

An Advent mediation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent I, November 30, 2008, dedicated to Karen Carpenter, Bob Williams, Harry Campbell, Jean Byerly and others who battle their “inner Everests” of cancer and other diseases, to all who are battling HIV/AIDS on the eve of World AIDS Day, and always to the glory of God!

“The Mountaintop”

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

Part I of VI in the Advent/Christmas Series: “Places on the Journey to Bethlehem”

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Out of the clouds of Heaven and racing down from the peak of a quaking high and holy mountain, our Advent journey to Bethlehem begins. The journey begins in fire, wind and God’s exceeding anger, not in silent holy nights!

The Prophet Isaiah and the author of Mark call us to wake up and face this truth: **Our God is coming again!**

In a prayer, Isaiah 64 petitions God to come down from heaven and from the mountaintop with theophanic splendor and terror. He calls God to come in “awesome deeds” so terrible and wondrous they defy all explanatory categories. He cries to God, confessing Israel’s sins and he beckons God to come cleanse them from all unrighteousness. In the end, the prophet calls to God as father and potter – the one who makes us all by the works of his hands. Isaiah calls this God to come and be our loving parent and sets all things right again.

In a proclamation, Mark declares on the day in which the Lord comes again that the sun will be darkened, the moon will be lightless, the stars will fall from heaven and the power in the heavens will be shaken up! He warns us not to claim we know when this will be. Rather, we are called to “KEEP AWAKE!” and be watchful.

It is important to be watchful for two reasons. First, there are false alarms from frauds and charlatans who do not know what the real crisis is and who do not know what time it is. In every generation, these charlatans – many of whom claim TV time in our time – point to wrong signs or to themselves as the answer so they can cash in on people’s fears. But it is their false prophecies that really threaten God’s people in the process.

Second, and most important, we need to be watchful because ONLY God knows what time it really is. Not the angels, not even the Son of God know the critical time – only God knows. In Advent, we watch as Mary waits for her son to be born. We come to know by his birth in Bethlehem – only a few people knew of his coming and not one person understood the meaning of his birth when it happened.

We begin Advent in apocalyptic visions of despair and devastation; in prayers of petition and appeal to God’s parental relationship; in watching and waiting.

The journey on this roadway to Bethlehem has more signposts of

destruction than lampposts of hope, joy, peace and love. These are not easy texts. But, then again, these are not easy times. Today, we are faced with immeasurable greed and foolish monetary abuse on Wall Street that has produced palpable pain and the vanishing of savings on Main Street. Joblessness and foreclosures are becoming more real to people than corporate job opportunity and home ownership. Two wars and rumors of more wars have produced fear and intensified violence so much so that terror has become part of the global landscape. Our times make the apocalyptic visions of these crazy old prophets seem more real every day.

We must be awake and alert in times such as these.

But we have a huge advantage to be alert and awake as we begin our Advent journey from **the mountaintop**. From the mountaintop we can see great distances. We can see valleys in full productivity. We can feel the change in the wind and the weather. We can see storms rolling in and the sun rising and setting without any breaks on the horizon. From the mountaintop we can anticipate what comes next, while taking in the vast panorama of sights and sounds right before our eyes.

On the mountaintop, we avail ourselves of “mountaintop experiences.” In these spiritual encounters, we find ourselves overwhelmed by our connection with creation and others, and through these experiences we discover our own sense of self-worth and the beauty of life.

But, as you know, “mountaintop experiences” can happen on the plains of Ohio, too. It would be convenient if we could all ascend to the peaks, but moreover, it is how we are awake, alive and alert in worship, in prayer, in the encounter with our beloved or another person we are serving in their time of need that determines our “mountaintop experiences.”

These spiritual encounters happen for some of us at a beautiful sunrise or sunset. But, they also happen when we see others as real

and beautiful right before our very eyes. A “mountaintop experience” can happen when a newborn baby cries, when we hold the hand of our beloved, when we greet another with **Namaste**: “*The God in me honors and greets the God in you.*”

The late Anthropologist Margaret Mead described a “mountaintop experience” as a religious experience in which one is so overwhelmed that he or she is cannot speak in normal cognitive ways but ends up communicating in what others would call a “babble” of sounds.

From every mountaintop, we return to the valleys of our lives. In Isaiah 40, the prophet speaks of bringing the mountains down to the valley, “Making every mountain and hill low.” This image comes to mind when I consider the writing of Alan Hobson, author of *Climb Back from Cancer*. From the top of the world, from the peak of Mount Everest, Alan Hobson thought he had seen it all. His was the ultimate “mountaintop experience” as he successfully climbed Mt. Everest and returned to tell his story. He thought he had faced and overcome the greatest challenge of his life. That was until he was diagnosed with acute leukemia and given less than a year to live. At the point of diagnosis, 90% of the cells in his bone marrow were cancerous.

Hobson writes, “Thankfully, I was able to receive a successful adult blood stem cell transplant, the equivalent of a bone marrow transplant.” Following this procedure, he could barely stand in the shower long enough to wash. He continues, “My inner Everest took me from the top of the world to the bottom in just 120 days of treatment. It was a long fall. Climbing back from cancer is the hardest thing I have ever done. It has dwarfed even Everest.”

To all those who have climbed back from cancer, you need to know this climb is more difficult that Everest! Your climb back is a tribute to your strength and courage! Thanks be to God!

In this article, given to me by Karen Carpenter, as she climbs back from cancer, Alan Hobson tells how he used his experience of three climbs to Everest – only one of which took him to the top – as his

inspiration for overcoming the mountains in his path. He names “*Ten Tools of Triumph*” in the climb back from cancer. I believe these 10 tools can benefit all of us as we face the challenges of our lives – those that are life threatening and those that threaten our existence in other ways. It is the mind/body/spirit connection that is at the root of this climbing expedition. Hobson shares them with others. Karen shared them with me. I share them with you:

- 1. Stay 100 percent present.**
- 2. Ignore all predictions of doom.**
- 3. Silence your mind.**
- 4. Take charge.**
- 5. Focus all your energy on getting better.**
- 6. Decide to be a survivor.**
- 7. Patch into the power of your personal purpose.**
- 8. Measure success by effort, not by outcome.**
- 9. Can/will yourself to move.**
- 10. Make essential changes in your life.**

(Drawn from *Coping* magazine, September/October 2008 issues, p. 20. For more information, visit www.ginlive.com or www.climbback.com)

As we enter into this new season of the church year, and begin the journey to the manger from the mountaintop, I love the image of “overcoming our inner Everests.” Each of us has demons that haunt us and situations that hold us back. Each of us has unhealed wounds from our life stories and mountainlike obstacles we still need to climb over. It may be a broken relationship. It may be unresolved guilt or anger. It may be depression or a deep sadness we have allowed to overtake us because we have sought no help in overcoming it. It may be past pain or present imperfections. It may be a life-threatening illness. It may be our way of life itself. Each of us knows what our inner Everest is.

You may have the necessary climbing tools for triumph. But, I believe Hobson’s tools for triumph may help you overcome your own

inner Everest. Staying present, ignoring predictions of doom, silencing your mind through prayer, yoga or meditation, taking charge of your life, focusing all your energy on getting better, making a conscious decision to be a survivor, naming and claiming your personal purpose and patching into the power you come to know in it, measuring your success by effort, not outcome, willing yourself to move (something Hobson says saved his life over and over again on Everest and many cancer survivors name as the greatest daily challenge), and deciding what is essential and changing your life to meet those essential needs are all spiritual, psychological and physical skills that we need to face and overcome the challenges of life.

I would go one step further and say these can be applied to families, to institutional systems in challenging times, to any number of people and places that intersect our lives each day. They are God-centered and effective.

Our God is coming again! This is not some far-fetched dream of uncertain prediction. If we but open our eyes, ears, hearts and minds, we will encounter God in the present moment. If we stay present, God's presence will be opened by us and to us and within us.

In such revelation, "mountaintop experiences" happen! They are ours to receive if we but open our arms to the living Christ, who is everywhere around us. In so doing, the meaning of his birth becomes real again. Amen.