

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“View from a High Place”

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Isaiah 2:1-5

2 The word that Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

*2 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.*

*3 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.*

*4 He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

*5 O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!*

One of my favorite books was Stephen Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, the narrative of the Lewis and Clark led Corp of Discovery, which explored the Louisiana Purchase from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps the most moving part of that adventure was the crossing of the Continental Divide. Ambrose wrote, "Only a tiny number of people have ever had the experience of not knowing what they would see when they got to the top of the mountain or turned into a river or sailed around the tip of a continent. Meriwether Lewis expected that when he got up the mountain to the Divide, he would see something resembling the country he had already traveled through- long, sweeping valleys dropping down to a broader river valley."

Of course, today we know that Lewis did not find a long, sweeping valley. He found only more mountains. He saw, in his words, "an immense range of high

mountains still to the West, with tops covered with snow.” His journal did not indicate if he was excited or disappointed about that. But one can only imagine the shock and surprise that Lewis must have felt, for from the top of that mountain ridge he did not see the great river or the open plain to the Pacific that he was expecting. He did not see terrain similar to that which he had already crossed. With Lewis’ last step to the top of the Divide went decades of theory about the nature of the Rocky Mountains and the hopes for an easy passage to the Pacific. And with one glance from one single man, both theory and hope were crushed. Another historian writes of that moment, “the geography of hope had to give way to the geography of reality.”

On this first Sunday in Advent, it is as if we too are standing on the top of a great mountain. We are on the edge of seeing something new. We are on the cusp of receiving something long awaited. Unlike Meriwether Lewis however, Advent means that the geography of human reality is about to be encountered with the geography of God’s hope. We come to the top of this Advent mountain, perhaps expecting more of the same on the other side. The problems of life probably won’t change too dramatically. The fears and anxiety that grip us will still be strong. The darkness of evil will be present. War and terror and violence cannot be dismissed. The issues of health and relationships and work will still weigh upon our hearts and minds. The cultural Christmas will turn up its volume and set us up for expectations that can be easily purchased but are usually disappointing. So we have struggled to this high place of Advent, but with diminished expectations, prepared for more of what we have already lived through. We might ask, “Have past Christmases really changed anything?” And so it is about this time every year.

But today we are invited to glimpse into God’s future, a new reality, a divine alternative. The prophet Isaiah’s words were a spirit-filled visualization of God’s new world- in, through, and beyond the distressing realities of his time. Isaiah was a crazy, radical dreamer. He spoke of a view from a place lifted up by God, a place above all of the confusion and disappointment below. This high place created a vantage point to see God’s possibility, an alternative to what was happening in the world. He saw a community oriented around God’s redemptive power. He saw a world filled with God’s justice, with healing and salvation fulfilled in the very events of the humanity. He saw a world at peace with swords turned into plowshares and tanks into tractors with the way of God as the final arbiter. He saw a world in which people brought divisions to God and were made whole in the work of pursuing God’s priorities.

I am struck when I read accounts of astronauts on their first journey into space. They talk about their initial view of their home, planet Earth out the window of their space capsule or shuttle. It is a view that most of us saw for the first time in pictures from the crew of Apollo 8 at Christmas in 1968. From space, earth appears as a different place. There are no borders or divisions, only a common planet shared by everyone. The higher view yields a different sense of reality. The higher view offers an angle of new possibility. That higher view is always the vantage point of God.

This past August my family vacationed at Walt Disney World. The only theme park we visited was Epcot Center. While enjoying the 95 degree temperatures and high humidity, I paused in the shade of a tree for a few minutes to watch a stage show. Beside me was a young man with his toddler daughter in a stroller. He also looked like he could use a break from the heat and humidity. But she was agitated, fussy and

complaining. There was seemingly nothing he could do to please her or to settle her down. I thought to myself, "I am so glad those days are past for me!" Finally the young man reached down and picked up his daughter. He placed her on his sweaty shoulders and pointed to the characters singing and dancing on stage. Suddenly her mood changed. She enjoyed the view from this high place. In a matter of moments she was smiling and clapping her hands to the music.

It is easy to dismiss Isaiah's talk as unrealistic. And wishing for such a changed world to come to be is not enough to make it actually happen. But Isaiah's vision was shared to move the people of Israel into living and speaking as God intended them to live and speak. Isaiah's vision for us today draws attention to God's future for us and our world. It is a gift, a gift to illuminate what God really wants for us so we can begin working for it to happen.

This is a season that takes us to a mountain where we can view a different world. With the eyes to see and the ears to hear, we can trust in a day that there will be promise and good will toward all. From the top of that mountain we might actually see a manger and hear the song of the heavenly host.