

Circle of Mercy – Sermon
November 27, 2016 (First Sunday of Advent)
Isaiah 2:1-5
By Missy Harris

Waiting in Hope

There's a quote by John Muir that was taken from a letter to his sister. You have likely seen and heard it quoted often, "The mountains are calling, and I must go." Most often, this quote shows up on t-shirts and bumper stickers in outdoor shops selling gear and wears to hikers and outdoor enthusiasts. But this particular quote points to something much deeper for Muir. Taken out of context from his larger life story (which I encourage you to read more about) actually refers to more than just a casual hike in the mountains. This quote refers to the work that Muir felt deeply compelled to do in the service of scientific learning, conservation and preservation – work that he returned to again and again, when the weather good and when the weather was treacherous, when he was well and when he was gravely ill.

In the biblical narrative, experiences on, near or around mountaintops are a signal for us to pay attention. Abraham set out with instruction from God to go to the mountain to sacrifice his son Isaac. Moses came face to face with God on Mount Sinai, where he received instruction for the people of Israel. The prophet Elijah heard God speaking within the stillness and silence of a mountain cave. Jesus preached one of his most significant sermons on the side of a mountain. Later, Jesus journeyed up the mountain with a few of the disciples, where he was transfigured before them. More often than not, in these biblical stories, the experience on the mountain didn't always match up with the expectations that folks had when set off on their journeys. As they came back down the mountains

they had just scaled, they returned to and reentered the messiness and complexity of their lives.

As one perpetually plagued by altitude sickness, I have to say that literal mountaintop experiences are not usually something I intentionally seek out. When I graduated from college, I traveled with a group from Mars Hill to Israel, Greece and Egypt. While we were in Egypt we made our way to Mount Sinai.

At that point in my life, I had not yet discovered the severity of my propensity toward altitude sickness. None of the people in our group were too keen on getting up at 1:00 a.m. to hike up the mountain to see the sunset, so we opted for the “warmer” and therefore more rigorous evening hike. So I eagerly set out with the group to ascend Mount Sinai, aiming to make it to the top in time to see the sunset.

We rode camels about halfway up the mountain, and when the terrain became too steep for the camels, we set out on foot to climb the rest of the way. About ¼ mile into the hike on foot, I began to feel nauseous and dizzy. My legs started to give way to gravity, and I had to steady myself with my hands on the rocky terrain. It quickly became clear that I couldn't keep going, so I found a spot to sit down. Someone brought me a blanket, and I waited in that place until the group returned a few hours later.

Even after my group rejoined me halfway down the mountain after they had taken in the sunset at the summit, I still could not stand up without my knees buckling beneath me. The way I made it down the mountain was by putting my arms around the shoulders of two of my traveling companions and leaning on them to steady myself as we slowly descended the mountain in the dark. Eventually, the unevenness of the terrain and my dizziness made it impossible to continue walking

in this way, and before I knew it or could even process what was happening, one of our guides, a young Bedouin man bent down, scooped me onto his back and carried me the rest of the way down the mountain.

We often speak of going to the mountains, whether we make it to the top or not, as spiritual experiences. We know something of the spiritual (and physical) highs that are experienced as we aim to ascend and eventually descend mountains.

Sometimes we seek out these experiences. Sometimes the experiences seek us.

However these experiences happen, when we go to the mountain, some of us – like the disciples, want to camp out there, to remain in that place where we have experienced something beyond ourselves, something that we are not likely to be able to explain when we come down from that particular place, where our words will fail us and where the words we may manage to put together fall so markedly short of the experience itself.

And some of us (and I would include my experience on Mount Sinai in this category) can't wait to get down off the mountain, and we might not WANT to speak of it anytime soon – even if we do have the words to describe the experience. In fact, I haven't recounted this experience to many people – partly because it felt like a huge failure on my part for not making it to the top of the mountain with the rest of my group and partly because the kindness and grace that I received from my traveling companions and the Bedouin man who carried me down the mountain was more than I even knew how to receive at the time, and if I'm honest still may be more than I know how to receive – which is probably the reason I find myself coming back to this mountain again and again. I'm still learning what that mountain and young man had to teach me nearly twenty years ago.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, mountains do invite us to come and learn, to consider something we haven't seen before in quite the same way. For some, mountains might be seen and experienced as places of escape or retreat. But, more often than not, mountains are an invitation to go more deeply within ourselves, testing our limits and creating a space where we might learn to depend on something more than we could ever be on our own. Sometimes the lessons we learn on the mountain – whether it's what we went there intending to learn or not – have a way of pointing us toward that which is out beyond what we imagined possible up to that point, toward that which – if given a choice – we might actually try to avoid at all costs. And this might be at least part of the reason that the mountains – whatever form they take in our lives – keep calling us back.

In our text today from the second chapter of Isaiah, God offers a vision of hope – in the midst of several chapters that swing on a pendulum between divine judgment and hope. Isaiah tells us that a mountain will be raised up higher than any other mountains, Zion in the midst of the city of Jerusalem, to which people from every nation will stream, to be taught the ways of God and to learn how to walk in the path of God, where swords and spears will be beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks, where war will be studied no more.

In a time filled with despair, fear and uncertainty it seems just as hard for us to imagine Isaiah's words being possible or true as it was for the people who originally heard them. Figuring out how to have hope or even to imagine what hope could look like in the midst of despair, grief and uncertainty can feel like a futile endeavor – wishful thinking – mere pipe dreams. Even today, Isaiah's words mostly still land in the sphere of the “not yet” and sometimes leave us wondering – will we ever truly know this kind of world?

The reality is that the mountain Isaiah describes does not physically tower above other mountains surrounding it. Couched in images of theological geography, Isaiah describes Zion, the place where God resides in the heart of Jerusalem. There is an anticipation of, a hope that the ways of God will be made known to all people and that people from every nation will stream toward the word of good news that God sends forth from the holy city – that people will seek out the wisdom springing forth from this mountain, seeking to be taught how to walk in the path of God. Zion will be elevated in a way that draws people toward it.

What God wants to teach us is a new way – a new path. It is a path that invites the people of Israel toward an act of faith, toward a concrete response to what they have not yet known or seen themselves. As the Empire surrounds them and as the practices and values of the wider culture allure them, the instinct is to adopt the ways of the Empire and culture, to buckle down, to gather up weapons, and to secure and protect themselves against all that threatens them.

But God is inviting the people to consider a counter-intuitive response and way of life that does not compute in the face of imperial powers and principalities. The people are invited to learn a new way of being in the world. The people are invited to come to the mountain to be taught how to live in the hope of new life, rather than be destroyed in the fear and death that accompany buying into the systems of power and war and profit.

Spears and swords are tools of power, destruction, war and death. Plowshares and pruning hooks are tools for planting and trimming – tools that embody anticipation of new life, growth, and abundance from the earth. To turn the tools of war and death into the tools of life and growth, in the face of uncertainty and challenge would take tremendous acts of strength, will, determination and courage.

To beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks would be an embodied act of faith – that would enable the people to place at the very center of their actions a hope in something that, to their knowledge and experience has not yet been fully realized. It would be an embodied act of resistance, an act that, without a doubt, would solidly place peoples’ allegiances squarely behind something they had never even seen before. It would be a risk, but as we hear echoed throughout scripture and the larger history of the world it would be a risk worth taking.

They would be placing their bets upon a force more powerful than the powers and principalities of this world ever could be. We have seen this quiet but powerful force embodied in movements around the world, where people have refused to continue playing by the rules governed by power and war – that end in death and destruction – that perpetuate the forces of fear and violence.

We have seen it in the Civil Rights Movement in our own country – when Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus, when marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, when Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed his dream from the steps of the Washington Monument. We have seen it in the movement against apartheid in South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that followed. We have seen it in Black Lives Matter movement, actively intervening in a world where black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted with violence.

But before our eyes, acts of death and destruction unfold every single moment, and it is quite easy for these acts to become the loudest voices – clamoring for our attention, convincing us – without a great deal of effort that fear and despair are the final and most powerful words. These voices can so easily convince us to give up

before we even begin. Diana Butler Bass, in her new book *Grounded* states that “there are far too many reasons to believe that human history is tipped toward destruction. Hope is at a premium, but the supply is perilously short. Fear is both cheap and plentiful.”

So, do we listen to the loudest voices that scream out to us relentlessly trying to convince us that dreams of hope are futile, or do we continue to place our bets on what seems to be in shorter supply in our culture, on that which has “not yet” been fully realized, in the hope that it one day will be?

I have to be honest – it has been hard to find my way to a word of hope this week. It has felt elusive, like sand running through my fingers. From a conversation with a young undocumented man who fears for his and his family’s safety to a conversation with a good friend whose 14 year old son stepped out in front of a train, intentionally ending his life in September to the seemingly endless stream of stories that punctuate the news that comes to us in every direction – I have keenly felt the distance between reality and the hope of what we have “not yet” seen and have found myself wondering if all our efforts are futile.

But, I keep reminding myself of the countless acts of goodness and hope and courage embodied in people who have held out hope in the face of fear and despair, who have kept returning to this mountain of which the prophet Isaiah speaks to learn again and again how to keep relentlessly beating down swords and spears into plowshares and pruning hooks. I have to keep reminding myself of these stories that we don’t hear often enough.

The irony is, the very places where I witnessed such deep despair this past week are actually the exact same places where I have had brief glimpses of the deepest

hope imaginable. Hope was palpable in the young undocumented man who finds ways daily to support, care for and be present with his family, while continuing to pursue his goals and dreams that are also intimately tied to his entire family's wellbeing. Hope was palpable in the countless ways that my friend engages in and faces the unrelenting despair and grief of a parent who has lost a child, while continuing to envision a future filled with possibility and dreams, even though that future looks so drastically different than he ever imagined it would be.

When I personally find myself in that place of deep despair, I often think of this quote from Anne Frank, "It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart."

When I came across this quote in a journal entry I had written twenty years ago, it occurred to me that Anne Frank could be channeling God's deepest hopes and beliefs for who we can become. Maybe God really does believe we can do this. Maybe God really does believe that we truly do have the capacity and courage to live into this hope that we have not yet seen. Maybe it's not just about melting down the literal swords and spears that fill the world around us – though this is a vital aspect of the work we are called to do – but it's equally important to keep returning to the mountain to learn how to melt down the swords and spears that we keep sharpened and ready to wield at a moment's notice, within our own hearts and minds and bodies.

The past few weeks have shaken many of us to our very core, and on this first Sunday of Advent, we find ourselves asking what does hope look like right now, in this moment. Standing on the edge of this season and looking toward the days and

weeks ahead may elicit a wide range of responses from those of gathered in this room:

Some of us may actually be filled with hope, peace, joy and love – and if you are there, you might find some of us coming to you to borrow and lean into those things with you.

Some of us may be filled with excitement.

Some of us may be filled with dread.

Some of us may be filled with anticipation.

Some of us may be filled with exhaustion.

Some of us may be filled with fear.

Whatever you find yourself filled with in this moment – Advent is the season of the church year that interrupts ordinary time and beckons us to slow down, to set a different pace, to rest in the waiting – something that we're not so good at. It is a time that invites us to slow down and pay close attention to the places within us that sharpen the edges of the spears and swords rather than melting them down into instruments of life.

Isaiah 2 is the perfect invitation for Advent. We, too, wait for something that has already happened, while at the same time we wait for something that we have not yet seen or known, something that we may never see or fully know. We stream to the mountain as the people of God have done for thousands of years. We come to the foot of this mountain, to wait and watch, to learn a new way of being in the world that we haven't fully figured out yet, that we are not sure is even possible.

Together we wait and dream and hope for the day when war and fear and violence are no longer the common core of the world's curriculum. Our hope is buoyed by those moments where we have caught a glimpse – in large and small ways – of

God's vision of beating swords and spears into pruning hooks and plowshares becoming a reality. We come to the foot of this mountain to be taught and to learn how to walk in this new path. It's quite possible that we might even have to re-learn things we think we already figured out a long time ago.

We wait together in hope – remembering and anticipating God's entering into this world, becoming flesh and dwelling among us – an act that began thousands of years ago, an act that continues to unfold in our own flesh and blood. God continues to dwell among us and be made known to us but may not come in the forms that we want or expect. At times, we may not immediately recognize the people and places and experiences in which we are brushing shoulders, sharing spaces and breathing the same air alongside the very presence of God who has been right here with us all along.

I would venture to guess that we will likely find ourselves along this path toward the mountain, being steadied by each other when we can't walk on our own. And from time to time, we may even find ourselves scooped up and carried along by a mercy and grace that we didn't even know we needed, and that we have no idea how we ever lived without.

Amen.