

# “Up to the Mountain”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – November 18, 2018*

Stewardship Commitment / Thanksgiving Sunday

Psalm 33:12-22

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 1:1-3, 2:1-4

The narrative arc over the past months has been telling a powerful story: God delivers the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt, creates a covenant with them, brings them to the Promised Land, gives them judges and kings, and establishes them as a nation. But they are a tiny nation stuck between greater world powers, and so they frequently wonder whether other gods might be a better bet than their own. In the past couple of weeks, we have met the prophets Elisha and Micah, who bring the word of the Lord to the people of Israel, reminding them that God is their creator, redeemer and sustainer; their rock and their hope.

This morning, we encounter the prophecies of Isaiah, who lived in a chaotic, warring world: Israel was threatened by the powerful Assyrians to the north and east and menaced by the Egyptians to the south and west. The leaders of Israel were constantly pre-occupied with what they needed to do to protect themselves, concentrating their efforts on building bigger and stronger armaments to fight off neighboring nations; fear was rampant. Internally, the neediest of the needy – the widows and the orphans – were being neglected in an *I got mine, you get yours* society.

But out of that turmoil, there was one voice and one vision that stood out; to the world that was warring and fearing, exploiting and forgetting, Isaiah rose up and called out: “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken...” (1:2) Isaiah had a vision, which was of God’s vision. The thing that separated him from the other voices was that he believed in God’s message; he believed that the sickness which overcomes us and draws us to act out our violent insecurities must be stopped. God offers an alternate vision; and without that vision, scripture tells us, the people perish.<sup>1</sup>

In the balance of the first chapter, which we skipped over in today’s reading, Isaiah laid out what he had witnessed: desolation, unfaithfulness, and trampling on the poor. While there are brief interruptions as God calls for repentance and offers glimpses of hope, they are drowned out by images of violence and rebellion. But, chapter 2 begins as though Isaiah is starting over again. What he sees is not taking place now, but “in the days to come.” People from every nation – including those who are the enemies of Israel and Judah – will stream to Mt. Zion. God’s instruction will go forth from Jerusalem; and the people will be transformed by this teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Montgomery, “Closer than You Think”

This is “the word that Isaiah *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” (2:1) How exactly does one *see* words? It must mean that they are envisioned, brought off the page as more than mere language. Isaiah envisions them; they have come alive in his seeing, so maybe they can also come to life for those of us who listen to them over two and a half millennia later. “In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains.” (2:2) Rising up higher than all the surrounding hills, all the nations of the world will flow toward Mt. Zion and its house, the Temple of Jerusalem, like a giant upstream river.

God pronounces justice among the gathered peoples who have come for this teaching; and as a result of those lessons, the following amazing actions result: “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.” (2:4) No longer will sons and daughters be trained to kill others or die themselves; they will have no weapons with which to do such things. All they will now be trained to do is reap the grain and prune the trees of the land together. Soon, the promise says, thoughts of war will disappear completely from human minds.

Of course, God’s peace is not merely the absence of war; shalom is wholeness and unity. God’s vision is the abolishment of what we seem to desire and fixate upon; namely our victories at the expense of others. *No longer*, says God. War will completely disappear, and its tools will be changed into objects of peaceful co-existence. Can we, like Isaiah, believe it? Or is it only a pipe dream which vanishes into the air?<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, we share a common conviction with the prophet Isaiah; our most precious promises are also attached to tangible realities like mountains and temples, plows and pruning hooks. Only for us, it is things like water, bread and wine. For, in these very concrete ways, God draws nearer to us and offers us hope for a day when joy extinguishes sorrow, when peace silences violence, when faith in the future becomes present reality.

The prophet Isaiah is trying to tell us that, even in the midst of a broken and conflict-ridden reality, God has set a vision before us. Although some of our relationships are fractured and responsibilities thrown out-of-balance, what matters is that we can – with God’s help – make things right again. We can acknowledge before God and one another that healing can come where brokenness currently rests – in our families, our communities, our nation, and our world.

As author Amy Oden says, “*the world is going to hell in a handbasket* is not a Christian view of the world. It is not a witness of faith in the God who has delivered us from bondage, demonstrated divine love in the Word made flesh, and announced the renewal of all things.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe the prophet’s gift is not to see magically into the future,

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<sup>2</sup> John Holbert, “Real Peace”

<sup>3</sup> Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.com*

but to be able to better discern the mysteries of the present. If we can believe these words – if we can *see* these words – then we can watch for, prepare for, hope for, and work for God’s coming kingdom of justice, love and peace.

So, what does God’s future look like? According to Isaiah, our weapons of war – those instruments that we trust in and rely on – will be repurposed to help nourish the world. Instead of killing each other, we will be feeding each other. We will no longer learn these ways of war – its fear, pain, horror and anxiety. Instead, we will teach one another the ways of life and peace, of justice and mercy, of kindness and humility.

If this is a future that God is promising, the coming act in the story the God is authoring, then what does it mean for us in the here and now? For starters, we can begin acting as if these things were true; as if God’s promise is more trustworthy than the other narratives that we may be hearing. Even if others might tell us a different way is just a pipedream, we can still attune our ears and eyes more to God’s voice and vision than competing sounds and sights of violence and fear. And so, if God really cares about what happens to creation, then how will we better tend to what God has made? And if God is ushering in a kingdom where no one goes hungry or thirsty, how will we work for better systems of distributing food and clean water? And if God is transforming weapons into tools meant for something useful and beautiful, then how can we also turn our weapons – whether they are guns or words, bombs or policies – away from each other and use them to create peace?<sup>4</sup>

These are the kinds of questions that this reading from Isaiah reminds us to be asking of ourselves; because God’s people have always and continue to represent an alternate vision for the world: one of unity and peace, rather than division and conflict. While it may not always seem like reality these days, the mountain of our Lord towers above all others surrounding it; God’s teachings – and especially, we believe, the good news revealed through Jesus Christ – can raise us and all peoples above the mire of violence and fear that so often seems to be the way of the world.

For despite its many mis-steps, the church throughout the past two-thousand years has been the visible means of God’s shalom; it was the church that created the first hostels and hospitals, that established schools and universities, that stood alongside those fighting for voting rights and equal rights. The church has led the way in hunger relief and medical missions; it has advocated for peaceful mediation and human rights.

Today, we dedicate pledges of financial support for the mission and ministry of this particular church and, by extension, the hope of God’s coming kingdom of justice and peace. In doing so, we re-commit ourselves to the word of hope that Isaiah asks us to see: a coming day when we are no longer threatened by, nor are we participants in, a

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<sup>4</sup> Teri Peterson, “The Lord, the Great King”

world filled with far too many swords and spears. Instead, the resources at our disposal will be dedicated to planting, growing and harvesting; to gathering together at tables and feasting on the good gifts that God provides.

For if this story is true, and the God who creates, redeems and nurtures God's people is truly generous, then we will grow more and more generous as we seek to live into God's future. And if everything truly is a gift from God, then we will learn to increasingly open our hands to share rather than insist that it has been earned and belongs to us. And if God is made known to us in Jesus Christ: who lifts us the lowly, sits at table with the outcast, reaches out to the stranger, and cobbles together a community that is accepting and loving, then we will seek to do the same.

None of us can do this alone; and, even together, it will only happen in fits and starts. The church continues to be an imperfect institution; these days, it sometimes seems not to be the tallest of mountains; it can appear as if the nations are no longer streaming to it. And yet, it still is the Temple of God, the holy place where God has chosen to dwell. Therefore, through it we put our faith into action; we look to turn this ultimate hope into reality: that the day is coming when God's vision of peace will be the way of the world. AMEN.