

In the days to come, The Mount of the LORD's House
Shall stand firm above the mountains
And tower above the hills;
And all the nations Shall gaze on it with joy.
3 And the many peoples shall go and say:
"Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the LORD,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That He may instruct us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths."
For Instruction shall come forth from Zion,
The word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 Thus He will judge among the nations
And arbitrate for the many peoples,
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks:
Nation shall not take up Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war.

I know that this sounds odd, but I enjoy saying this every year. TODAY is actually our Christian New Year's Day, because it is the First Sunday of Advent. This, right now, is the beginning of a new Christian Year. Special things change. Our sanctuary sits quietly today, all decorated with color and beauty. Unfortunately we are going to have to wait a while longer before we can return. But one thing should be absolutely clear for us. As far as First Sundays in Advent have gone, *There has not been another one like this.* And we can either be bothered by this, or we can make the best of it. That is my suggestion.

We need to lay out a few metaphors for ourselves today, to highlight this special day, and its uniqueness. First, look at our picture on the screen [lots of people gathered to see baptisms taking place in the water]. Imagine we are watching something that we do not normally do, and that is to baptize people in a river, with water slowly running towards the sea. Imagine people out in that river, water up to their waist, and someone is about to be dipped (which is what the word **Baptize** actually means). The water will not just

surround them under the surface, but it will move by them, touching them for only a second. And then it will continue on its journey. Just like the water flowing, time flows around us in the same way. It is only here for a moment. There will not be another moment for us just like this one, or this day. And today we begin a new Christian year.

Let me introduce a second metaphor for us to embrace, and this one has to do with walking on a trail or a pathway. We have words about traveling this morning from the Prophet Isaiah. We just heard these special words of motion, words of travel:

Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the LORD,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That He may instruct us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths.”

This sure sounds like we need to be moving forward, to some special place. We will get to that. I have started reading a really great book by an Episcopal priest and scholar by the name of Paul van Buren. I wish I could have met him, but he passed away in 1998. His book is **deep**! I would like to share some words from this man as he talks about us needing to be aware of what it is that we are doing with our lives, and the role that we must play within our Faith. So here is a special quote, right here for us. And just so that we have a little head start here, we need to know that he is going to invite us to Walk the Way. Today, we are all Walkers!

“We walk a Way that began long before we joined it. We could not engage in this particular conversation if we did not both remember and respect those who kept it alive and are no longer with us. We would do those earlier Walkers no honor, however, if we refused to take full responsibility for carrying on

the conversation as a living occurrence, a fact of the present, not just a remembrance or repetition of words of the past. We talk as we walk, and the steps we have to take today are on ground not covered yesterday.”

That is deep stuff! *We talk as we walk, and the steps we have to take today are on ground not covered yesterday.* I hope we are struck by this idea...*the steps we have to take today...*

I am so aware right now that we are walking in a place where no one has walked before! We are in a situation that no one has faced before, but it is our turn to walk and talk and to make this conversation into a living occurrence. I love that! And this is *Christian New Year's Day* on top of it all!

Paul van Buren reminds us that the fact that we have anything to believe at all, comes from the fact that other people did the walking and the talking long ago. Now, do we honor them if we only repeat what they said? No! This walk and talk needs to be a living occurrence! *Is there anything new to say?* Well, that is a profound question! But we have a problem, because something happened to stop this process. They claim that there is nothing new to say or share. By the way, this is an idea that comes from what we would call **Fundamentalism**, officially started in 1912 in our country. The Fundamentalist movement insisted that there is nothing new, that God has nothing new to say, it was all said long ago, and our job is to lock it down and make sure that it will never change! How crazy is that?

Fundamentalism would have us believe that what God might say to humanity has been locked down since the time of Moses, or at least the time of Jesus. This doesn't make sense. God is alive, and

God is still speaking. *Shouldn't we hope that that is true, that God is still speaking to us?* And God needs us to keep walking the Way, and talking about this life, and trying to figure things out as we walk. We have things to figure out, don't we? Will we figure it all out? No. But we have to take our turn, *Walking the Way Once More*. Others will walk after we are gone. That is OK. God will want to speak with them as well. But what is our job today, as a new year begins? We need to Walk the Way, and we need to Talk.

As of today, we are walking in what we call ADVENT. Unfortunately, it has been the case in many churches and for many pastors that Advent simply means "Four Weeks of Early Christmas!" Yay! Four Weeks of Early Christmas. That has never seemed very satisfying to me. Four weeks of early Christmas to me means that by the time you get to Christmas it is a relief that it is finally over. If it were not for Covid, and normal shopping would be as it has been in the past, it would be totally normal for the Christmas decorations and even music to rain down around us starting right after Halloween. By the time Christmas comes, it has already been around for a long time.

Maybe we should do some walking and some talking together as we live our lives in these unique days, and we should ask ourselves about Christmas and Advent, and what this all really means. We are the Church of Jesus Christ. We should be the ones who talk among ourselves about what we believe this holy time should mean for people. We should at least decide for ourselves, or talk about what we think it means, as a living occurrence.

I would like to cut to the chase here, as they say: We do in fact say all kinds of things about Christmas, do we not? If people ask us,

what is the meaning of Christmas, what is the purpose, is there a special HOPE for Christmas, what might that be? We talk about peace on earth, and good will to people. Is there really peace, and good will? Was that established? What is Christmas? Is it a birthday celebration? I have watched churches do that in the past. It might be that no one else has offered some other ideas about what it all might mean. So hey, why not a birthday party? Why not sing happy birthday to Jesus? Is that going to give people hope, and will it change the world? This is why we must walk and talk, and make this conversation become a living occurrence.

We will see Isaiah's words again next Sunday. Isaiah is a place of misty, cloudy hope for the world. It whispers to us. Today we have the holy words of chapter 2, the words of great promise from the great Prophet.

In the days to come... we don't know when. Clearly they are not here now, and they have not come yet. But at some point, things will change. If we really want to know what ADVENT and Christmas are about, we need to think about TIME, and we need to be looking and hoping for God's Future. The word ADVENT, a Latin word, simply means that ***something*** is coming. Our passage this morning tells us something so wonderful, but I don't know if we really believe it: something is COMING. Somehow, some day, people will want to know the ways of God. How many people will want this? ***All*** people, especially the people who know nothing of God right now. They will walk in God's direction, wanting to learn God's Instruction, God's Torah. It talks directly about walking. Again

Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the LORD,

To the House of the God of Jacob;
That He may instruct us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths.”

And that we may walk in His paths... and God will heal our world, so that we will learn war no more.

We cannot go with the Fundamentalists who tell us that there is no looking forward, only that we must look backward. No, we cannot do that. God is still speaking, and we need to walk and talk together, so that we might listen to what God might be saying to us in our days. We need to figure those things out, so that the children will be able to pick up the trail when they are fully grown adults. They will honor us by knowing what we talked about. But they will cover new ground. And God will say new things to them. And they will be blessed. Their walking and their talking with each other and with God, it will become a living occurrence. How great is that?

But it is our turn today, November 29, 2020. It is our turn today. What will we tell the world around us about the hope that we have? Will we have any hope to share? Those are things we need to talk about. And we need to listen, because God is still speaking. As this new year begins, let's walk together and talk together, and figure out what we will leave to Colin and all the other children. OK? Advent is here. May it be a blessing for us and our world. AMEN.