

“Mountain dreaming”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
November 27, 2016

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

One of the best days of my life was when Cincinnati Public Schools got a new superintendent... from Texas. Oh we kids loved this man! If he saw even the smallest of snow flakes, he'd cancel school and call a snow day. Which gets me wondering: Could that be why a church in the snowy Finger Lakes called a pastor from Kentucky? Could that be why a group of such seasoned winter warriors called a young guy who's never owned a house before and thus never had to clear his own driveway? Were you hoping to get some Sundays off—church gets canceled and you get to sleep in?

Well, I have to hand it to you. It was a good plan. Diabolical, even. But there's one thing you didn't consider. I might not survive this. Do you know what it feels like to ache in places you never knew could ache, or to have your tears freeze to your face, as you come to doubt all of your life choices? Because I now do.

Frankly, after all this snow, a mountain, with its cold, snowy peak, is about the last place I want to go. And yet this is where Isaiah would direct our eyes. It's there, on a mountain, that Isaiah sees a vision of the future. On that high perch, God's house shall be established. People will come to learn God's ways and walk in God's paths. Out of the mountain shall flow wisdom like so many rivers of melted snow. The winds of justice will blow off the mountain, and God shall heal all divisions. War will no longer exist. Nations shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

It is fitting that we begin Advent on a mountaintop. Hilltops have long been chosen as sites for worship, seen as thresholds between earth and sky, mortality and the divine. Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai and looked upon the promised land from a mountaintop. The prophet Elijah would later stand on that mountain and encounter God in a still, quiet voice. An angel chose to tell a group of shepherds on a hill that hope had entered the world again through a babe in a manger. As a young man, that same babe gave a sermon on a mount and was transfigured on a high mountain, his face shining like the sun. Some years later, Martin Luther King Jr. would stand, in a famous speech, on his own mountaintop, taking in a panorama of human history and casting a vision for a revolution in human rights.

But you know, it was thousands of years ago when Isaiah first saw that vision of hope perched on a mountain, and we're still not there. We're still in the low valleys, where swords have turned, not into plowshares, but into guns. We're still crawling through the swamps of loss and sadness. We're lost on winding paths that take us no closer to that wisdom, that justice, promised by Isaiah. Moses may have stood on a mountain, but truth is he never made it to the promised

land. The Rev. Dr. King may have stood there too, but the next day he was shot, and truth is we're still far from the equality and dignity he dreamt of.

As beautiful as it is, this mountain dream can feel awfully unrealistic. It can feel as unreachable as Christmas itself. Between the parties to plan, the gifts to buy, the rooms to clean, the bills to pay, the work to do, the doubts to hide, and the losses to grieve, there's often little time to feel again that anticipation of Christmas—that rush of unhampered joy, that certainty of God's presence, that sense that the world is at once good and beautiful.

Maybe it'd be easier just not to dream. Just stop hoping for mountains. At least, there wouldn't be any disappointment.

But before you give up on dreaming, consider this. Researchers say that dreaming—I'm talking about the literal kind now—is good for you. Many believe that dreams help us process emotions and memories, alleviate depression, sleep better, and shape our self-image.

In fact, Dr. Rubin Naiman, at the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine, says that “dream loss” (induced by too little sleep or by medications that inadvertently suppress dreaming) may be one of the most critical threats to human health.

According to psychologists like Naiman, dreaming isn't an escape from reality; it is our biological way of coping with reality. It's how we integrate the sometimes painful, sometimes chaotic fragments of our day into a cohesive whole, empowering us to tackle the next day, perhaps even confront challenges with new and subtle insights.

When Isaiah speaks of this holy mountain, he's not offering a delusional escape, an opiate to dull the pain. Isaiah is no pollyanna. The verses we just read are couched between long denunciations of evil and unfaithfulness, pain and injustice. Isaiah describes a world falling apart.

He knows all too well how far off the mountain really is. And yet, he insists on dreaming. And for a moment, he sees what it's all for—all the struggle, all the prophetic words no one listens to. Part of it is hoping that a future generation, the children of his children, will inherit a better world than the one he knows. But it's more than that. The dream is his tether; the mountaintop, his perspective. It makes sure he doesn't get lost in the weeds of this here valley, that he remains tied to God, to his people, to principles more important than his life.

You see, that's the thing about dreaming. Just like mountaintops, dreams are invitations to stand on the edge of another world. And just as we carry with us our mountaintop experiences when we come back down, we carry our dreams into our waking life. And with them, we bring, into these valleys, that other world.

Dreaming changes us. It transfigures us, just like Jesus on that mountaintop with his disciples.

This is where that last verse of our Isaiah passage becomes so important. When Isaiah says, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” he’s not talking about the future anymore. This line isn’t part of his mountain vision. It’s an invitation to live our lives right now, right here in the valleys, as if we were already on that mountain, as if already full of love and joy and justice.

Paul, in the same way in his letter to the Roman church, tells us to “wake from sleep” and “lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” The sun may not yet be in the sky, he says, but “the day is near.” It is time to wake and bring our dreams into daylight.

Can you see them—these mountain dreams breaking into our reality?

Can you see hundreds of people blocking a pipeline that threatens the drinking water, sacred sites, and sovereignty of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation? Can you see them standing there, in the cold, braving water cannons, pepper spray, police dogs, and rubber bullets—Native Americans and their allies laboring still for their land and their human rights?

Can you see Peggy Whitson, flying off in her rocket to the International Space Station, as the oldest woman to ever visit space?

Can you see Dartmouth University’s trustees proclaiming their campus a sanctuary for undocumented students?

Can you see a repo man in Illinois raising enough money to pay off an elderly couple’s car bill after falling on hard times?

Can you see kids and parents in Houston pooling their money to pay for repairs to the prosthetic limb of their beloved crossing guard who at the age of 15, as a child soldier in Ethiopia, stepped on a land mine?

Can you see the food truck in New York City that is fueling social change by hiring formerly incarcerated youth?

Can you see our very own Chrissy Thornton, on Thanksgiving Day, stopping to speak with a man carrying a huge backpack, finding out that he’s homeless, and getting him to a shelter?

As Dirk Lange writes, “The vision of Isaiah is no longer just a far-off dream but is something realized already here, in this Christian community, as we love our neighbor.”

We are not on the mountain yet. But we can see it in our dreams, and we can walk as if we're already there. And when we do so, our lives become like blades through the jungle, like roads through the desert, like paths to the mountaintop.

It's why, even after Moses died in the wilderness, even after Dr. King was assassinated, God's people didn't give up. Others picked up where Moses and King left off; they carried on, walking toward that promised land.

It's why, 2,000 years after Christ's ascension, and still a broken world, we gather yet again to worship God in the quiet of Advent. It's why even now we still believe, still hope. Because we're mountain dreamers. And that mountain ain't far off. **Amen.**