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TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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HEBREWS 12:18-24
ISAIAH 2:1-5

“DRAWN UP THE MOUNTAIN”

The main point of this sermon is that God establishes His Kingdom through the cries and blood of Jesus, so we can always have hope amid the pain and suffering of this age.

Introducing Advent

Today marks the beginning of Advent, and over the next four Sundays (minus the Christmas Cantata on December 15), we are looking at passages out of Isaiah. These passages are traditional Advent texts, because in them we hear the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming. What we are going to hear over the next several weeks is meant to heighten our anticipation and make us more aware of God’s actions--past, present, and future.

What’s the key to making the most of Advent? Embrace the tension. Christ has come, and yet not all things have reached completion. There is still trouble all around us and within us, but Advent teaches us that amid all that trouble we are not without hope as we wait Christ’s second coming.

You see, Isaiah knew what it was like to live in troubled times. Sometimes we think of prophets as only concerned about some far-off mysterious future. But that’s not the case. For Isaiah, and all prophets like him, the present mattered to him, because he had a real sense of what God was doing and where God was taking all things.

Here’s an illustration: Whenever someone wins an Olympic Gold Medal, they often say something like this, “Ever since I was young, I had a vision of standing on this podium as an Olympic champion.” We all know what that means – the vision of standing on the podium determined, shaped, and influenced how that person spent each day. There was never a moment or day that wasn’t meaningful. That’s what great visions do. They pack each day with significance. They give us purpose and clarity.

And the trouble for Isaiah was that when we looked around, what he saw was out-of-step with what God envisioned for His people.

The Threat Isaiah Saw that Others Missed

So, what exactly did Isaiah see that others missed? One way to get at that answer is to ask, what absorbed everyone else’s attention? What dominated the headlines? Here’s the background. It was the eighth-century BC, which meant Assyria was the region’s superpower. As superpowers

tend to do, Assyria enjoyed the challenge of conquering foreign lands, and as lots of people discovered, Assyria was quite good at this. And Assyria was knocking at the door.

If you could have polled the people about the nation's gravest threat, Assyria would have been at the top of the list. No one could deny that Assyria had the upper hand militarily. They had the better resources and the track record to prove they could exercise their will against anyone.

But if what if you only polled Isaiah? How would he respond? Here's what we learn. Isaiah didn't see the gravest threat as coming from "over there." He saw it arising from within. He knew the trouble wasn't an external one. It was internal. It was the sin that ran right through each person's heart.

Listen to how Isaiah puts it right at the beginning. He speaks for the Lord and says, "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged" (1:2b, 4).

Now, what exactly is Isaiah getting at? In other words, what is he saying God's children have done? What it is not is just a few errors and misjudgments. You see, the heart of their sin is that they've pierced God's heart with their rejection of Him. They're children who've chosen other things above the perfect and complete love of their Father (cf. 1:29). And what Isaiah sees is that choice, choosing anything else above God, has worked itself out into all sorts of social injustices like the neglect of orphans and widows (1:23ff). That's how sin always works. It's always a matter of the heart that never stays private.

Think about why people lie. You lie in order to protect or advance the thing you have set your heart on. So, if your heart is set on money, it won't be long before you find yourself lying in order to protect your money or make more of it. If you set your heart on your career, it won't take long before you are willing to embellish a bit on your resume or undercut a coworker.

The Consequences Isaiah Saw that Others Missed

Isaiah could see the real threat, because he saw what was going on in the hearts of the people. The heart of the matter was the *heart*. People were walking around with *disordered loves*, and Isaiah was able to see what that really meant. In other words, he saw just a universal a problem this was.

Here's what I mean. Listen to how Isaiah's vision begins. "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken" (1:2). Remember, Isaiah is speaking to Israelites. So, why does his vision begin by calling out to the heavens and the entire earth? Why does this concern anyone else? Isaiah understood that the welfare of the universe depends on how God's people respond to His word. Their faithfulness and obedience weren't just between them and God. It was a concern to all people. But, why?

Remember, what was their role and purpose? They were to be servants who brought light to the nations. They were intended to bring healing and reconciliation to the world. They were to bless

the nations by sharing God. And what Isaiah condemns is that in their broken relationship with God they've put God's mission in jeopardy. In Jesus' words, they had become like salt that had lost its taste (Lk. 14:34).

The Hope Isaiah Saw that Others Missed

Isaiah brings a hard but necessary word of judgment. He doesn't gloss over what he sees. But notice what emerges out of judgment. Following Isaiah's long pronouncement of the people's disobedience, we hear him declare, "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" (2:2).

Now, what does that mean? Here's what the Lord is saying through Isaiah, "Even though my children have walked away from the mission I entrusted to them, I will not let my mission fail. I will deliver the victory they could not fulfill."

You see, the "mountain of the Lord's house" or Mount Zion is a way to express the kingdom of God. And that's what God's people were supposed to extend. Instead, they brought judgment on themselves. And the shocking thing is that even judgment doesn't keep God from doing what He promised. Isaiah sees that out of judgment, when all seems lost, God establishes His kingdom.

And notice, who's coming into God's kingdom? Who's going up this mountain? The nations. And what that means is that God's plan to bless the nations isn't forgotten. And notice how they come into God's kingdom. They aren't dragged against their will. This isn't an image of a conquered enemy coming as shackled slaves.

Instead, they are drawn by a desire to learn of God and submit to his ways. Precisely what God's people weren't doing. And remember, in Isaiah's days, one's national identity was inseparable from the deity of your nation. But look at the image here. The nations are eager to set aside their national identity in order to come "to house of the God of Jacob." You see, by drawing people into His kingdom, God creates a new humanity.

Old and bitter disputes are resolved by the Lord. And what happens to the instruments of war? They are beat into farming tools. And most commentators believe that is a symbol of a return to the Garden of Eden. No longer is there any division and separation between people and between God. No more hostility. No more barriers or cause for animosity. Everyone recognizes the one true God and learns from Him.

And what's interesting is how Isaiah pictures the nations coming to this mountain. What does he say? He says, "the nations shall stream (or flow) to it." The image is of a river flowing *up* a mountain. Unusual, isn't it? How many rivers have you seen flowing upwards? Why that imagery?

Here's what Isaiah is telling us. God's kingdom is established in a way that defies your expectation. God is going to do something that will utterly turn our world upside down and flip our value systems.

The Suffering Messiah Isaiah Saw Coming

You see, Isaiah saw what no one else saw coming. At the heart of his vision is that God's kingdom was going to come through the unexpected sufferings of the Messiah. Think about the kingdoms of this world. They are always built by shedding more of your enemy's blood than your own. What about God's kingdom? God didn't spill His enemies' blood; instead, His Son gave up every ounce of his own for his enemies. And on the cross, when his enemies mocked him, Jesus didn't shout down curses and call upon an army of angels to come to his defense. Instead, he prayed for their forgiveness. Even in his last breaths, Jesus Christ blessed those who cursed him. He was the perfect child who never rejected his Father's love, but on the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). You see, he experienced to the fullest measure separation from God, so our separation could end.

God's grace turns our world upside down. It always defies our expectations. It gives what we don't deserve. And the only way into God's kingdom, the only way up the mountain, is by the grace given to us in Jesus. You can't stream up a mountain on your own.

And I think that's what the author of Hebrews is saying when he tells the congregation, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (18:22). He's saying, right now, at this moment, because of what Christ has done you are welcomed into God's kingdom. He's saying the kingdom of God is yours, right now, even if we don't always see it around us.

And here's why I believe you can have hope this morning no matter what is going on in your life. God established His kingdom through sorrow and suffering. It came only through Jesus' cries and blood. It came because the judgment fell on him. And what that means is that God's kingdom is for those who are broken by sin and know their need and feel the weight of great sorrows. It isn't a kingdom for the proud and self-sufficient and self-justifiers. It's a kingdom for those who weep. It is for those who know, deep down, their life depends on a sovereign and merciful grace. Those who know the only way up is by the grace of a Savior.

And as we wait for the coming of our Lord and Savior, we can expect suffering. We know not all things have been set right. There are tears and questions and longing. Weakness and failures and doubts. But the hope is that out of the greatest suffering the world ever saw, God secured our redemption. Out of the greatest pain to Himself, God has built His kingdom and paid the price for us to come up the mountain and into his glorious kingdom.

Amen.

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