausting, hard work.

Perhaps you have resolved to forgive a person, but when you see them, the hurt overwhelms you. Perhaps you have committed to sharing only positive, uplifting speech but the negativity of the group has you joining in pessimistic talk again. Perhaps you are determined to listen and stay non-anxious, but your frustrations spill out in rambling words. Perhaps you have pledged to help someone who is being hurt by hate, but you do not get involved. Perhaps you want to be joyful and grateful, but your thoughts turn sour and you become obsessed with getting something more. Perhaps you have resolved to stop trying to control others and your life, but the desire to do things your way consumes you. Think about your swords and spears; how you tried over and over to rid yourself of them, yet you keep picking them back up. We all need to continually go back up the mountain, keep listening to God's instruction, be honest about our faults, be diligent in purify our mistakes with fire and be tenacious in molding them into goodness.

Look around our country we desperately need to do this work. Our news is filled with stories of fear, hate and violence. Scrolling through Facebook we encounter spears of frustration and sword fights of angry words. Listen to your speech; you will hear harmful words. Feel your feelings; you will discover that you are lacking purity.

Our swords can be used for protection, a way of keeping our self safe as we retreat. Avoiding the difficult person. Not speaking up when someone says a joke that hurts another. Hiding in cynicism. Building a wall of negative thoughts. Shrinking from service. Not standing up against bullies. Doing nothing. Hiding behind a wall of coping mechanisms. Refusing to be vulnerable which hinders love. We are to take our swords and beat them into plowshares that break up compacted, hard, thorny rocky earth

into receptive fertile soil eager to receive the seed and nurture that seed into a vibrant plant. We are to beat our defenses into vulnerability, that lets go, lets come, and grows into abundant life. We are to learn to love every person, to serve every person, to nurture every person, to make every person's life abundant. We are to bring heaven to earth, to establish ever growing joyful, loving life for everyone. What will Christmas be like if everyone in your family could refashion every sword of defensiveness, every justification of why they have been wronged, every argument asserting that they are right, into love for each other? What will Christmas be like if everyone in the world refashions their swords into love? It is a glorious vision that needs our work to achieve.

Spears can be used to hurt, injure and kill. Hateful words kill a smile. Hateful actions, in addition to physical wounds, harms with tormenting thoughts. Lies destroys the trust that deepens relationships. Angry words kill our praise. Our greed hinders our sharing. Our lust destroys intimacy. Unhealthy desires cause us to step over and on others. Jealousy consumes us leaving us unable to see our own beauty. We are to take our spears and beat them into pruning hooks that prune away every negative thought, prune away ever hateful action, redirecting all our energy into fruitful thoughts and actions. **Galatians 5:22** “**The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self control.**” What will Christmas be like if everyone refashions every spear into the fruit of the Spirit? Imagine the spectacular glory of everyone belonging to one harmonious world-wide community. You, all of us, are called to make it happen.

Let's begin our work right now. Let's get real, past all the symbolism, to what you need to do this Advent. Picture a person you have hurt. How have you hurt them? How will you apologize? How will you make amends? What will you do to change, enabling you to treat them with love today and in the future? Do this with every person you have wronged.

Picture a person who you have been indifferent to, a person you have failed to love. How will you initiate a relationship? How will you serve them? How will you love them? Our work must continue until we love every person, God and our self.

We are faced with the same decision we face every Advent. Will we choose comfort or curriculum? Will we retreat into the cozy familiarity of this season, or will we dare to confront the hard lessons that God has waiting for us on the mountain?

It's not an easy trip, up that mountain. Many of us don't want to go. It's a lot of work. It's treacherous beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Most of us prefer to spend Advent curled up under a blanket, celebrating with certain people we like, in front of a crackling fire. We prefer the mountain postcard, the nativity scene, rather than the real thing.

Gary Haugen spoke about a trip to Mt. Rainier when he was ten years old. He decided not to go on the summit hike with his family because he was afraid, and so he spent the afternoon in the Visitor Center at the base of the trail. He looked at the exhibits and watched all the videos. As he watched the loop for the umpteenth time he thought, “Maybe it would be fun to be one of the people going up the mountain rather than watching the video about the people going up the mountain.” Sitting in that visitor center, he started to feel sleepy, bored and small. His family came back clear-eyed, with flushed cheeks, full of life.

What do you want for our family of faith? Our country? Yourself? Sleepy, bored, and small? Or clear-eyed, flushed-cheeked, and full of life? God is saying to you through Isaiah. Come, go up the mountain of the Lord. There I, God, will teach you My ways, and You will walk in My paths. You will hammer your swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks. Walk in My light, the light of the Lord!

Our Advent journey begins today. Thanks be to God. Amen