

“The Mountain of the Lord’s House”

“O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD!”

The Adirondack High Peaks are a series of forty-six mountains that *“offer a gratifying challenge for avid hikers and spiring hikers alike.”* Located in the Adirondack Wilderness Area in northern New York State, the High Peaks range in height from Mt. Couchsachaga at 3,820’ to Whiteface Mountain, site of the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid in 1980 at 4,867’, to Mt. Marcy at 5,344’. Dedicated hikers who complete all forty-six hikes become known as “46ers,” an accomplishment that is a source of great pride among hikers in the North Country.

Even if you never have the opportunity to hike up one of the High Peaks, mountains have a magnetic attraction, offering majestic vistas for those who successfully scale their heights. Mountains bring us up from the sphere of everyday life, offering a fresh perspective on the world that living in the lowlands cannot afford us. It is not surprising that mountains were often considered holy places where gods dwelled, sites of pilgrimages where the faithful would journey to come into the divine presence. In Ancient Near East religions, it was believed that gods preferred mountains or high places. The Mesopotamian ziggurat, a mountain-shaped temple, was the house of the gods, and Canaanite deities lived on Mt. Zaphon as well as other peaks. In Celtic religions, mountains were considered “thin places,” a term for *“those rare locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses.”* It is in this context that George Frederic Handel set the words of the prophet to music in his majestic *Messiah*, calling out *“O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into a high mountain.”*

For Israel, the centre of their religious life was Mount Zion, the hill in Jerusalem upon which the Temple was located. The Temple was far more than merely one of many houses of worship; it was the place where the Lord was believed to dwell, the destination of pilgrims who would travel up to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Several of the Psalms are Songs of Ascents, psalms sung by pilgrims as they made their journey to the Holy City to worship the Lord on his Holy Mountain:

- “Come, bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD, who stand by night in the house of the LORD! Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the

LORD. May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.”
– Psalm 134.

Our first lesson for this First Sunday of Advent is the call of the prophet Isaiah for God’s people to journey to the holy mountain, to worship the Lord God of Israel on Mount Zion. The passage is introduced by identifying its source as “*the word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.*” (Isaiah 2:1). It is a message of what will happen “*in days to come*” (2:2), a promise of peace with justice among nations spoken in the rhetorical power of poetry that makes the promise graphic and compelling. The prophetic voice announces what will happen and what the LORD (YHWH) and other will do, words that can also be found in the book of the prophet Micah (“*In days to come the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills.*” – Micah 4:1). The passage in both Isaiah and Micah is a prophetic hymn or promise of salvation; the proclamation is addressed to no particular audience but concerns all nations and all people who will listen.

- “This prophetic vision (like many in the Hebrew Bible) promises a future that contradicts the people’s present experiences ... the prophet simply tells the audience that the vision he saw for Judah and Jerusalem is for a future date – a hopeful time promised amid a dire present.” – Joel B. Kemp.

The sequence of future events is important in Isaiah’s proclamation. He speaks of the days to come in which “*the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it.*” (2:2). Among all the mountains of Israel, Zion shall be elevated and exalted because it is the mountain upon which God chooses to dwell. There will be a pilgrimage of all peoples to this mountain of the Lord – not only for Israel, but for “*all the nations.*” As they approach, these pilgrims will join in a song of ascent, a call to pilgrimage that expresses their reasons for coming to Zion: “*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.*” (2:3). The motivation for this pilgrimage, the attraction of Zion for these pilgrims, is clear: “*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.*” This instruction (*tora*) is understood as God’s invitation to know God more fully and to walk more closely with God along the very paths that God travels. God’s laws, instructions, and commandments are not seen as impediments to human joy or as heavy burdens that humans must bear; rather, they are expressions of God’s invitation to draw more closely to know not only God’s acts but also God’s ways (“*He made known his ways*

to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.” – Psalm 103:7). The Lord God of Israel who dwells in Zion will “*judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples*” (2:4), who will in turn transform their instruments of war into farming tools, inaugurating a permanent reign of peace. The nations come to Zion seeking instruction and revelation, and they – not God – destroy their weapons of war. “*Consequently, their acknowledgement of Yahweh and trust in Yahweh’s capacity to settle international disputes is the basis for peace.*” (Gene M. Tucker).

Isaiah’s setting of his prophecy “*in days to come*” is indefinite and distant, but not vague. It refers neither to the end of time nor beyond time, but within it; the prophet sees the destiny of Zion beyond his own days. “*Circumstances will change dramatically, and the Lord will reign, fundamentally as judge and peacemaker among nations*” (Tucker). “*The mountain of the LORD’S house*” shall be raised higher than any other mountain so that its prominence is clear not only to Israel but to all nations. Zion is celebrated as the city of the divine king, a citadel that can never be violated:

- “Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great king.” – Psalm 48:1-2.
- His abode shall be established in Salem, his dwelling-place in Zion. There he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war.” – Psalm 76:2-3.
- “He brought me, in visions of God, to the land of Israel, and set me down upon a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south.” – Ezekiel 40:2.

The mountain that was the destination for the pilgrims of Israel will now be the place to which people of all nations will journey to worship Israel’s God and to be taught his *torah*. A scene of judgment will be enacted, and the God of Jacob will finally settle divisions between the nations, bringing an end to warfare. What distinguishes Israel is the LORD and his *torah*, like all the other nations, they must make their own way to Zion and be taught God’s ways. In these latter days, Israel will join the nations to learn again God’s ways and to be taught his *torah* once more; Israel and the nations alike will stand under a similar rule of universal justice. “*Isaiah is not just a prophet of salvation but a prophet who sees God’s salvation affecting all nations and peoples.*” (Christopher Seitz).

The Hebrew word for “peace” (*shalom*) does not appear in this passage, but that is what the promise entails. Beyond the absence of military conflict, there will be justice, the resolution of conflicts based on the LORD’s justice. The transformation of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks represents a diversion of tools of destruction to tools that provide food. For Isaiah, a land ravaged by sword-wielding and spear-hurling soldiers is transformed into a fertile land in which every sword and spear become agricultural tools to provide food for a peace-filled community.

- “The time of this transformation of circumstances is not specified; indeed, the poem is vague on this point. But the announcement is concrete. That vision of peace finds its setting within history and connected to specific places makes it all the more difficult to ignore. This is not some mythical vision of peace but one that invited all who hear it to see God’s reign breaking forth in the concrete realities of human life. Any particular movement in the direction of peace with justice can be recognized as a sign of that reign.” – Tucker.

Our lesson ends with the prophet inviting the “*house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!*” (2:5). This verse is a call for response to the announcement of salvation. Having heard the announcement of the vision of peace for all peoples, the congregation of the faithful in Jerusalem is called to “*walk in the light of the LORD.*” Those who already live in the presence of God are admonished to take the first steps in the path that all nations will tread one day. The appropriate response to the vision of God’s reign is to be guided by it, to actualize hope through obedience.

- “Now, like then, a reminder of God’s ability and desire to turn weapons of war into tools for life is a needed balm and urgent challenge to God’s people. We, who are privileged to share God’s word in this time of suffering, anxiety, and war, can find in Isaiah a fellow-traveller to encourage, challenge, and strengthen us. As God and God’s people responded to the crises of their day, it is incumbent upon us to stand and do likewise in our day.” – Kemp.

The words of the prophet Isaiah will be heard in worship on all four Sundays of Advent, this season that begins the church year with a call to watch and wait for the coming of the Lord. Advent comes from a word meaning “coming,” identifying it as a season of preparation that looks forward to both the birth of Jesus and the coming of Christ at the *Parousia*, the “last days” when all of God’s promises will be fulfilled and God’s Will will be accomplished. It is a season in which we are called to heed the words of John the Baptist to “*prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths*

straight” (Matthew 3:3). While it is a season in which we prepare for our celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, it is also a time for us in the present day to look forward to the “*days to come*” when the promises of God will be fulfilled. It is a season in which we are called to join with God’s people of every generation to come into God’s presence so that “*he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.*” While it may not require us to ascend an actual mountain, it does mean that we are called to strive to come into God’s presence so that we might hear God’s Word and strive to live in obedience to God’s teaching, the hallmarks of true discipleship. It means honouring God’s commandment to “*remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy,*” which Martin Luther teaches us means that “*we are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God’s word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it.*” (*Small Catechism*). It means that as we prepare our homes for the coming of Christmas, we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ into our lives and look forward to that day when he will “*come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end.*” (Nicene Creed).

- “Advent reminds us that there are finite days in our finite lives until Christ comes again in Christ’s own infinite being. A seasonal reset paired with our finiteness leads to intercessions and responses that can be changed to reflect the newness and finiteness of this liturgical season, recognizing that our prayers are both for a moment in time and also connect us to the communion of saints beyond time and space.” – Yolanda Denson-Byers.

As ascending mountains such as the Adirondack High Peaks can offer us a majestic view of the wonders of God’s creation, coming into the presence of the Lord – which for Christians is wherever God’s Word is proclaimed and God’s holy sacraments are celebrated in the midst of God’s people – offers us a vision of God’s future in which all warfare, suffering, pain, and death will be no more, a peaceable kingdom where weapons of war will be transformed into tools of peace, where we’ll hear a hope-filled vision of a future in which the darkness of this present age will give way to God’s own brilliant light. Advent is a time for us to come into God’s presence, to hear God’s word of triumphant hope, and to “*walk in the light of the Lord.*” May we continue as pilgrims of old to come into God’s presence as we look forward to that day when our Lord will come to fulfill all that God desires for us “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Amen.