

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

Isaiah 2:1-5

If you look at one of the typical scenic calendars we get from businesses and churches, many of them show scenes of mountains. Iowa is great for farming, but it is not a tourist site like the hills of the Ozarks, the Alps, or Colorado's "Rocky Mountain High," as John Denver sang about. Mountains are associated with scenery because they aren't the same as a flat prairie.

Mountains are not only scenic; they are associated with what is beyond this world. You have to go up to get to a mountain. So you are that much closer to heaven. You have to look up to climb. Pagan people tried to experience their gods on mountains. Shrines were built on mountains. The "high places" talked about in the Old Testament were the centers of pagan worship. Mountain peaks are considered sacred to many native cultures. And where there were no mountains, like in the plains of Iraq and the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico, people built pyramids as artificial mountains to get closer to the gods. The Greek gods lived on Mt. Olympus. Mountains were closer to the heavens. You could look down and see more, control more, like people believed the gods did. No wonder they felt that the mountains are where you found gods.

The Old Testament is filled with references of going up to the mountains to see God. Abraham referred to God as "El-Shaddai," "God of the heights." Noah landed on dry ground at Mt. Ararat, Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah, Moses saw God on Mt. Sinai, and Elijah set up a sacrifice to God on Mt. Carmel. Jesus appeared in glory before Peter, James, and John on the mountain of transfiguration, and he ascended into heaven from the Mt. of Olives. The Psalmist says, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hill, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD who made heaven and earth."

Above all a mountain is the location in the Scriptures of God's temple. Jerusalem lies on a hilltop called Zion. You always "went up" to Jerusalem. With that in mind Isaiah shares with us this vision, "In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."

But mountains are not places where people normally live. They are usually too rocky and steep to be farmed. Often they are too cold and snowy. Many are volcanoes which erupt. It is hard to build roads up the mountains or anything on them. Often water has to be carried up them. People will go up them to gather wood, graze livestock in the summer, but they go back to the valleys. The valleys, the plains are where people live.

When settlers moved west in this country they didn't talk much about the magnificent scenery. Visitors from Europe or artists from the east did. But they were out there as tourists. The settlers didn't see the scenery; they saw places where you could not live on. For them beauty was a flat place near a stream with trees—a place you could farm.

That can be the way it seems in our relationship with God. We go to “the mountain” by going to church. We leave behind where we live during the week to be here with God. Our “mountain” is a building with a high peaked roof that directs our vision up to heaven. The glass windows impress on us a different world than what we see each day. Pews place us in order, not to sleep, but to look and pray. The music of the service isn’t what we hear during the week. We come. We hear God’s Word. We commune with Him. Then we go back to our lives as if our time with God is like a vacation in the mountains—nice, but just a break, not our real lives.

On this day we begin our observance of Advent, our preparation for Christmas. We are getting ready for when Jesus came to this world. Christmas is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision. “In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among mountains.” But the temple is not a building. It is a person-Jesus. The mountain is not Jerusalem or Everest, but a rock outside of Jerusalem called “Golgotha” which means “skull.” That “skull” we call Calvary. That is the mountain of the LORD. Calvary is not majestic or scenic. It is bleak, eerie, foreboding. It is a place of death. Yet on that pile of rocks God made Himself known in a way He never did on Sinai, Carmel, Ararat, or Zion. Instead of the God of might and awe, on Calvary we see the God of love and mercy, our God hanging on a piece of wood. He’s mocked and raised from the earth not by an imposing mountain, but by a cross. But as we look up to that cross, we really see God most clearly. On the cross God draws us to Him, not to see His majestic power, but His total love poured out for us.

This mountain is not something we go to for an hour a week on Sunday. It is not a place to get away from reality and then leave it. This is not a mountain we walk up to encounter God. This is a mountain God sets right into our midst, right into the “valleys” where we live. Isaiah speaks of swords being turned into plowshares. We envision then a world without war—a wonderful dream of so many, but one destroyed again and again by human conflict. But the “war” is much greater than just between nations. It is the “war” that makes marriages end in divorce, that makes siblings fight over their inheritance, that causes crime and terrorism, that makes people exploit others, that ruins our lives. It is above all a war we have started against God. It is sin. But on that mountain called Calvary Jesus became sin for us. His Word goes forth from the cross no longer condemning us, but forgiving us, restoring us to God, putting an end to our war against God.

The mountain of God is not a faraway place like Asgard to the Norse gods like Thor and Loki or a place hidden in the clouds like the Olympus of Zeus and the Greek gods. The mountain of the LORD is what we have because of Christmas. God came to us in the life of a baby—Jesus. And He came not just for 33 years 2,000 years ago. No, in Jesus God’s mountain is placed into each of our hearts.

Monday morning—back to work and the rest of the semester. We drag ourselves out of bed. But God’s mountain reaches down to us. He gives us life. He gives us work and school. And we can get up making the sign of the cross, remembering how our baptisms can shape the whole day ahead of us. Christ lives in us as we deal with the people in our lives, helping us to be generous and patient. And when we see a need, we move to do something about it. Or if we hear about something bad, we pray about it.

Tuesday afternoon—we come home from a long day at work. We just want to plop down and do nothing. But our children need us—to help with homework, to play, to read to. They are God’s gift to us, so we, even if we don’t want to, give them the time they need.

Wednesday night—our minds are racing, thinking about everything—bills to pay, aches and pains, getting ready for Christmas, homework. How can we handle it all? But God has placed His mountain among us. We put our trust in Him.

Thursday noon—We are looking forward to a quiet time at lunch. But a coworker comes to us with a problem. We listen even though it goes until our lunch time. We barely have time to gobble down half of it. But we listened, because we know God listens to us.

Friday early evening—It’s the weekend. Time to do what I want to do. But I don’t do it in excess because I am called now to live not for my impulses, but to care as Jesus does for us.

Saturday morning—It is supposed to be time to sleep in. But we drag ourselves out of bed to make breakfast for the kids and play with them so mom can sleep in a little. Our wives are God’s daughters. How would we want a man to treat our daughters? So we are with God’s.

“In the last days the mountain of the LORD’s temple will be established as chief among mountains. God will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths.” The mountain lies just ahead of us, the life that God lives with us. Let us then live in the mountain of the LORD.