

“A Holy Heist”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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First Sunday of Advent Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 25:36-44

It was the hope-- wasn't it?-- that we would all meet at the same mountain. Which mountain would be clear, for it would be the highest of mountains, and the Lord's house would be upon it, and all the nations would be streaming towards it.

People would head to that mountain, for there they knew they would receive the instruction they needed and receive a holy word. On that mountain, people would be so transformed that they would then beat their swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. Their weapons of war would become tools for feeding many people.

When I hear this passage, I think of a piece of artwork that sits by the entrance to the United Nations building in Manhattan. It is a bronze sculpture by Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, of an oversized Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver with a knotted barrel and the muzzle pointing upwards. The artist made this sculpture after singer-songwriter and peace activist John Lennon was murdered. Not only does the sculpture speak to that moment in history, but also to the founding principles of the UN, that all nations would come together in this one space, and have the kinds of conversations that turn our weapons into tools for peace, all over the world. We certainly have the arena where peace can be built; however, our efforts towards peace will only be as successful as the investment and change required of each nation to move towards that goal.

So where is that holy mountain of which Isaiah speaks?

Yesterday at this time, I was on a mountain. Over Thanksgiving, we spent 2 days with my dad and his wife at their new house up in the North Georgia Mountains. My father has recently sold the yoga studio he owned and ran for 25 years. This move marks a new, and quieter, phase of his life, and he is trying to figure out what his identity will be after he spent so many years identifying himself with his yoga center. My dad loves nature, and he has a real sense of ritual, so earlier this fall he took a 4 day, solo, pilgrimage onto a mountain in the woods around his house. He took no food, only

water, and had no phone or other human contact other than to visit a place he and his wife decided he would visit and leave a new rock each day so that she would know that he was still alive. He would just spend those days fasting and meditating and relying on nature, facing his fears, his demons, and perhaps God. Over Thanksgiving, I asked him more about how his mountain forest pilgrimage went. “It was really good. I loved feeling blanketed by the stars at night, and being greeted by the creatures of the forest. They took really good care of me. However, while I appreciated this experience, I did not leave feeling any new sense of direction as I had hoped. I think I should have stayed in the woods longer, so that I really could have stretched myself out of my comfort zone.

“Dad, If you really wanted to go out of your comfort zone, couldn’t you have just gone to a cocktail party?” I asked my introverted father. I was only making a joke, however, I do recognize the spiritual value in taking yourself out of your comfort zone.

You see, Advent already builds in that space for us. It beckons us outside of our comfort zones to prepare and make room for Jesus’ arrival. As it is, we awake from our Thanksgiving stupor of too much turkey or whatever kinds of comfort food your family serves, and we are ready to fill ourselves again with pumpkin-spice lattes, Cyber Monday, familiar carols, cookies that will show up at every single church committee meeting between now and December 25, and a sweet little baby Jesus. But instead, the gospel throws at us a grown-up Jesus with frightening reminders of Noah and the flood that swept everything away, of farmers in the field where one suddenly and mysteriously disappears, of two women at a millstone, where again one vanishes and another stays. Today’s gospel tells of a thief breaking into the house at night, and the message is clear: keep awake, be ready, for Jesus’ coming will be like that: unexpected, surprising, and will even involve some kind of loss.

This passage does not make me feel comfortable. In fact, it makes me so **uncomfortable** that I had to resist the urge to do a little Christmas shopping on Amazon last night *instead* of writing my sermon. Today is the Sunday when we light the first Advent Candle, and it is the candle for Hope. What is so hopeful about loss? And, when can we get back to climbing that holy mountain that Isaiah promises?

I have been robbed before, and if that has happened to you as well, you know that the feelings that come up when something is stolen from you are not just about the material objects that were lost. Sometimes the even more troubling thing about being robbed is that it is a disorienting experience. You start to question everything that made you feel

safe and secure. So, it is very startling that Jesus does use this kind of language about a thief in the night to describe his return to us.

Nadia Bolz-Weber suggests that the gospel is telling us that the grace of God is in fact like a thief in the night. She says, "This holy thief wants to steal from us and maybe that is literal and metaphoric at the same time. Because in this season of [extreme] levels of consumption in which our credit card debts rise and our waistbands expand, maybe the idea that Jesus wants to break in and jack some of your stuff **is really good news**. I started thinking this week that maybe we should make Advent lists -- kind of like Christmas lists, but instead of things we want Santa to bring us, we write down what we want Christ to take from us. You know, in hopes he could pickpocket the stupid junk in our houses, or abscond (take off) with our self-hatred or resentment ... maybe break in and take off with our compulsive eating or our love of money in the middle of the night. Don't you kind of long for God to do something unexpected?"¹

What will happen on this Advent journey is not entirely in our control, and we have to be okay with that. Advent, if we let it stretch us past our comfort zones, should be a little *disorienting*. But here is what we should remember. If we go back to that holy mountain which the prophet Isaiah imagines for us, we will find that the people going down the mountain do not look the same as those going up the mountain. As they stream up that holy mountain that stands taller than all the mountains around it, they are carrying their swords and their spears. But when they come down, we know they have received the Lord's instruction. They have learned God's ways and have chosen to walk in God's paths. And so, when they descend God's mountain, not only have their tools for defense become tools of farming and feeding; they also find that they "walk in the light of the Lord." I am not certain what that looks like, but I know I want to walk like that.

Now, most of us don't walk around carrying deadly weapons. But we do walk, carrying our own defenses. What would it look like if God changed those into something that heals or feeds ourselves and others? How can that happen?

We hold those questions in our hearts at the start of Advent, as we look up that holy mountain. Remember, what happens on this journey is not entirely under our control. And we begin with a meal not of our own making, but of Christ's blessing. Let us receive this grace, knowing that materially it is only a small amount; but spiritually, it is all that we need. Amen.

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "That Thieving Christ and Advent" in *Sojourners* December 1, 2010

