

Chuck Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Colorado Springs, Colorado
chuck@blaisdells.net
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Live Discerningly

Isaiah 2:1-5 New Revised Standard Version The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

For a couple of years in the late '80s, I was the part-time pastor of a Disciples church about 30 miles west of Indianapolis in a little town of 600 people. It was corn country and in the summer you could get completely lost on the identical-looking county roads surrounded by corn stalks ten feet high. There was a hill a few miles from that little town, only a couple of hundred feet tall, but it was the highest things for miles.

Perched on it were television and long-distance repeater antennas. What I learned when lost on one of those county roads in the hot, hazy humidity of an Indiana summer was that if I could spot that hill and those antennas, I could re-orient myself, I could know the way I needed to go. Since that time, I've lived in places that have much more dramatic mountains – Mt. Diablo in the San Francisco Bay area that rises up unexpectedly and gives you something to look at while stuck in traffic; the twin volcanoes of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea in Hawaii whose presence always reminded me that I was on some of the newest land in the world; and of course, now, Pikes Peak

which – if you’re on the Front Range – immediately tells you east from west and helps you know which way you need to go.

What are the purpose of such landmarks, such mountains, such high places? They function in many ways in our lives: they are markers for our nostalgia, as when you go back somewhere you’ve been away from for a long time and the sight of a local landmark brings back all sorts of memories. They can be a reminder of solidity and unchangingness when our lives don’t feel very solid or stable at all. And such landmarks, such mountains, such high places are referred to in the Bible over and over again: At the beginning of Second Isaiah, the news that the Hebrew people’s exile is about to end comes from “a high place.” And then there are the powerful and comforting words of Psalm 121, “I look to the hills from where my strength comes; my help comes from the Lord.” And today’s scripture, the first of our Advent scriptures from the prophet Isaiah, tells us that “in the days to come” the Lord’s House will be established on a mountain and all the peoples of the earth shall look to it, shall come to it.

But why are they coming? Why is this scripture traditionally chosen by the lectionary on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the season in which we prepare for the coming of the Christ once again? Well, look at what the folks who are coming to that mountain are going to do: they are coming to be taught, they are coming to learn, they are coming to receive God’s instructions about what is important and what is true and what matters. In other words, and as the title of this sermon has it, they are coming in order to learn how to live discerningly rather than shallowly, or fearfully, or mistakenly. *Discerningly.*

And all of us need that reminder of what is truly important, what is really true, what is life-giving instead of fear-inducing. We need such instruction, such teaching, such discernment in an era in which fake news sites have proliferated in a frightening fashion and millions and millions of people of every political persuasion have found themselves duped by “news” that was not news at all, but was in fact too often nothing more than bald-faced lies.¹ We need such instruction, such teaching, such discernment in a time when it is more and more likely that you may not know or ever talk to someone who doesn’t share the same political views as you do, when a huge percentage of Americans say they do not know personally someone of another faith and so are easily misled by lies about each other. We need such instruction, such teaching, such discernment in a time when food banks across this country – including here in the Springs – are reporting huge increases in the number of folks who can no longer reliably feed their families particularly, perhaps, in an era in which Americans will spend an average of \$46 per animal on Christmas gifts for their pets.²

What wisdom, what discernment, what teaching, then, does the prophet Isaiah offer to us? If I were to put it into one phrase, it would be this: the coming of the Christ, the time of discernment offered to us in our Advent anticipating, is about learning the difference between what we want and what we need, the difference *between what we want and what God needs.*

Last week I shared with you a story from the great Disciples preacher and

¹ And the credulity that allows for the proliferation of such sites starts at an early age; 80% of middle schoolers, according to one study, could not tell a fake news story from a real one.
<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/11/23/503129818/study-finds-students-have-dismaying-inability-to-tell-fake-news-from-real>

²<http://www.dogalize.com/2015/12/christmas-gifts-for-pets-how-much-will-americans-spend/>

teacher Fred Craddock. This morning, let me share another one:

I had absolutely no interest in buying a car when I drove into the lot where dozens of used cars were on display. Let me explain. Every day between home and work, I passed this car lot. These "like new" automobiles were shown to the public with their prices in large letters on the windshields. From time to time the cars were moved around, with the exception of one car. Always in a favored spot was a real eye-catcher, an Olds Cutlass Supreme, a canary yellow convertible with black interior. Price:\$300. Must be some mistake; one zero omitted, but even at \$3,000 it looked like a real steal.

You can tell this is a story from several decades ago; now Dr. Craddock's story might instead talk about a Tesla with all the bells and whistles. But listen to how Dr. Craddock continues his story:

One day it occurred to me that some buyer would see the mistake and offer the \$300 to the horrified but helpless owner. I drove in to warn the owner of the mistake so he could prevent a huge loss. But he said it was not a mistake, \$300 was the price. It can't be; what's wrong with it? I kicked the tires, checked the odometer (165 miles), searched for evidences of being wrecked or flooded, turned on the ignition and listened. It hummed like a hive of bees. Okay, what's the catch?

This car does have one unusual feature; it will take you not where you want to go but where you ought to go. Really? Yes. How many owners? One. Do you have his phone number? Yes. I called and verified the strange truth about the car.. What is it like to have a car like that? Absolutely horrible, he said. One Saturday I

missed my tee time because the car drove me to a nursing home to visit with the residents. One evening I missed dinner with friends because I was ringing the Salvation Army bell for three hours in front of Macy's. I recall a Sunday when my wife was away, I drove down the street to get a paper and a six-pack and that crazy car took me to church....

I noticed the other day that the car is still on the lot. The price has been marked down to \$30.00.³

Christmas affirms and re-affirms what God has already done for us and this world amazing, astounding, miraculous things - and Advent reminds us that God created us to continue to create with God, for this world is not yet finished, we are not finished, and there is much work to be done in this beautiful, broken, bountiful world. For here's the thing: Advent invites us to find that Olds Cutlass Supreme and take it for a drive, because **God needs you.** God needs all of us. God needs us to help make ever more real that Advent vision that the prophet Isaiah wrote about. And to live discerningly – rather than in cynicism or despair or jadedness – makes it that much more possible, that much more likely, for the prophet's Advent vision to come true, that vision of

- wholeness and healing,
- swords into plowshares,
- an end to bullying and violence,
- an end to homelessness and hunger,
- an end to children dying because adults lack courage,

³<https://www.facebook.com/craddock.sermons/posts/1370317872980670>

- an end to lives that are lived in too much desperation,
- an end to poverty and racism and xenophobia and hatreds based on class or nationality or orientation or gender

For you see, in the words of my wife Barbara,

...living in anticipation and hope for that wholeness... brings us closer to wholeness today.... [because] **Our hearts take the shape of what we most dearly anticipate.** If we've decided the world is going to hell in a hand basket, our hearts will reflect that. But if we've decided that there is, at ...the base of all things, a goodness, a God who is working to redeem this world from all suffering, and we anticipate a day when that work will be complete, well that anticipation will shape our hearts!⁴

What are you anticipating this day, this season? How is your heart being shaped this morning, as we step into the blessings of the Advent season on the way to the Christmas cradle?

I invite you, then, to find that Olds Cutlass Supreme and point it toward that mountain of the Lord, to pray to God that you will indeed be taken in directions that you need to go, and may you truly hear and believe God's promise that all things **will** be made new and whole and healed. For on this day of new beginnings, Advent greets us with a promise, a promise that once again Barbara so beautifully and eloquent proclaims. Hear her words one more time:

The promise is that God is working to overcome all evil and every form of death.

And God invites us to be a part of that battle against evil. God invites us to feed

⁴Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, a sermon preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, December 1, 2013, entitled "Hoping for More than Christmas."

the hungry and house the homeless and to visit the lonely and the grieving; and to wait, to long for and hope for and pray for the completion of these promises.⁵

For the completion of those promises **will** come. Isaiah proclaims it, Jesus embodies it, God assures it. And that is why we can live and move and love in confidence and trust and most of all: **hope**. On this first Sunday of Advent, indeed, let us pray that God will help us live discerningly, showing us where we need to go, and joyfully pointing us the way. Amen.

⁵Ibid.