

“Ain’t No Mountain High Enough”

Isaiah 2:1-5

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If you are looking at the title of the sermon, don’t worry, I’m not about to break out into the classic Marvin Gaye hit, but it would be an interesting and catchy way to begin, wouldn’t it? Alas, despite modern attempts to the contrary, entertaining you is not the goal of the preaching office. The tallest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest, reaches a height of just over 29,000 feet. In the text we have from the prophet Isaiah this morning, he proclaims the mountain of the house of the Lord will be “the highest of the mountains.” So, that means that the Lord will build a tall house that exceeds the height of the world’s tallest mountain, right? If the Bible literalists out there want to hold to their literal interpretations, they would have to make that affirmative statement here. But of course, that is not what Isaiah is saying in these words. The Lord is not going to build a massive structure stretching into the atmosphere, but He is going to build a house upon the earth. In fact, He already has.

As we embark on this Advent season, a penitential time of repentance, we must highlight the truth of what the Lord has given to us as His called children. “The mountain of the house of the Lord” is His holy Church on earth, and it is His gracious gift to sustain us as we await the second Advent of Jesus, the one who came to establish a New Covenant with God’s people. In order to raise that mountain high above the world, the Son of God who established it must first be brought low, incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary. He must come down from His heavenly dwelling and suffer and die for the sins of the world, so that His beloved children would have the blessed gift of eternal life. And so, we gather around the gifts He has given His Church. The Church of God is not a structure. It’s not a building, a sanctuary, an altar, or a pastor. The Church of God is the gathering of His saints around His gifts, what we call the “marks of the Church,” and those marks are not hard to find. Wherever believers gather around the Word being preached in its truth and purity through the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, and wherever His holy Sacraments are administered rightly according to Christ’s institution, there you find the true Church. There, in that gathering of the saints of the Lord, no mountain can eclipse the height it reaches, because heaven and earth meet in that place.

Upon the mountain of the Lord, first and foremost the Word must be preached. And not just spoken of and referenced, not just used to prove a point, but taught and used as the very Word of God that has been revealed to us. No one really likes to hear the

Law, and so the answer for many who preach is simply to ignore it for the sake of making sure no one feels uncomfortable gathering in their “church.” But we don’t get to pick and choose what God says and break it apart based on how we feel about it, which is exactly what Jesus Himself tells us in Matthew 5:18, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” The Law must be preached to show the people of God that they haven’t moved on to a better life that either needs no Law or has the ability to obey the Law. You are still sinners in need of a Savior, no matter how badly you may want to claim to be a good person and a good Christian.

Everyone fails at keeping the Law, and no one wants to hear about their sins and filth that make them unclean before the Lord. But that is the purpose of the Law. It is given to us by God Himself in order to show us our sin and make us squirm about them. Paul says in Romans 3:20, “For by works of the Law no man will be justified in His sight, since through the Law comes knowledge of sin.” The Law of God is given so that you would see your complete and utter inability to please God or do anything for your own salvation. You need Jesus to do that for you. In the forgiveness of your sins, the Lord graciously pardons all of your iniquities, and He does so through the means of grace given to His Church on earth. We find forgiveness, life, and salvation where the Law is rightly preached, because after the Law comes the Gospel promise of Jesus Christ who has redeemed the world. And outside of that holy Christian church, there is no forgiveness to be found. There is only lawlessness and debauchery. Luther says in the Large Catechism on the Third Article of the Creed:

Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered to the end that we shall daily obtain there nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. Thus, although we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to injure us, because we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but [continuous, uninterrupted] forgiveness of sin, both in that God forgives us, and in that we forgive, bear with, and help each other.

But outside of this Christian Church, where the Gospel is not, there is no forgiveness, as also there can be no sanctification. Therefore, all who seek and wish to merit sanctification, not through the Gospel and forgiveness of sin, but by their works, have expelled and severed themselves from this Church.

So, we preach the Law in order to remind the sinner that they are indeed such and in need of reconciliation, and then we preach the Gospel to give that reconciliation. That is

what Isaiah says in our text this morning when he speaks of swords and spears versus plowshares and pruning hooks (v 4). The Law is the spears and swords. It cuts to the heart and kills the one whom it attacks. It shows you that you are as good as dead if left to fend for yourself in this world of sin. But the Gospel is the plowshares and pruning hooks. Plowshares till the earth and bring life to an otherwise dead soil. Pruning hooks cut out the dead vines in a grapevine that would otherwise choke the life out of the vine. These things bring life to that which is otherwise dead, and that which brings life to the dead soul is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the forgiveness of sins. And, as we just read from Luther, the place where that forgiveness is found is not in the middle of a field on your own or in the private prayer of a solitary man. It is found in His Church, the place where the assembly of God's people gathers around His means of grace.

“Out of Zion shall go forth the Law” is what it says in verse 3 of Isaiah 2, and there Isaiah is not speaking of the Law proper, but the entirety of God's Word, the full counsel of God as His blessings flow from that high mountain. “The word of the Lord from Jerusalem” is a reference to the preaching of the Gospel and the visible Word in the Sacraments. From those good things, the blessings of the Lord will flow out into the world where God's called people will receive the forgiveness that Jesus has won on the cross. The Word and the Sacraments are His means by which we receive the blessed truth of our salvation in Christ, and that only because they are given to us by God for that purpose. Nothing we do here makes it what it is, only the powerful Word of God performing that which it says it does makes it what it is. And it is meet, right, and salutary for us to use His means of grace exactly as they have been given to us without the interjection of our own thoughts, ideas, and sinful inclinations. The Law condemns; the Gospel saves. The Law condemns; Baptism now saves you. The Law condemns; the body and blood of Jesus have redeemed you.

And because of that redemption, we now “walk in the light of the Lord.” Because it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20. And because Christ now lives in you by virtue of your Baptism into His death and resurrection, you have been given new life as the light of the Lord dwells within you. As Jesus says in John 8:12, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus is the light of life, and His holy Church on earth, the fellowship of His saints, reflects that light to the world and, more importantly, to each other. We live our lives in Christ for the benefit of our own souls, but also for those around us. We are the instruments of the Gospel proclamation that Jesus is Lord and has given Himself up to be the propitiation for our sins. As God's Holy Church, everything we do is Christ working in and through us for the benefit of the

salvation of His holy people, and nothing will ever separate us from that truth. Nothing will ever separate us from the love of the Lord our God.

Through the gift of the holy Christian Church, God has given the communion of His saints on earth a place where they can meet Him as He is – a place that stretches beyond even the highest mountain because it is the place where heaven and earth meet to bring God’s gifts to His people. It is not a building that there “ain’t no mountain high enough” to eclipse its stature. The holy Christian Church which we proclaim in the Creed is each and every one of us gathered together with all the saints and all believers of all times and places. And we gather together in hope of what’s to come. We gather together in the “light of the Lord,” as we walk this world side by side with those who have the one true faith in the one true God. Jesus comes to bring us His very body and blood as He breaks the barrier between His dwelling place and ours and unites as one with the communion of saints in His Holy Supper. There is where we see what it means to be the Holy Christian Church – to be “the mountain of the house of the Lord” and be “lifted up above the hills.”

The hope around which we gather as one body in Christ is the hope of His coming on the clouds of heaven to inaugurate an eternal peace that will consummate His judgment. We will forever sing “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest (Matt. 21:9),” just as the people welcomed our Lord to Jerusalem in our Gospel lesson. The light of the Lord will shine upon us as we walk in the glory of heaven for all eternity, where we will dwell in the presence of the one who is the light of all things. Jesus is the light of the world, and that light shines forth through His Word and Sacraments administered rightly by His called servants. Until the day when we are called home, or He returns again in the fullness of His glory, we look forward to the day when we have the fullness of His promises in the heavenly dwelling place He has gone to prepare for us. Amen.