



“From Mountaintop to Manger”

Isaiah 2: 1-5

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“The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples, 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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

The holidays are fast approaching and that means Christmas parties. Sometimes they are nothing but fantastic fun, but often they have awkward moments of introductions and stumbling over conversation. I bet you’d all appreciate a great ice breaker you can use in the buffet line. Are you ready?

At the most recent Presbytery meeting, Dr. Martha Moore-Keish, Professor of Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, relayed an old truth she had heard years ago. When it comes to parties, Presbyterians are especially lucky because of all of the Sunday school training and sermons we’ve heard. Presbyterians can walk into a party and go up to anyone there and say, “Hey, I know you! I know you! You are . . . not God.”

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The book of Isaiah, the source of this morning’s scripture, is very long: it has 66 chapters. If you’re like me, you grew up thinking that the book of Isaiah was written by a guy named . . . Isaiah. Maybe I didn’t think it through too carefully, because 66 chapters is a lot to say—and it covers hundreds of years. Scholars tell us the book of Isaiah actually has multiple authors and can be divided into three sections.

First Isaiah is Chapters 1-39 and was written in 8th century BCE. Second Isaiah, Chapters 40-55 was written in the 6th century BCE, when the Israelites were kicked out of their land and living

in exile in Babylon. Third Isaiah is written after 539 BCE when the Israelites returned to their home.

Here's a slightly more complex look at that time period—there's a lot to explore for those of you who are intrigued by history and how we see God involved in the rise and fall of powers in the world. But that's a bit much to cover this morning. Let's summarize by saying "Isaiah was not written by one guy named Isaiah."

Rather than finding this multiple author reality upsetting, I see it as beautiful. The Harper Collins Study Bible says about Isaiah, "Despite the different historical settings . . . and the clear evidence of multiple authorship, there is a certain overarching unity of the book [T]he book of Isaiah moves from . . . judgment to . . . salvation."

The people of Israel found it easier to know who God isn't—the Babylonians—than imagine who God is. Listen to today's scripture, written when danger was looming from nearby unfriendly tribes, Isaiah writes, "In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house SHALL be established as the highest of mountains, and SHALL be raised above the hills; all the nations SHALL stream to it." What do you hear in that verse?

Here's what I hear: There is certainty in the use of the word SHALL. The author doesn't say maybe or probably or hopefully . . . the word is SHALL. Things aren't perfect right now but good days are ahead. God will be clearly in charge. And God is so mighty and powerful God must be on the highest point imaginable, distant and far, at the top of the mountain.

Several weeks ago, Rev. Jennie Sankey and I went with a clergy group to the NC Mountains for an overnight retreat. As the sun began to fall, three of us walked from the house directly up . . . through piles of leaves and over brambles and between branches and even around a huge gate to the top of a hill. The "up" felt pretty severe, and our continuous conversation paused several times as we struggled to catch our breath.

When the three of us made it to the top, we fell silent as we took in this view. And now we were breathless because it was just so clear that yes, God is at the top of the mountain. Surely this is why so many in our congregation hike—many Pleasant Hill members' Facebook posts have been set in the nearby mountains these last few months.

"Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For all of Biblical history, God has been on that mountaintop. Why do we think to be closer to God we need to hike over and under and around all sorts of obstacles? Why do we imagine God as so far away? Maybe it's more comfortable to think of God as far away, high on that mountaintop, judging us from a distance, and far removed from the everyday dealings of the world.

My daughter Grace attends Texas Christian University. Before graduating from college, all Texas schools require education students to take—wait for it—“Texas and US History.” Hmmm. What does this say about world view? Just last week her professor handed out this visual illustration of attitude.

Grace’s class got a laugh out of this illustration. But I ask you, is that far off from how many of us see the world? What if we did some rearranging to illustrate reality. First, let’s include God. With apologies to Texans, how about instead of Texas, we put God as the center part of this page. Actually, God gets the whole page. Then the world. Then the United States. And then Georgia.

How would it impact the way we live our everyday lives if we saw ourselves as living completely inside God’s world? God not on some distant mountaintop but absolutely everywhere.

This is the first week of Advent, when we begin waiting for the birth of the Christ child. God saw that the mountaintop image, the mighty and all powerful Oz kind of God, was not working. And so God sent God’s own self in Jesus Christ to live among us and show us how to be.

Isaiah 2:3 predicts optimistically that all people will say: “Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” That 8th century BCE prediction came true in God’s own way, when Jesus, the “word of the LORD” spent his entire life teaching us his ways and inviting us to walk in his paths.

Jesus even employed the mountaintop motif for those of us who don’t catch on very quickly. He said his most clear instructions about how we should live in the Sermon on the Mount. People did “stream to him,” more than 5000, more than had RSVP’d for dinner. In Matthew 5 Jesus says love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Do not judge so that you may not be judged. You cannot serve God and wealth. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

If we follow Jesus’ counsel, the words of Isaiah come true: people “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 anymore.” Put these words of Isaiah and Jesus together. We cannot “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and lift up our sword. If we “turn the other cheek” we don’t tolerate hate. If we take “you cannot serve God and wealth” seriously, we don’t manipulate the law for our own benefit. If we “treat our neighbors as ourselves” we stop the cutting sarcasm, the looks of disdain, and our intentional exclusion of someone from the group.

When times seem the most disturbing, we SHALL lift up the optimism of Isaiah that moves from mountain judgment to intimate unity. During the darkest times of apartheid, South African theologian Dirk Smit was dreaming of The Confession of Belhar. During Hitler’s reign of power, Karl Barth was turning the wording of The Declaration of Barmen over and over in his head.

During this time of deep tension in our own country, I invite you to tune out the talking heads whose gloom and doom rhetoric will get under your skin if you hear it 24 hours a day. Instead, take a walk and notice God at work all around you. Tune in to the poets, theologians, singers, rappers, sculptors, writers and the everyday blue collar optimists who are speaking to us. They are putting forward great utopian visions of when “all nations will stream to the Lord’s house” AND they are reminding us that the Lord is standing right next to you in your kitchen.

It’s time to move on from being so sure who God ISN’T – and look for who God IS, in the regular, everyday goings on of our lives. The man who helps your child up when she falls. The school counselor who lets you cry out your teenage angst in her office. The relative who just . . . lets you off the hook for a while. The person who loves you and is brave enough to tell you the truth of your harmful actions. The politician who advocates for justice. The stranger who gives generously to people she will never meet. That quiet voice in your mind that says, “Respond in love.” As Advent begins, we celebrate God coming down from the mountain and being with us in the manger.

“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Amen.

¹ Slide One: Awkward Christmas Party photo

² Slide Two: Simple Timeline of Isaiah

³ First Isaiah from 8th century BCE is chapters 1-39, Second Isaiah from 6th century BCE is chapters 40-55, Third Isaiah post 539 BCE is chapters 56-66.

⁴ Slide Three: Complex Timeline of Isaiah

⁵ J.J.M. Roberts in *The HarperCollins Study Bible, Revised Edition*, ed. Harold W. Attridge. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, p 914.

⁶ Slide Four: View from top of mountain near Jane Fahey’s residence in Sylva, NC

⁷ Slide Five: Photos of PHPC members in the mountains (Wintle, Webb, Reineking, Madden, Sankey)

⁸ Slide Six: Texas World View drawing