

McCabe United Methodist Church
Advent and Christmas 2016: "All I Want for Christmas"

"I Want a 'Holy Mountain' for Christmas"

Sermon on Isaiah 11:1-10 (12/3 & 12/14/16)

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Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

I'm going to start today's message with a bit of congregational participation. It's a "name that tune" kind of quiz. So, our wonderful sound person is going to play the first five seconds of a famous song, and you get to guess. If you guess correctly, your prize is the simple satisfaction of knowing you can quickly identify popular holiday tunes.

Okay. Here's song number one:

Name that tune! [Answer: *"All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth" recorded in 1947 by Spike Jones & His City Slickers*]

All right. Here's song number two:

Name that tune! [Answer: *"I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" recorded in 1953 by Gayla Peevey... currently being reintroduced to us this season in a United States Postal Service commercial.*]

Now, here's song number three:

Name that tune! [Answer: *"All I Want for Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey. Incidentally, this song was recorded in 1993 and Billboard recently identified it as the number one, most downloaded Christmas song of all time. It is, without a doubt, my all-time favorite non-religious Christmas song. Every time I hear it I want to sing and dance along!*]

And, finally, here's song number four:

Anyone know that one? It's perhaps a bit more difficult to name with only five seconds of the introduction. It's a song recorded by Amy Grant called "Grown Up Christmas List." Many artists have recorded this song, but the particular set of lyrics Amy Grant uses in her version is my favorite.

I mentioned in my message last weekend that our Advent theme was born out of a brainstorming session a great handful of McCabe folks had back in August. We gathered to think about Advent and Christmas... and we gathered to read and reflect on the Scripture readings we'd be experiencing during this season.

As we read the Advent Scriptures during that late-summer brainstorming session, we couldn't get away from ideas around "lists" and "wants" – things we need to *do* to prepare for Christmas and things we *want* for Christmas. So, ultimately, we settled on the Advent theme "All I Want for Christmas."

The songs you just heard snippets of connect well to this theme – even though three of the four of them are not exactly *Christian* Christmas songs. One of them is, however. The last one. Amy Grant's song "Grown Up Christmas List." But I'll get back to that song a bit later...

Today's Scripture reading from chapter 11 of the book of the prophet Isaiah is one of my favorite passages of the Bible. I love the vision it presents of God's "holy mountain." It's a hopeful passage that invites us to imagine a mended world – a world where enemies get along... a world where predators and prey are friends.

In many ways, Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 11 is fantastical. It sounds like something out of a novel – the description of a lovely, imaginative place we can think about, but that would never become real in our world. Listen again to words from Isaiah 11:

“Like a branch that sprouts from a stump, someone from David’s family will someday be king.

“The Spirit of the Lord will be with him to give him understanding, wisdom, and insight ... This king won’t judge by appearances or listen to rumors. The poor and the needy will be treated with fairness and with justice. His word will be law everywhere in the land ... Honesty and fairness will be his royal robes.

“Leopards will lie down with young goats, and wolves will rest with lambs. Calves and lions will eat together and be cared for by little children. Cows and bears will share the same pasture; their young will rest side by side. Lions and oxen will both eat straw. Little children will play near snake holes. They will stick their hands into dens of poisonous snakes and never be hurt. Nothing harmful will take place on the Lord’s holy mountain.”

It's a beautiful vision... but it certainly seems fantastical. Leopards lying down with young goats, wolves resting with lambs, calves and lions eating together with young children caring for them, poisonous snakes won't hurt little ones who put their hands in their dens.

Nature simply doesn't work like this. The groups named in Isaiah's vision, by their very nature, oppose one another – and, in fact, one group is often, rightly so, rather frightened of the other.

Wolves and lambs do not, naturally, rest together because the wolf wants the lamb for food and the lamb knows it! Snuggling up together would, in normal natural circumstances, mean a deadly attack.

In reading and reflecting on this passage, I couldn't help but think about it in reference to real-life, seemingly oppositional groups today. I mean, in this day and age – and in our current climate – the following ideas probably seem rather fantastical:

Democrats and Republicans having rational dialogue. Hillary supporters and Trump supporters listening to one another with open minds and hearts. Protesters, law enforcement, and private security sharing stories and laughing together. Or... perhaps even family members who have hurt each other sharing a meal together that is filled with joy and love rather than fear and contempt.

A contemporary and very real re-imagining of not only the prophet Isaiah's "holy mountain" vision, but also a contemporary and very real re-imagining of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

*"I have a dream," Dr. King said back in 1963, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."*¹

Prophets and dreamers of great dreams cast their holy visions at times when imagination is low – times when people have gotten so entrenched and fearful that faithful change seems impossible. In times like these we struggle to dream and we struggle to imagine how we ourselves to think or behave differently.

That's why we so desperately need dreamers of great dreams and why we so desperately need prophetic visionaries.

I have told a handful of people recently that I have perhaps never been more excited for Advent and Christmas than I have been this year.

I don't know about you, but I have certainly needed some time to dream and to rest in the hope that things can be *different*. The season of Advent gives us that time for dreaming and hope.

During Advent, we beautify our sacred spaces with light and with reminders of God's presence in Jesus Christ. During Advent, we reflect on what we truly *want* – for Christmas... in life... in our world. Personally, I want

¹ From "I Have a Dream" by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 1963. Full text can be found at <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>

a “holy mountain” for Christmas. I want true peace: I want God to *bring* that peace... and, like the song “*Let There Be Peace on Earth*” says, I know that peace needs to begin with me.

This week especially, in conjunction with this particular passage of Scripture, I thought of some things a few McCabe folks have done or said recently – and I thought about the ways in which their words and actions reflect the “holy mountain” kind of work God can do through us. They each gave me permission to share their stories and their words, and I am grateful to them for that.

A member of our McCabe Leadership Team works at the Capitol and, with all the anxiety that's built there these last months, this member decided to start prayer-walking the floor where she works.

When she arrives in the morning, she walks the floor, often prayerfully repeating simple words like “grace”, “peace”, “gratitude”, and “hope.” She often repeats this prayer-walking throughout the day when she needs to make a pit stop elsewhere on her floor.

In doing this, not only is she centering herself in prayer at the beginning of her work day, but she is also specifically and intentionally inviting God's Spirit to be present with them as they work.

Pastor Mark and I recently started doing this kind of prayer-walking through our church building ahead of weekend worship services. It has proved to be a powerful way to make sure we, ourselves, are spiritually centered as we prepare to lead worship... but it also allows us to ask God's Spirit to connect with each of you when you come to worship or when you come for Sunday School.

As I thought about this “holy mountain” vision from Isaiah, I also thought about some things a couple of other McCabe folks posted on Facebook recently. One – a young wife and mother – posted this for all her Facebook friends to read:

She said, "I may seem stubborn or closed minded, but please do not hesitate to challenge my thoughts and views. My friends and family who do this are instrumental in helping me grow and become a more well-rounded individual. Wisdom comes to a person with time and experiences, it cannot be bought."

I so appreciated these words. They certainly reminded me true, holy peace only comes when God opens our minds and hearts toward one another... rather than staying closed-off, refusing to hear the perspectives and experiences of others.

Another parishioner recently posted a quote by English minister and hymn writer Isaac Watts. I'd not ever read this quote, but I instantly fell in love when I saw it. Isaac Watts lived from 1684 until 1748² and the quote our member posted of his was this:

*"I'll not willingly offend, nor be easily offended;
What's amiss I'll strive to mend, And endure what can't be mended."³*

If that doesn't sound like holy mountain work, I don't know what is!

"I'll not willingly offend, nor be easily offended; What's amiss I'll strive to mend, And endure what can't be mended."

As I close this message, and as we prepare to move into our celebration of Holy Communion, I'm going to read to you the lyrics for the song "Grown Up Christmas List." In it, the writers paint a vision that is a "holy mountain" of sorts.

They paint a vision of what so many of us truly *do* want for Christmas. A vision that is not exactly lions and lambs snuggling up together or children fearlessly playing with poisonous snakes – but it is certainly along those lines... and perhaps a bit more within our real-life imaginations.

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/isaac-watts>

³ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/i-ll_not_willingly_offend-nor_be_easily_offended/161690.html

The song “Grown Up Christmas List” is written as though the singer is writing a letter to Santa Claus. If it helps you listen, close your eyes as I read:

“Do you remember me / I sat upon your knee / I wrote to you with childhood fantasies / Well, I'm all grown up now / But still need help somehow / I'm not a child but my heart still can dream / So here's my lifelong wish / My grown-up Christmas list / Not for myself / but for a world in need:

“No more lives torn apart / That wars would never start / And time would heal all hearts / Everyone would have a friend / And right would always win / And love would never end / This is my grown-up Christmas list.

“As children we believed / The grandest sight to see / Was something lovely wrapped beneath the tree / Well, heaven surely knows / That packages and bows / Can never heal a hurting human soul.

“No more lives torn apart / That wars would never start / And time would heal all hearts / Everyone would have a friend / And right would always win / And love would never end / This is my grown-up Christmas list ...

This is my only lifelong wish / This is my grown-up Christmas list.”⁴

Friends, all I want for Christmas is a “holy mountain.” And, while that holy mountain may not end up under my Christmas tree by December 25th, I will continue to dream of it... I will continue to pray for it... and I will continue to work for it. With God's help.

May we be in that holy mountain-building work together: this Advent season, through Christmas, and beyond.

And now, let us prepare to join together in another “holy mountain”: the Lord's table, where we share in the sacred meal of Communion.

⁴ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/amygrant/growupchristmaslist.html>