

Come to the Mountain

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: As was observed a couple of Sundays back, I've now had the pleasure of living here in Southwest Iowa for ten years. And I want to say first that I enjoy very much the work I do here serving the Lord as your pastor. I'm deeply grateful to God for giving me this most undeserved privilege. But as much as I like the work, I enjoy and appreciate even more *you*: the people I have the honor of serving. I'm always amazed at the kindness, the support, and the unreserved Christian love which you have continuously shown for me and for my family. I count you all as a great blessing from God.

And one more thing worth mentioning, and I admit that it required some mental adjustment on my behalf, but I have come to appreciate the land itself in this little corner of Iowa. Please understand that I've lived in a lot of different places. And for me, Iowa used to be just a name that was tagged on to part of the seemingly endless plains in the center of the country that I had to pass through to get on to the next place I was going. Never for a moment did I imagine that I'd call it home one day. But for ten years now I've done that. And as a result, I have come to see the beauty of the rolling terrain and terraced fields, the colorful quilted patchwork of corn and soybeans alternating year by year and changing throughout the seasons, and the charm of rustic barns, silos, and windmills. I didn't quite get it at first; but now I do. And I really have come to love it.

But that being said, I confess that I do miss a couple of things. And don't think of this as criticism, because each place has its own peculiar plusses and minuses; but now and then I do miss living near the sea. Much of my life I lived within easy reach of an ocean, and here we're just about as far away from one as you can be. So sometimes I do miss the salt air, the pounding surf, walks on the beach, and really great seafood. You just can't find that around here. Great steaks, yes, you've got the best beef in the world; but seafood? Forget it. But, you know, I can live without the ocean. What I miss even more are mountains. I've always enjoyed taking long hikes in the Cascades, the Rockies, and the Sierra Nevada. While stationed in Europe I got to hike the Alps, the Swabisch Alb, and the rugged hills of the Black Forrest. And there's just nothing like that around here. Once in a while a well-intentioned person who knows of my love for mountains will say, "Have you been over to the bluffs there by the river?" These folks mean well, I'm sure; but they do not understand. Bluffs are bluffs, not mountains. Mountains rise significantly above all of the surrounding terrain. That's what makes them mountains. Bluffs are part of a big gaping hole in the ground carved by a river. Mountains are heights; they lift you up: ahhhh! Bluffs are depressions; they take you down: awwww. There's no comparison.

So, with only one exception, every summer since I've been here, I've taken a couple weeks off to go west. I do it for three reasons. One is to attend ongoing pastoral education at a seminary extension course they offer out there each year. Another is because they always hold that course during the first week of August, which serendipitously coincides with the most uncomfortable summer weather around here – so it's a good time to be away. But truth be told, the biggest reason I go is to get my annual fix of mountains.

In ways that are impossible to describe to anyone who's never experienced it, there's just something awe inspiring about standing in an alpine meadow surrounded on three sides by towering white granite cliffs. The great cathedrals of Europe are designed to give worshippers a similar uplifting sense of reverence and transcendence, but they are only poor imitations of God's own natural cathedrals that he's carved of living stone. And then there are the breathtaking views and panoramic vistas that give you the feeling that you can see into infinity. It makes you feel very small – and yet at the same time, it fills you with sense of something immense and powerful. Just a bit of this sensation is captured in a line from a hymn we all know that goes, "As I look down from lofty mountain grandeur". There the hymn writer is expressing how he's filled with wonder as the landscape spreading out before him causes him to reflect upon the greatness of God and his creation. It's to capture something like that sense that I go to the mountains; and after I get it, I'm good for another fifty weeks or so. Who knows? It could be that living here most of the time on the plains helps keep that sensation fresh.

Anyway, if you're wondering where I'm going with this, it's here: The Lord knows exactly what mountains do to people and how they have the capacity to inspire us and direct our thoughts to higher things, and he capitalizes on it. I mean, biblically speaking, a lot of important things happen on mountains. The ark that saved Noah and his family comes to rest on a mountain. Abraham is supposed to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, on a mountain. God appears to Moses in a burning bush and then later to the entire nation of Israel on a mountain. It's from another mountain that Moses later gets his distant overview of the Promised Land. Elijah faces off with the prophets of Baal on a mountain. The Temple of God is built on a mountain top in Jerusalem. Indeed, a lot of the worship of the Lord takes place on mountains. These are just a few examples that could be named. And mountains, of course, figured prominently in the ministry of Jesus. He would often go off into the mountains by himself to pray. And they are the settings of his most famous sermon, his transfiguration, his crucifixion, and his ascension.

And if we were to look for a common theme in all these mountaintop episodes it would be this: God tends to reveal himself to people on mountains. It's like he brings them higher for a closer look at who he is, and to learn more about him and what he thinks, what he has to say, or how he interacts with people. It's as if certain mountains were an elevated platform in between our normal lives on the low, level plains and the heights of heaven above – a place of mediation where we can draw closer to God and he can come closer to us to give us a greater revelation of himself.

Now, I'm not saying this is some kind of physical necessity. Obviously, God can come and reveal himself to us anywhere – even in the deepest crevasses and canyons—that's not the point. Nor do we need to move physically closer to him by climbing a hill. A lot of the people in ancient times thought that way. That's why they'd build their temples atop pyramids which were essentially man-made mountains. They were thinking: we can build a staircase to the gods. We can construct a way up to their level by our own efforts. That's nonsense. But it's not nonsense to say that the Lord used mountains to communicate the *idea* of a place in between heaven and earth where God and man could meet. And I'm pretty sure that the Lord chose *natural* mountains – the ones he's created – for these meetings in order to say, "I'm the one who builds the way for you get to me. All you need to do is present yourself there, open your eyes, and prepare your heart to hear. I'll meet you on the mountain."

With all of this in mind, we can better understand the invitation we hear in this morning's reading from Isaiah where the prophet says, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob." And to fully appreciate this gracious summons for what it is, we have to put it in its context. You see that it comes right at the beginning of the *second* chapter of Isaiah. There it appears like a breath of fresh air, for the entire first chapter describes the wretched condition of the people of Israel. Things have gone terribly wrong. In their hearts the people have turned from the Lord and his ways. He describes them being loaded down with guilt, a brood of evildoers, who have forsaken the Lord and turned their backs on him. And as a consequence, the Lord has reluctantly had to bring hardship upon them in order to adjust their thinking. He's like a parent who hates having to spank a rebellious child, but who knows it's the best and loving thing to do. The trouble is that the people haven't responded properly to his discipline. Instead of taking their licks and the implied warning that they can expect worst if they continue in their evil ways, and turned back to the Lord, they've dug in their heels like stubborn mules and they refuse to budge. So entrenched are they in their wickedness that they'd rather be destroyed completely than give up the momentary pleasures of sin.

And so through the prophet the Lord pleads with them, "Why should you be beaten anymore? Why don't you give it up? Your whole head is injured, your heart is afflicted, from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head you have only wounds and welts and open sores." He begs the people to return to him in order to be forgiven, healed, and restored. And he makes it clear that he's not just talking about the obvious and open public sinners. No, he's talking about all the hypocrites too: the ones who are still coming to worship and offering their sacrifices and going through all the motions, but who in their hearts are just as rebellious. He says, "You don't think I know what you really are? I'm sick to death of you coming into my courts with your meaningless offerings and empty words of praise. There's not an ounce of sincerity in any of it. You're only wearing out the floor with all your coming and going. You come in here acting all pious, and you spread out your arms to pray; but I want you to know that since you're not listening to me, I'm not listening to you."

It's in this context that Isaiah calls to the people encouraging them to come to the Lord in true repentance. And with prophetic insight into the future, he envisions a day to come when the mountain of the Lord would be raised above all the other mountains. And we need to understand this in a spiritual sense. It's not so much that the physical elevation of the Lord's mountain will be higher than Everest, but rather that God's self-disclosure there will be greater than ever before. What will make the mountain high, so to speak, is the fullness of God's revelation that occurs there. It will be high because people will be closer to God than was ever possible in the past. And drawn by his glorious presence, people from every nation will come flocking to the Lord's Temple to hear his Word and learn to walk in his righteous ways. The prophet speaks of a time of peace when the Lord will rule in people's hearts and conflicts between them will end. Wars will cease, and weapons once used to kill and maim will be reforged into the tools of agriculture. He calls to the people of Israel to step forward now, to leave their lives in the deep, dark valleys and broad plains of sin and to climb up the mountain and walk in the light of the Lord.

It was a glorious invitation, one that the Lord sincerely meant; but unfortunately, one to which the people of Israel failed to respond. Time and time again they refused to heed the call, and so ultimately the Lord stopped calling. In the end he brought on his

people the destruction he'd promised. Their Temple on the mountain of the Lord was taken away from them and they were all killed or carried off into captivity by enemies. So, sadly for Isaiah, the coming era of grace and peace that he was blessed to describe was one that he never lived to see.

It had to await a later fulfillment; but it had to be fulfilled because the Lord always keeps his Word. And what I'd have you catch a glimpse of this morning is the profound truth that the day Isaiah could only dream about and long for is today. The high mountain of the Lord he was speaking of is right here. We don't have to go seven hundred miles west to find it – instead it comes right here to us. What am I talking about? The same thing Isaiah was: The Church of Jesus Christ. That's where God reveals himself like never before. Remember in Isaiah's day, the Temple of God atop the hill in Jerusalem was a place of barriers. There were many walls between the holy dwelling place of God and the people that represented the separation necessary on account of people's sins. God could only be approached through sacrifices – and even then, you could only get so close. But all those barriers are done away with in Christ. He was the supreme sacrifice – God's own sacrifice – who died for our sins, and so opened the doors and tore in half the veil so that we could come directly into the presence of the Lord. And now whenever we gather in his name, he comes here to meet with us in his Word and in his Sacraments. And with them he forgives our sins, he heals our hearts, and he teaches us to walk in his ways. More than that, through these means he communicates to us his Spirit who dwells in us and helps guide us and keep us in his righteous paths. In all these things he lifts us up higher and closer to himself. By them we stand with him on the highest of all mountains.

And so, Isaiah's invitation is for us. He's calling for you and me to come up the mountain. He's calling for you to look over your life here on the low lying plain and ask yourself, what isn't right? How am I not living like the person I know I ought to be – the person I'd really like to be? How am I a disappointment to myself and to others? With whom am I experiencing conflict – and, let's be honest now – how much of it is my fault? How could I be a better person? In what ways could I be kinder, more patient, more forgiving, and more generous than I am? In what ways could I be less irritable, less self-centered, and less lazy and spiritually lethargic? In what ways am I living the life of a hypocrite? How much of my worship is just going through the motions? How much of my confession of sin is insincere? How much do I begrudge the offering I give to the Lord? How often do I grow weary of hearing his Word?

Come up off that plain, Isaiah calls. Aspire to a higher way of life. Climb out of those well-worn ruts of sin. Come to the Mountain of the Lord. Come to him who meets with us here, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will do the rest. He will forgive, heal, and restore. He will inspire our hearts with his Word and feed us with the sacrifice of his own body and blood. And he will grant us his peace and the capacity to live with others in it. Then we'll be living high up on the Mountain. I can't think of a better way to begin a new church year, or of a better new year's resolution to make, than for us to make it our goal today and every day to come to the Mountain and walk in the light of the Lord. May God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!