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*Let's Go*  
Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:35-44  
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Let's face it. The readings for the first Sunday in Advent are just plain weird. We are decorated for Christmas, ready to talk angels and Mary and stars and sheep, and here come Isaiah and Matthew saying, "Hold on there, church. Back it up." When we start out on a road trip, we head out with a destination in mind. The Christian calendar today is reminding us that Advent and Christmas are wonderful scenic outlooks, but they aren't the destination. The day of the Lord, what we call the second coming, is the destination. On this first Sunday in Advent, we stop for a moment, and remember where we're going.

Isaiah paints a vivid, shimmering landscape of where we're headed: "In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains . . . all the nations shall stream to it." I again recall my time in Israel last year, on a tour called "Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus," where we retraced the life of Jesus, beginning with his birth in Bethlehem, continuing with his baptism in the Jordan River, his time in the wilderness, his ministry in Galilee, and finally his death and resurrection in the city of Jerusalem. It was so easy to visualize Jesus in the wilderness and in and around the Sea of Galilee, because those environments are still pretty close to their original state.

But Jerusalem was a different story, because Jerusalem has been through a lot in the past 2,000 years, and over the ancient sites where Jesus is thought to have walked and taught and suffered and died, ornate cathedrals have sprouted up. So when you go to see where Jesus may have been crucified, and the tomb where he may have been laid, you aren't going to a hill far away, you're going to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that was first built in the year 325, and

then rebuilt after multiple destructions, with the current building dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

When I went in there, it was jammed full of people, unbelievable crowds, and the line that moved the slowest was the line that moved past a stone slab where it is thought that the body of Jesus was laid as it was anointed and prepared for burial. People waited in line to kneel down and touch and kiss this slab, called the “Stone of Uncion.”

And the thing that sticks in my memory from all the sites we saw in Jerusalem, especially the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, was just the overwhelming variety of people. I couldn’t identify all the different languages I heard. I couldn’t even count them all. It really did feel like all the nations had come to Jerusalem, with no one nation dominating, and the best part was, everyone was so happy. Yes, it was crowded, but the crowds were good-natured, and smiling, and reverent, with some even weeping tears of joy.

Isaiah would say, you think THAT’S special? Just you wait, because in the days to come, our yearning for God will be satisfied not by glimpses of remnants and relics, but God’s very self. No longer will we binge on TED talks, take yet another personality assessment and shell out money for the latest words of wisdom from the guru of the day, but God’s own self will take us by the hand, and give us personalized instruction on how to live fully, and relate to one another.

And instead of judges who sometimes get it and sometimes don’t, God who sees the depths of every human heart will be the one calling the shots, always with the aim of restoration. God doesn’t take away anybody’s firearms, but the people feel so safe, that they themselves willingly convert weapons of destruction into tools that build and bless the community.

This sounds like a fantasy and a fairy tale, especially this bit about the weapons in a time when there are more civilian-owned guns than there are humans in the United States. But Isaiah spoke these words in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before the common era, when his land was being invaded and overrun by foreign powers, worship had become meaningless, leaders were hopelessly corrupt, and the most vulnerable suffered the most, just as they do today, and Isaiah could still see this vision of the mountain of the Lord and know it to be from God.

It sounds like a fantasy and a fairy tale, but it's happening, says Jesus. Interpreters of scripture have explored various options as far as what Jesus' words in Matthew might mean—does Christ really come on one last day in history, for everybody all at the same time? Does Christ come to each of us individually when it's our time to leave this life? Is Jesus just talking symbolically about the urgency of living life in a state of awareness? Or some other option?

Some years ago I lived in Southern California, where there are so many great things to do, but I only did a handful of them. I didn't get to the Getty Museum, or go whale watching, I didn't visit the La Brea Tar Pits or the Gene Autry Museum or the Hollywood Walk of Fame. I kept thinking I had plenty of time to get to those things, And then one day, I got a job offer back in my hometown of Kansas City, and I got caught up in the busy-ness of moving, and the chance to do those things easily, without making a special trip, is gone.

[And given that we always have to interpret Jesus' teachings in the light of his life, death, and resurrection,] one thing Jesus is urgently trying to convey here is, whatever we've been thinking we really need to do, do it NOW, today. Don't get distracted. If there is an apology you need to make, forgiveness you need to offer, a gift to give, a word to speak, a debt to pay, a mess to clean, a loose end to tie, a kindness to do, a grudge to release, a fear to overcome, a story to tell, or gratitude to express, DO NOT PUT IT OFF! The opportunity to do these things could

end in an instant. Keep awake, and don't drift off into the dream of "someday." You may well have many years ahead of you to do your stuff, but you might only have a month, or a week, or today. Finish your unfinished business and let's go to the mountain. Walk, crawl, hobble, scoot, or sprint, whatever we can do--in the light of the Lord, where Isaiah's dream becomes our waking reality.

To help us walk in the light, we have included a wonderful insert in your bulletin today. During this season of Advent, we invite you to walk with us in the practice of spending time with God through these Advent devotions written by Jill Duffield, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*. Please take it home with you today. Read the scriptures she mentions, reflect on the questions she provides, and pray the prayers she offers, or offer your own. These will help us be ready, and help us walk in the light this Advent season.

And now, in preparation for the sacrament of baptism, a joyful, light-filled occasion if ever there was one, let us stand and sing hymn #488.