

Isaiah 2:1-5

First Sunday in Advent

November 27, 2022

"I am the greatest!" Do you remember that boast from the young boxer named Cassius Clay, later to be known as Muhammad Ali? Perhaps a first reaction to such a claim is, "Prove it!" He did, as he later became the heavyweight boxing champion. In general we take a dim view of a big ego that claims greatness. But today Isaiah shares with us a message that proclaims

IT'S A TIME OF GREATNESS

I. A great message

II. A great future

The prophet brings us a message that is great to hear. It was not that way with everything God's spokesman had to say. He also voiced the law of God that condemned his hearers for their unfaithfulness. In the opening chapter he had said things like they had "forsaken the Lord" and "spurned the Holy One of Israel." Their spiritual rebellion would bring consequences. Isaiah warned of a coming defeat at the hands of the Babylonians. That's what they deserved.

What they did not deserve was also coming in the scene before us in Isaiah's vision. "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it." To communicate the vision Isaiah used picture language with earthly imagery so people could understand and relate to it. Some may look for a physical raising of Mt. Zion, the hill on which the temple was located, to astounding heights, surpassing Mt. Everest, but what Isaiah was describing was the prominence which the Christian gospel would achieve. It takes place in "the last days," which is the Messianic age. It started with the coming of Jesus into the world as the incarnate Son of God to save the world. The period takes in all the time since then and merges into eternity at his Second Coming. That's why the text fits in the Advent season, for we look at all of Christ's comings: historically at Christmas, continually in the present through Word and Sacrament and at the end of time for judgment and taking believers to heaven. The last days are the New Testament era, the time we are living in.

The world and all its inhabitants plunged into sin. We ruined God's perfect creation. The Lord hit the restart button when he destroyed all but eight members of the sinful human race with the Flood at the time of Noah. There was no change afterwards. Sin still reigned. Then God set apart the nation of Israel to be his own and through

whom he would send the rescuer to the world. God's Son would live sinlessly and would die as the payment for the sins of all. It was not an easy task. It involved great suffering as he paid for the world. We saw the contrast in today's Gospel reading. On Palm Sunday the Savior was greeted as a hero but was also riding in humility on a beast of burden. He came in great love and abasing service.

Jesus was what every one of us needs. Once he had come and carried out his work the message was sent to all, not restricted to a single nation (although in reality it never was limited—Israel was to be a living testimony to the true God). It is that scope of influence that makes the mountain of the Lord prominent in the scene before us. Numerous other gods and religious systems exist. They are not real but are products of human imagination. We may detect in them a remnant of the natural knowledge of a divine being conjured up with other ideas, some of them mimicking aspects of the true God, but they are not the God of Scripture. They do not save. The true God, the Triune God of the Bible, does save us, so his place of worship rises to the prominence that the prophet described. People stream to it from all over the planet. What we are hearing about is the growth of the Christian Church. Isaiah was not talking about the location of a physical mountain. Yes, the temple of the Lord was in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion. It signified the dwelling of God with his people as was shown when the glory of the Lord, the smoky sign of God's presence, filled the restricted portion called the Most Holy Place. The temple was important as Jewish men were required to go there on the high festivals. Jesus indicated a change was coming. He told a woman at a well of Samaria, "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth," but not limited to one mountain. Wherever believers gather in his name (he mentioned even just two or three), he is there. That's where he shares his message of forgiveness for sins, rescue from hell and eternal life in heaven.

"Many peoples" will stream in. They come from other nations, as do you and I. What a great message to hear! It is not deserved by us; it is not possible apart from Jesus. He did it. What joy! It is a better deal than any Black Friday sale, for it is offered to us as a free gift.

It is thus a message great to share. We have come to the mountain of the Lord and rejoice in the good news. We see its greatness and stream in. We trust the Savior. We worship and honor him. We know his value and realize the need for more residents of the world to do the same. So we invite them. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord." It is not a situation for hoarding. We have no less of the gospel when we share it. Rather it increases our joy to gather with more. It's like watching virtual church online. It's OK when necessary, like many of us did in the

early months of the pandemic, or for those in remote areas or confined at home, but it's not the same as being here. Faith is an individual response to God's saving love as no one can believe for you, but it is encouraging to know others have the same faith.

So witness to the Savior. Jesus told his disciples, "You *will be* my witnesses," not, "think about it." If God has given you a family, see that they are reared in his ways. Tell others of the hope that you have. Set a godly example. Pray for and support the work of the congregation and church body as together we reach out further, whether it is in home missions, with the goal of one hundred new missions in the next ten years, or world missions far away. Exciting developments are occurring in many locations. What began in Jerusalem after the ascension of Jesus continues to this day. Our synod is part of the process making Christianity a large part of the world scene.

The glorious scene encourages us. We often feel we are a small and insignificant group. God's Word brings success. We live in a time of greatness despite the ongoing challenges of this evil world.

II.

Another aspect of this time of greatness is it tells of a great future. The news of our Savior Jesus exerts an effect on our behavior. "He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." Salvation is not something we have earned. It is not a job for us to complete. But it transforms our attitude. Filled with thanks, we want to show it in a lifestyle that corresponds to God's commandments and brings him glory. We turn to his Word for instruction on how to do so. We need it because our sinful nature is still a part of us on this earth. It listens to the temptations of Satan and his helpers and finds them attractive. We look to the Word to identify what is right and wrong, what to avoid and what to do. God's goodness plants in us the desire to walk in our Lord's ways and the Holy Spirit through the good news of Jesus gives us the power to follow him.

Life is better when we follow the ways of the one who designed it. We will have an effect on others. The prophet mentioned settling disputes. Interpersonal relationships improve when you're not thinking only of yourself. We will be kind and helpful, generous and sharing. We do not seek revenge when others wrong us. We avoid selfishness and rudeness. Following God's ways is the answer to the issues that trouble us. Hearts that have been changed by his love will not take the life of the unborn, oppose marriage as the union of one man and woman for life or promote gender confusion. Cities will not be war zones with murders and crime rampant. Phone callers will bring good news, not scams to defraud you of your life

savings. That is why gospel proclamation is our focus and first priority as Christ's followers. We want to convert and save souls, who will then be salt and light and a force for good in society as they thank God for his goodness. Proclaim the greatness of your Savior and his love for sinners.

Peace also results. "They will beat their swords into plowshare and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." That is our desire, and it would happen if everyone were brought to faith and lived in line with it. Resources would be directed to positive ends, not the destruction of war. We are also realistic, however. Not everyone will be converted; many will continue to honor the false gods. Not just formal religions are the problem but personal ego and selfish ways abound, even among believers. Jesus noted that wars and rumors of wars will continue throughout history. Most visible presently is the Russian action in Ukraine, but that's just one of twenty skirmishes currently happening around the world according to a report I recently read.

The lasting effect is on our eternal future, making it great. The ultimate, full experience of peace awaits us in our forever home of heaven. No fighting and no enmity will exist there because sin will not be present. We will enjoy total safety and pleasurable experiences. Satan will be able to stir up no opposition. We will be united in serving the Lord and singing his praises.

Eternity may seem a long way off, but there is urgency to our message. Ads these days remind us of the number of shopping days before Christmas. The post office alerts us to mailing deadlines for packages and greetings if we want them to arrive before December 25. We have a bigger deadline for getting the message out. The world as we know it will one day end. Even if that event does not come soon, many current residents of planet earth will meet their personal end before then. It could happen any day. None of us knows the time, even if we are in great health. Unexpected conditions can strike. Accidents happen. We want no one to miss out on the great future, just as our heavenly Father desires.

We have the thrill of receiving and sharing the greatness of our Lord and his grace. We have been brought to faith in the Savior whose coming we prepare to celebrate. It is a time of greatness. Use it to its fullness, not becoming distracted from our important task but rejoicing and heralding his goodness.