

“A Spectacular View”
Isaiah 11
November 27, 2015

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Before I read our second scripture lesson, I would like to reiterate just a little of the background to this. One of our challenges as Christians is that we oftentimes will take a prophetic text and skip right to right now and right to us. I want to just remind us as Donna did so well of what’s happening in the life of the nation Israel and Judah in the Old Testament. Isaiah the prophet lived through a pivotal time in his nation’s history. He was in the second half of the 8th century BC. There are a whole lot of other prophets that arose during this time because God was trying to speak to people in exile. So Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah all prophesied around the same time. But it also was the downfall, it was the disappearance of a large part of Israel known as Judah, the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. In the text that Donna read and in the text that I’m going to read, the people are invited, even as they’re away in exile, a sense of hopelessness. They’ve been conquered, they’ve been captured, they’ve been relocated to Assyria. They’re invited in the midst of this great tribulation to look toward the mountain of the Lord. Because when they go there, and when they worship, then and there they’re going to receive their hope for what God is going to do in a time away from now. So even in our day now, as we think about the troubles in the world, the dangers, the uncertainties, let’s for a moment sit with Isaiah and with the people of Judah as they’ve been exiled and think about how the dangers to our world are not peculiar. People have always lived in danger. God’s people have always lived a risky existence. In the midst of this, God gives the promise of the Messiah to come and the sense of peace at the last. Listen now to Isaiah chapter 11:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the
sea.

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, meet us in the midst of our uncertain times, whether they be the
uncertainties of the world, or the challenges in our own families. I pray, Lord,
that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts shall be
acceptable in your sight, that you should bring hope to us in the midst of
uncertainty, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

I have lived in the Midwest since 1985, but I have to confess I still miss living
out West, where I grew up. I think it's debatable what I miss the most. There's
I think a little more sense of adventure out West. Yes, there's a lot more
flakiness out West, I admit that. But I think about where I grew up in a very
narrow valley and the ocean was right outside where we could see. The
vastness of the ocean was a wonderful thing. The sounds of the waves lapping
on the shore have always been things I've enjoyed so much. Then there are
mountains that seem so solid and give such a view of the world when you get
up on top of them. I think there's really nothing like a morning devotional
time at the top of the peak looking over the world below.

I remember in such vivid detail such a moment like that when I was backpacking with a friend in California thirty-nine years ago. It was a wonderful, wonderful time. But I also think of times of worship that were not tied to topography. When music and singing brought me to the throne of grace, even as we have heard this morning so much, thank you for that. Sitting at a church in Glasgow and listening to one of the finest expositors I've ever heard, who not only blessed us with his preaching, but even more with his praying. I remember special people in my life, sharing intimate moments with them in worship, baptisms, weddings, even funerals together in the sanctuary, vespers at our Presbyterian camp in Saugatuck.

I think that moments of worship have transformed my life, especially when I've been in times of distress. Perhaps you can think of those moments as well. How those moments of worship and the people that you are with transform your perspective on life in general, or perhaps on a particular difficulty you were facing at the moment. Or brought a measure of healing to your heart when it was broken. Changed your life as you met Christ for the first time or renewed your hope in Christ in the midst of the uncertainty of the world. Brought you close to other persons and certainly help you and gave me strength to go out and serve. Because God has renewed our hearts in a time of worship.

I believe that the most transformative moments of our lives have not been when we've stood in front of the mirror looking at ourselves, but when our heart has been fixed and transfixed on the majesty and power of the Lord, and God's involvement with us and others. It's one thing to think about God in heaven and in the holy sanctuary and the place of judgment, but it's another to think about how God has come to live among us. The same God who created the heavens and will bring all things together at the end of time has chosen to live among us in Jesus Christ, to understand what our lives are like, to encourage us in the midst of it. This worship has not always changed our circumstances, but it has changed our hearts. So we think about the nation of Judah and to a nation in exile to whom God offers hope, following his recognition of their unfaithfulness, God speaks of God's continued and unending interest in the nation and its people.

God is so unlike us. God is angry but God still loves. God has been ignored but still remains faithful to his promises. God has given us good things and watched us ruin them on the altar of our selfishness but still redeems us and calls us home. The word to the people in exile is that the exile shall not be the end of all things. There will be better days and God will accompany the people on those better days. But even now, in the midst of the relocation and the capture and the sense of powerlessness there is a reason still to hope because God's promises endure. David wrote in Psalm 39,

‘Lord, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.
Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.
Surely for nothing they are in turmoil;
they heap up, and do not know who will gather.

‘And now, O Lord, what do I wait for?
My hope is in you.

So even in another time, David can trust amid a difficulty. He can declare his hope. Peter, in his first letter said, ‘Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’ No matter how serious the circumstances are, and for Judah they are very serious, God offers hope; God is with them.

And then to a world at war, God offers peace. When all one can see is weapons, danger, death and defeat, God offers a longer view. The implements of the wartime state will be replaced by the implements of growing food. God will have a worldwide ministry of judging and settling disputes. God will require nations and peoples everywhere to abstain from warfare. Universal peace, with no military conflict or training will prevail because the implements of warfare, the swords and the spears, will have been turned into implements of agriculture, plowshares and ?. And at this time of worldwide

peace the nations will go to Jerusalem to learn from God. Peace will come, not by human achievement, but because God's presence is there. God is at work.

If you look at the two texts that have been read this morning, you'll find in Isaiah chapter 2 the greatest sense that there is peace among the nations. So all of the nations will find a way, because of God being there, to be at peace. And in Isaiah 11, that there will be peace throughout all creation. All of the dangers that the animals which prey and the dangers that are there will be gone. So the sense of the messianic kingdom is that people will be able to get along with one another because God will transform hearts. God will transform hearts not only of people but all of creation will be restored to the order that was there in the garden. It's a great promise, isn't it?

Isn't it great to think about that day coming? And that day will come. That's what Isaiah says. When Jesus comes as the Prince of Peace, that's the final word for us. One of our challenges is that we focus so hard on the circumstances of the world. And certainly from the lens of our own experience and self-interest we look at the world. And we forget, when we do that, that there is a God in the universe who loves us and invites us to sit at his throne and take an eternal perspective on life and be able to reach out to those around us because God's grace and love are coming. They're extended to us in Christ.

I don't want to minimize the danger of the world. It is a dangerous world. And we have to focus, to some extent, on the danger around us. But when it displaces in us the hope we have in Christ, it becomes a tool to distract and discourage us and we miss out on the hope. And that's why it's so important that we learn to worship. In the midst of the difficulties of life, when the world is not as we want it, we must worship. When our personal circumstances are not ideal, we must still worship. When we're estranged from our homes and our hopes, even in pain and loss, the invitation remains, 'O house of Jacob, let us come and walk in the light of the Lord.'

Remember this is not an invitation given in peaceful, wonderful and prosperous times. It is at a time of dislocation, a time of pain. So I think we're invited to three things. We're invited to have a connection to God and to God's promises. God's promises were there for Isaiah, they were proclaimed

to the whole nation. And they are there for us. I want to encourage you to read your Bible and look for those promises. Don't just look historically for what's happened, but look at the promises of God given to the people of Judah, Israel, Nazareth, Jerusalem and to us. And when we learn that we can ponder them and we can claim them, we won't benefit from God's promises if we're ignorant of them. Look to the Lord and to God's promises.

Have a conviction that God will indeed restore all things. The eternal perspective leads to extend beyond today and beyond next week and beyond us and our self-interest and, yes, I want to invite us even in the midst of our pain that God's promises are there. God will restore all things. At the very end of the Bible, Revelations says, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'

This sense of newness that comes, that's the final word. That's what it means to have faith. Faith is being sure of what we hope for, the writer of Hebrews says, and certain things we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for; that as they believed and as they believed they were able then, to do.

Thirdly, then, we are invited to have a commitment to worship, even in uncertain times and in imperfect conditions. You know by now that I really appreciate C. S. Lewis and his many writings. There is a really remarkable essay he wrote in 1939 called *Learning in War Time*. It's right after the one called *The Way to Glory*. And the question is how can you study classics ??? And he says this, '*The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it.*' So how can you study classic literature? Because danger is always there. People always die. There are always problems. So how can you worship when you're in fear? We must. Because if we don't, we give in to hopelessness. We no longer hear God's promises, which are the only antidote to lead us out of hopelessness and into to a time of promise. So if we can do anything, it is to be hopeful. It's to remember that when we worship we are reminded that God is sovereign and this will transform our perspective in life, maybe even a little by a little by a little. And I'm not trying to minimize the weight of what we have in our lives. But if we don't worship, we will never be reminded to move

from paralysis to service in the name of Christ. That's the bridge. That's the connection.

Many years ago when I was in college, I went to northern Idaho to a town called Kellogg. You might have heard of it; it was where the Sunshine Mine disaster happened many years ago. I went with my friend Dave, who lived there, to do some hiking and have some fun for a couple days before we got back to the books. We drove up into the mountain area and we got out and hiked a ways up. We saw a leveling out area then another large hill above that. In the leveling out area, there was this beautiful mountain lake. We swam in it; I have never been so cold in my life; it was really fun to have done that. Then we said, 'Let's hike up this mountain.' It was the sort of place where you think, "I wonder if anyone's ever been here before?" So we started the hike and it wasn't a technical climb but it was challenging. We got to the top and we looked down at the lake and we looked at the valleys below us and it was just this spectacular view. We were talking about how wonderful it was to be in this place where nobody ever had a chance to come. Then, from this perspective, I turned behind me and there were motorcycle tracks all over the place back there. So what I thought was a place where nobody ever was, there were people up there all the time. Now I didn't see them. But they had been there and they would be back.

When we take a view of our world and we see the dangers and the problems, we sometimes think that we are the only ones that can see them. But if you take my metaphor, God has been in those tracks behind us. God has been up here before. God has seen it all. And God invites us to look at the view now, not in hopelessness, but with the sense that God accompanies us through our journey. That's the message to Judah. They're not alone. And that's the message of Advent. That we are not alone either and as we look for the birth of the Messiah, we do so with hope. In worship we meet the Lord; we hear God's promises, we get strength to endure, we are reminded to glorify God, we find our place in eternity and we go forth bravely to serve. O house of Jacob, come let us walk in the light of the Lord. O First Presbyterian Church, come let us walk in the light of the Lord.