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Advent I
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Text: Isaiah 2:1 – 5
Title: Mountain Climbing

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have you ever noticed how many times that mountains are used in the Biblical accounts? The English Standard Version of the Bible, which is the translation that we use with our *Lutheran Service Book*, uses the word “mountain” or “mountains” 314 times. That’s more times than Abraham is mentioned. This fact alone means that mountains are pretty important in the Bible. Or to quote one of my favorite professors from the Seminary who was trying to drive this concept into our thick heads, “Big things happen on mountains in the Word of God.”

When the Scriptures mention a mountain, that’s a good clue to pay closer attention because the Lord has something big planned. It was on a mountain that the Lord first spoke to all of His people after bringing them out of Egypt. On that same mountain He gave them and our entire world the Ten Commandments written in stone by His own hand. On another mountain He had His temple built and dwelt with His people. It was on a mountain that Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal, and proved that Yahweh is the one true God.

On a mountain, Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but then had him spared at the last minute by the Lord’s intervention. It was on still another mountain that Jesus was transfigured right before the eyes of Peter, James and John who suddenly found themselves in the presence of Moses and Elijah as well as the Lord. It was on Mount Calvary that Jesus hung on the cross for the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine. He suffered and died there to pay the blood price that the Lord demands for sin, a Law that He handed down from Mount Sinai. The Lord does great things on His Holy Mountains.

Finally, the Lord's Word promises more to come on the Mountain of Armageddon when Satan will be finally and completely defeated for all time at Christ's return. And He is planning even greater things on Mount Zion according to the rest of His Word. His return to judge and recreate the world will end with all of the nations coming to Him on Mount Zion.

It is this promise that is the focus of today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 2. Here we again find the Lord referring to a mountain. He tells Isaiah to say to His people, "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For out of [Mount] Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

"...the mountain of the house of the Lord..." refers to Mount Zion itself, the place where Solomon's magnificent temple was built to house the Ark of the Covenant, and therefore God Himself. It is the highest point in the city of Jerusalem which was the highest city in all of Israel. Anytime you went to Jerusalem or the temple, you "went up." According to Isaiah, when the Lord chooses to fulfill His Word to recreate the heavens and the earth, He will establish His house on the highest of all high places. Everyone will "go up" to see Him. The question is how?

I don't have much personal experience mountain climbing, and I can guarantee you that I will never learn how to do it. When it comes to those types of adventurous activities, I have an overdeveloped sense of self-preservation. But I do know that there are different ways to reach

the top of a mountain, and since this one will be the highest of all mountains, we can safely assume that we're talking bigger than Mount Everest here.

One way that I've seen thrill-seekers climb large mountain-like landscapes, is to simply bare-knuckle it. These people use little or no equipment to make their climb. They search for crevices and ledges to provide grips, and they depend on their physical strength to pull themselves to the top. They strain their muscles, and they risk their lives to achieve their goal of completing the climb.

A large portion of the human race uses this method to reach the top of the Mountain of the Lord, and they don't even know they're climbing it. They live a life that completely denies the one true God, and they have no faith in Him whatsoever, some even go so far as to deny any type of god or afterlife at all. These people are making their climb with no equipment at all. They search for crevices and ledges such as hobbies, work or perhaps some political cause to keep their lives from reaching a point of despair in its meaninglessness, and they are relying on their own strength of will to get through life. They want nothing to do with God or His gifts, and they certainly see no need to rely on Him as a type of lifeline. If they are even willing to acknowledge a heaven at the end of their climb, which many of them are surprisingly willing to do, they are most likely to believe that they will reach it because they are a good person.

These people are so stubborn in their desire to get through life on their own and have nothing to do with the one true God, that they have no idea of the danger that is just one slip away. In the blink of an eye, their life will be over when they fall off the mountainside, and nothing will be able to help them at that point. They have no idea that the task that they have set for themselves will end in disaster because the mountain of the Lord is not climbable with strength and determination alone. No one is good enough to achieve that. It can't be done.

A second way to climb a mountain is to work as a team using ropes and other equipment to aid the climb along a certain route. This is the way that most people who have some type of faith are attempting to reach the top of the Mountain of the Lord. They realize that their own strength is not enough to complete the climb, and they have some type of faith to serve as climbing equipment. Each faith and religion is a different face of the mountain with different equipment, and since some religions – such as Buddhism, Islam or Judaism – are false religions that do not believe in Jesus Christ, they will find that their pathway up the Mountain of the Lord is impassable and their equipment is useless. They will meet the same fate as those who attempt the climb with no equipment at all.

Others will find themselves on a good path, but their equipment won't necessarily be appropriate to the task or the path may be more dangerous than they realize. These are people who have a Christian faith, but don't realize that their beliefs are in error. Perhaps they don't realize that they are unrepentant of their sin or believe that they have contributed to their salvation in some way like praying Jesus into their hearts and believing sincerely enough. They don't realize that they have really been relying on themselves all along. They may get to the top of the mountain, but the nature of their task is extremely risky and it won't happen with the path that they're using or the equipment that they have. They can just as easily find themselves in danger of falling off the mountain and not reaching the top if they continue to rely solely on that.

The final way to reach the top of the Mountain of the Lord is also the only guaranteed method. This method is what I would call the rescue approach. In fact, it is the only certain way to reach the top of the Mountain of the Lord. In much the same way that a rescue party works on a mountain to retrieve stranded or injured climbers, the Lord works to save every person who is on the face of the Mountain of the Lord.

To those who are climbing with nothing, or who are relying on equipment or false paths He gives multiple warnings with His Law, and then He offers the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him crucified to rescue them from the dangers that they face if they continue on their path and fall. At the same time, He searches over the entire mountain to find the injured and the stranded to rescue them from their pain and hopelessness. But to those who recognize their own weakness and the frailty of their sinful soul, He offers to make the climb for them first and then promises to return to bring them with Him. Then He reaches down with a cross, scoops them up, and pulls them to the top by His own work and strength while He continuously encourages and calls to them to trust in His promise that He will never leave them nor forsake them.

Like all analogies that describe faith and life, this one can fall apart in several different ways, but I pray that you have gotten something from this one today. As Isaiah says in this morning's prophecy to begin the Advent season, the day will come when the Lord will establish the mountain of the house of the Lord, and many people, those who have faith in Jesus Christ and the sacrifice that He made on the cross, will go up to the Mountain of the Lord to hear His teachings and learn His ways. That will be the end of conflicts and wars to the point that weapons will no longer be needed or even made. Peace will reign supreme.

Until the time of His return arrives, there are many out there who are lost and living in a dangerous way. The Lord has asked you to join the search party by telling them that Jesus Christ is coming back to judge the world on the last day. He is the Son of God who was sacrificed on the cross, who died and who rose again to pay for the sins of the whole world, even theirs. Do not delay. The latter days that Isaiah is talking about are here and now. The time is short, and the Lord is returning. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.