"Glory to God in the Highest"

Isaiah 2:1-2a

"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 mountians, and shall be raised above the hills."

Our Advent theme this year is "Walking in the Light." And this theme is based on the first five verses of the second chapter of Isaiah which gives us every reason to want to "walk in the light."

During these weeks leading up to Christmas, we are to be rejoicing that Christ has come and will come again, and we are to be reflecting on how we are to live in the meantime. These five verses in Isaiah help us do both. And so, over the next four weeks, we will be reading these five verses - and we will be opening this text, verse by verse, in hopes that it will open up us, week by week. We will, together, "walk in the light of the Lord" allowing the Scriptures to silence our lives enough so that we are able to hear a new word of Hope...of Peace...of Joy...of Love.

Or maybe Scripture won't be silencing our lives as much as it will be *re-voicing the longings of our lives*. So that our longings align with God's longing for us.

By the time Advent comes around, we have already been primed by our culture for this Big Event of "Christmas." The catalogues have begun arriving at my house, showing us pictures of happy families in matching pajamas enjoying a quiet moment together (L.L. Bean). Commercials flash across the television screen, promising that if we get the latest new technological gadget (the Kindle or the i-Pad) then our futures will be "set." And then there's the other end of the spectrum: store displays that evoke nostalgia and wonder about one's childhood (maybe not my childhood – but perhaps your childhood), reminding us that perhaps we are longing for the simplicity of our "past" and that is our wish this year.

We are invited to rush together toward the coming Big Event of Christmas, when all the sudden on that magical morning – our dreams come true. And while it would be easy for me as a preacher to just stand up here and just proclaim that all these "worldly things" are keeping us from experiencing the real meaning of Christmas...the truth is - the reason these cultural messages are so powerful is that our human yearning

for something better is so real, and so very profound. We have to pay attention to them.[1]

Our consumer culture is living in its own mini "meantime" this weekend between Black Friday and Cyber Monday - two days when our longings for something more can be fulfilled for a cheaper price tag. And the helpful thing about this meantime is that at least we're encouraged to be thinking beyond ourselves, right? We're to be thinking about the people we love in our life - and what we might buy them for Christmas to express that love. There is a shift of focus...even if subtlety...from Thanksgiving (who and what I am thankful for?) to the shopping weekend (now what should I get for those for whom I'm thankful?). It's brilliant really. Strategically timed.

But as a people of faith - we know there is more to these longings and more to this season…that it's not just about us and the ones we love…that it's primarily about the one who loved us enough to come down as Love itself – Love Incarnate.

But even before the celebration of Christmas comes the preparation - the incubation - of Advent. The Advent season is about preparing for the coming of the Christ child...it is about waiting, once again, for Jesus to be born into the world, and for Love Incarnate to dwell in our lives. But it is also about preparing for the second coming of Christ into the world...a time that we can only imagine...a time of perfect Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. *A time when our hearts deepest longings have finally found their forever home*.

Isaiah holds up this vision of our True Longings. He takes us to a mountain and shows us what our hearts are actually tuned for. First, he shows us that God's presence, by God's own initiative, will become more evident and compelling: the Lord's house will be established as the highest of the mountains, and the nations shall stream to it. People everywhere will be drawn to God, from all nations, all cultures, all races. They will converge out of a shared desire for divine instruction. This is a revolutionary contrast to our current complacency and cynicism as a culture about God and God's church. Think about how radical a promise this is: **that we will all seek God together, and God will be present.**

As one theologian put it, *"Here Isaiah is declaring that one day we can quit trying to get by on scraps and remembrances of spiritual experiences. God's presence will be made manifest. God's house will be*

[1] Stacey Simpson Duke, "Isaiah 2:1-5: Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1 – Advent through Transfiguration*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press) 2010, pg 2.

established, and we shall stream to it. We will press toward it together to be taught and to be changed."[2]

I like how she emphasizes that we will be changed. This is not a utopic vision where we are perfect upon arrival. This is a universal worshipping of God that perfects us as we learn and experience and grow together – as we "walk in the light of the Lord" together.

But that is a topic for future weeks…for today - we are looking just at these first two verses in Isaiah chapter two. Verse one says that Isaiah "saw" this word...it doesn't say that this is the word that he heard...or the word that he read...it says, "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz saw..."

In other words...there is a three dimensional, real-life quality to this vision that Isaiah has...it is not just a message on a page or words that go in one ear and out another. *There is something very embodied about these words*. It's like the difference between reading a recipe on a page, and tasting the finished product when it's steaming on the stove. It's like the difference between seeing the sweater in a catalogue and going to the store to try it on and look at it in a 3-way mirror. It's like the difference between reading a play in English class and going to live performance in a theatre. The word that Isaiah proclaims to us is a vision that actively takes us to a new place…rather than just being a dream that we passively experience while we're asleep.

Now I know there's a brand new Harry Potter movie out - and I haven't seen it yet. I'm a bit behind. But - there's a delightful passage in the first Harry Potter book that comes to life in the first movie. You'll recognize this scene: Harry scoots into an unused room of the Hogwarts castle, and in this room he stumbles upon a large claw-footed mirror. When he looks into it, he sees the most wondrous thing: he sees not only his own reflection but also a whole crowd of people behind him. Among the crowd he sees the moving images of his dead parents, smiling at him, reaching to touch him with pride, being right there with him. He brings his friend Ron to see his dead parents in the mirror, but instead Ron sees something else. He sees himself a little older, captain of the Quidditch team, holding the winners' cup. Harry is later made the wiser about it all by the headmaster of Hogwarts, Dumbledore. The mirror is called Erised–that is, desire spelled backwards, the way a mirror might read it. The mirror shows nothing more or less than the deepest desires of the heart. Harry longed for a past he was denied, Ron for a future he doubted he could have. Professor

[2] Ibid., pg 4.

Dumbledore explains that the happiest person is the one who can look in the Mirror of Erised and see nothing but himself. It does no good to dwell on dreams and forget to live, he says.[3]

Some of us dwell on dreams of the past or dreams of the future and forget to live in the present. And yet it is true that *true* Christian thinking is weighted more toward the future than the past. We are given reason to hope for more to come than we could ever imagine. We are told that the kingdom of heaven is where we will want to live, because in it life will be what God always intended it to be. And so, yes, passages like this one in Isaiah encourage us to live with a sense of expectancy about the end time. **But we don't live for the end time; we live in the meantime in the light of the end time.** We are transformed in the present by the consciousness of what is to come.[4] It's as if we are looking in the mirror of Erised and we see Isaiah's vision, but we don't just see it as something far off in the future (like Ron holding his trophy), but we see it as something that we can be a part of right now in the present.

You see, Isaiah saw this word...and what he saw - he wants us to see too. But do we see what he sees when we read these words, that seem utopic, about nations coming together - all streaming toward God...a God who is not made in their own image, but a God whose image holds each of them within his or her own? Can we see this? Can we picture the House of the Lord high on a mountain, a place where we desire to go...the one and only place that captures our gaze and the one and only place where we desire to go?

It almost seems like a fairy tale. For God's dwelling place to be high on a mountain...and for it to be almost magnetic in its force of attraction. The truth is, most of us struggle to come into *this* house of the Lord regularly...into this church...not because we do not want to, but because there are a million other places that are drawing our attention...and in turn...our attendance. There are all kinds of things that keep us from coming into the Lord's house.

And yet, I wonder, if part of Isaiah's vision is something that we don't have to wait for – something that we can do now…that is – recognize the glory of God, see God's house as a place where we need to be, and go there. It must be intentional that before we can get to the nations coming together and then dropping

---

[3] Taken from George Mason's sermon, "No Time Like the End Time" preached on 2 December 2001 at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Accessed on 27 November 2010 at http://www.wilshirebc.org/sermons/article232319.htm . (J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorceror's Stone, Scholastic Press, 1997, p. 214.)

[4] Ibid.

their weapons in peace – that *we first must simply get to the Lord's house*.

Christmas reminds us that the first house of the Lord Jesus was a manger in an inn…and the closest company of the Lord were his two teenage parents, a lot of barn animals, and some lowly shepherds who stood with their flocks nearby in a field. It is to this humble house – that our Lord came into the world…from on high…to our level…in our world…in our time…to face our struggles…

And yet – despite this humblest of beginnings – Luke's gospel tells us that the angels burst forth in song singing, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"* (Luke 2:14) Glory to God in the Highest! God came as a lowly babe to teach us how to exalt our lofty God. Both of these truths are held in tension during Advent…the incarnation of Christ and the transcendence of God.

If Isaiah wants us to imagine that the Lord's house is on the highest of the mountains, Advent reminds us that our high and glorious God came down to earth to dwell among us – and that his first earthly house – was a very humble one.

And we are to glorify these humble beginnings and ponder how they might become our own beginnings this Advent…how the Christ child might be born in us anew – perhaps as a powerful and mighty Savior…but maybe first just as a humble child, needing its mother to nurse him and his father to teach him, and needing a community of faith to raise him to know his Father above.

We cannot celebrate the incarnation of God as the baby Jesus at Christmas without also celebrating the "otherness" of God - the power and majesty of God that draws us nearer and nearer to the manger. Even before the Light of Christ comes into the world as Jesus…there is some light that is beckoning us to the manger in the first place…perhaps it is the light streaming down of our most High and Holy God…shining forth our path…inviting us to take the first step.

This Advent – maybe the challenge of the season is to think about God before we think about ourselves. And even before we think about those that we love and want to buy gifts for. We don't have to wait for some future time for Isaiah's vision to come to fruition. We can do our part now. We may be one tiny part of just one of many nations – but we can do our part.

More people might be streaming to the shopping malls today than they are to the House of the Lord…<u>but you are not one of them</u>. You have chosen to come here – and you have glorified God in your coming. Might this be

our Advent promise to one another – that we will come here to this place – week after week – to remind ourselves that God is God and we are not? To remind us that the humble beginnings of Jesus are an example for how we are to come before our Glorious God? As humble servants?

The kind of Hope that we see in Isaiah is what allows us to long for something in our life that is greater than just a temporary fix. Hope gives us the vision of Isaiah and embeds it in our hearts as the compass of our lives...as the words, which, when embodied, help us know that even though we are in the "meantime," we are already basking in light and glory of our Most High God.

Amen.