

*From the Mountain to the Stable*

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Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:35-44

Even though I have spent most of my adult life in the Midwest, my formative years were in the Appalachian mountains of Western Pennsylvania, and my summers were spent in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The mountains hold a draw for me. I resonate with the image that is in Isaiah. God's house shall be established as the highest of mountains. It is there that God shall look out and be the judge of the nations. High above the horizon where we mortals dwell; there will be God.

When I find myself drowning in a list of things to do, whenever I become so inundated with commitments and the day does not hold enough hours to get everything done, I literally lift up my head from the minutia of details and think about the image. There will come a time when I will be on that mountaintop with God. If I were on that mountaintop, I would not be standing in this crazy line trying to checkout. If I were above all of the details, I would not find myself wide-awake in the middle of the night thinking about what needs to be done over the coming days.

The prophecy of Isaiah is rich with imagery. And during this season of Advent, I hope Isaiah will speak to you in ways that bring this season to life. Isaiah talks about God's presence in our lives now. In these next few weeks prior to Christmas when our stress level moves up the scale toward overload, the words of Isaiah may be helpful for our spiritual, emotional and physical preparation to welcome God's son into our homes and our hearts.

Our First reading is from those beautiful Words of Isaiah 2:1-5

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! This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God

Now away from the heights comes the depths in the reading in Matthew 24:35-44

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God

Paired with Isaiah’s words are these apocalyptic warnings from Matthew. Frankly, Matthew’s words are rather disturbing. Our surroundings will be familiar; it is then that the Lord comes. Two are in the field, one will be taken and one will be left; two are checking out at the Bed Bath and Beyond line and poof one will be taken and one will not! So, the message is be prepared, be ready. Nothing like adding to the stress of the season! We need to be aware of our neighbors and care for each other and oh by the way, get ready! This can happen at any time and out of nowhere the Lord returns and it will not all be flowers and light! How do we prepare?

This is the challenge that comes to us in the beginning of our Advent season. We start not with familiar angel visits to young girls or decrees to go to Bethlehem. We start with looking upward to the mountain where God dwells and we are hit with words of warning that God will be coming back and we better be ready! The first Sunday of Advent paints the backdrop for the rest of the Advent season leading up to celebrating Christ's birth. Here is the back-story that emphasizes how Christ's birth is such an amazing gift!

The words of Matthew bother us. What if we don't make the cut? What will happen if we fail to prepare? We have been told to get ready for 2000 years and so far, so good, nothing has happened. Quite frankly, such talk will not affect us as we watch the Timberwolves play later today or the Vikings on Monday night. We are people more comfortable with the immediate and the here and now than distant mountains and hours that will come when we do not know when.

The words in Isaiah and the end time words of Matthew point to how incredible it is that God became human to be with us. We do not understand God's realm, but we do know about what it means to be human. And that is where God begins with us.

Prior to Jesus' birth, God gave the law. The law was to be followed. If you broke the law, you had to fix it. There was no relationship. It tells us what to do and we are to follow it.

But the road to the stable changes that. God becomes one of us. God becomes human. By that act of being human in Christ and Christ's death and resurrection, we have grace. We are made right not by our own devices but through Christ. The law guides us; it is grace that takes us through the journey.

That is why the Christmas message is amazing. God chooses not to be above us on the mountaintop but comes down to the horizon place where we are. God could have stayed above us all. Pronouncements could have come from the mountains after all that is where Moses received the law from a top of the mountains shrouded in clouds.

Isaiah could only dream it but we know it, that God chose to become flesh. God became one of us, one who has trouble grasping illusive end times and what it would mean to reside with God.

The wondrous thing about Christmas is not the angel's songs or the journey of Wiseman but the grittiness of the stable; and Jesus enters into the messy things of life. God in all God's majesty, and glory in all of God's creative power, he is born like each of us. A child, weak and dependent, needing to grow so that he acts and speaks God's word in ways that we can follow.

That is what we have to share with the world. Not our attempts at perfection or even the glory that will come, but that God loved the world so much, so much that God became one of us.

I once visited a struggling Presbyterian church in Milwaukee, in a place where the neighborhood had changed and people were not coming to the church. It was barely holding on by a few loyal members who had long since moved farther from the city. Their current distress was the building itself. The church was built with wide majestic steps leading up to it. The sanctuary was at least a full story above street level. I could just imagine the discussion that went into designing this sweeping magnificent building. It must have come right out of Isaiah. God's home is established on high and we will make people realize that every time they come into this house of worship. They will have to climb a lot of stairs. In their desire to lift God up to the heights, they neglected to think how God's followers who would age. Their legs would get weak and it would become more difficult to climb the many steps to attend worship in such a glorious place. Soon the sweeping front steps up into God's home are just for show -- you now enter around the side door where the elevator is!

The Christmas message is that God becomes accessible. So, accessible that God comes down those stairs and meets us where we are. We have a glimpse and a promise of that right here in the table before us. At the beginning of this season, we are reminded with the simple bread and juice what it means for God to be present with us.

Our challenge is: how do we make God accessible to those who do not come through these doors – and those who do not even reach our doors. One way is by instilling fear and scaring people into following God’s law. Many of our faithful saints of the past have tried to do so with limited success. But that does not paint the true picture of God in our lives. We can share that God chose to become like us so that we can know God. As one of us, Jesus teaches us to feed the hungry and to give encouragement to those who are in despair; to provide compassion and stand with those who fear.

As the traditions and activities overtake our lives, let us pause and take a deep breath and think of the image of God residing on that glorious mountaintop. Then as we look around at what is ahead of us let us also realize that God does not stay there waiting for us to climb to that mountain peak but that God enters into our world with its frightening reality of bad choices and wrong decisions.

In Advent, we journey from the mountaintop glory to the lowly broken down stable. In faith, we know there will be a time when we will reside with God on God’s terms in ways that we really cannot fathom, but in the meantime let us live with the knowledge that God chose to come to us on human terms in order to show us the way and that has made all the difference. Thank be to God.  
Amen.