

THE MOUNTAIN OF PEACE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Isaiah 2:1-5

The population of the earth is 7.5 billion people. Of these, 32% or 2.4 billion identify themselves as followers of Jesus Christ. Christianity is the largest religious group on the planet. The second largest group with 25% or 1.9 billion adherents is Islam. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam traces its theological origins back to Abraham. Also, like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is monotheistic teaching that there is only one God—Allah.

The historical roots of Islam lie in the seventh century with the preaching of Mohammed in Mecca. Although the followers of Islam—commonly known as Muslims—are diverse, they do agree on the essential acts of their faith. These acts are known as the Pillars of Islam. These five Pillars are actions that are mandatory for all believers. They are the foundation of Muslim life.

The first Pillar is a declaration of faith which states simply, “There is no true god but God, and Mohammed is the Messenger of God.” The second Pillar is to pray to God five times a day. The third Pillar is to give charitably to the needy. The fourth calls for fasting during the month of Ramadan. And the fifth is to make the Hajj. The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. The Hajj is to be taken at least once as an adult if one is physically and financially able to comply. Each year, about two million people make the weeklong Hajj.

A pilgrimage, like the Hajj, is a sacred journey. Humans have undertaken pilgrimages since the beginning of time. Generally, we think of pilgrimages in a religious context, such as to journey to Jerusalem, to bathe in the Ganges, to circumambulate Mount Kailash, to make the Hajj.

A pilgrimage doesn't have to be religious to be sacred to a person. For example, for an American, visiting the monuments in Washington, D.C., can be considered a sacred event. Country music aficionados flock to Nashville to visit the Ryman—regarded as the Mother Church of Country Music. For football fans, attending a Super Bowl in person might be a once-in-a-lifetime sports pilgrimage. Here in Tennessee, an October trip to Gatlinburg is to commune with the divine.

In scripture, there are many instances of the faithful undertaking sacred journeys. Most of these call people to visit Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey during the Passover pilgrimage.

In our reading for today, the prophet Isaiah invites the world to make a pilgrimage to God's mountain.

Isaiah served in the seventh century BC in Jerusalem. The Old Testament book which bears his name begins with a series of oracles condemning the people who inhabit that city. These people, says Isaiah, have rebelled against God, their worship has become meaningless and empty, the city has become corrupt with the leaders taking bribes and *running after gifts*; they ignore the widows and orphans.

Then, in the second chapter of Isaiah (our reading for today), Isaiah foretells of a future in which Jerusalem shall be recognized as *the mountain of the Lord's house*. This mountain will be *the highest of the mountains*. It will be raised up above all hills. All nations shall stream to this mountain. People will say, *Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ...that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths*.

When we read of this place called *the mountain of the Lord*, our first instinct is to interpret it to be God's kingdom. And it is. But it is not quite like the kingdom that Jesus will preach about. That kingdom is the kingdom that we seek, a place that we might inhabit for eternity. But what Isaiah describes is different. This kingdom is a place of pilgrimage. It is a place that reaches out and calls all peoples of the world to gather. This place is not a place to escape the world. Instead, it is a place where we can learn to renew the world, to prepare the world for God's kingdom.

On a normal pilgrimage, the destination is something the pilgrim desires to experience in hope that that experience will change their life. But, in Isaiah's vision, those who climb God's mountain do so for a different purpose. They come so that God *may teach [them] his ways*. The ways of God are different than the ways of the world. But when we understand God's ways, then we *may walk in his paths*. The mountain of God is about learning God's ways—God's laws and priorities and will. As Isaiah writes, *for out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem*.

As Isaiah points out, there is a side effect to learning God's ways. That side effect is peace. In Isaiah's vision, God's mountain is a mountain that all nations shall stream to. It shall be a place where nations gather. And as they gather, they will bring with them their conflicts and hostilities, their feuds and grievances. But God *shall judge between the nations. God shall arbitrate for many peoples*. On the holy mountain, experiencing God's glory, the nations will discover God's judgment. The purity of God's love will highlight the dinginess of their conflicts. On that mountain, next to God's glory, the nations will realize the pettiness of their quarrels and seek transformative change. As Isaiah envisions, the nations *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 any more*.

In New York City, just across the street from the United Nations, is a small park. On one side of the park is a curving stone wall. On this wall, inscribed in large

letters, are these very words of Isaiah. They stand there as a challenge to the nations. *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 any more.* What a perfect place for these words to exist—in view of where the nations assemble—as a reminder of God's promise of peace and a different way for people to live together.

In 2013, in Mexico, the northwestern city of Culiacán suffered the highest rate of gun deaths for that country. Mexican artist Pedro Reyes decided to use that city's proliferation of guns for art. He initiated a campaign inviting residents of that city to turn in their guns. In return, they would receive coupons to purchase household goods. The campaign quickly collected 1527 firearms. 40% of those guns collected were high-power automatic weapons designed for military use. Next, in a public event, these weapons were crushed under a steamroller. The broken pieces were collected and taken to a foundry and melted. This metal was then used to produce 1527 shovels. The shovels were distributed across the country for the purpose of planting 1527 trees. Those guns—those agents of death—were reshaped into tools that foster life—swords into plows. The art project was known as *Palas por Pistolas*—Shovels for Pistols. Guns that plant trees—that is what we can expect to find on God's mountain.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the start of a new year on the Christian calendar, a new revolution in our cycle of faith. As Christians, we aren't mandated to take pilgrimages like our Muslim brothers and sisters. However, Catholics will go to Rome, Presbyterians journey to Scotland, Lutherans are drawn to Wittenberg. As Christians, we are on a pilgrimage every day as we seek to follow our Lord and Savior. The cycle of the year is a journey itself and Advent is the time to prepare ourselves for that journey, to imagine what lies ahead for us, to ponder our lives with the Lord. As Isaiah writes, *Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.*