

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent, Year A  
2.xii.2007, 10:00, Holy Eucharist – ELW 5  
Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44  
Saint James Evangelical Lutheran Church / Brogue, Pennsylvania

## Jesu Juva!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was  
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**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.**

**--Isaiah 2:2**

In the Spanish language, the word for table, *mesa*, is also  
the word for that sort of flat-topped mountain found in the  
deserts of northwestern Mexico and the American  
Southwest. That word with its double meaning gives  
perfect expression to the image the Prophet Isaiah brings  
before our mind's eye on the first three Sundays of Advent.  
That image is *the holy mountain of the LORD*, and it is on

that theme that I would like to focus our attention on these first three Sunday's of the new Church Year.

A *mesa* may be flat on top, but from a distance, it can be seen almost to rise from the earth the closer we draw to it. From photographs and paintings and documentary films, and from what pilgrims to the Holy Land have told me, Mount Zion and Jerusalem are just like that, as we hear in today's First Reading, the highest of all places when our focus is placed there. The Prophet challenges us to do just that as we begin our approach. On the Second Sunday of Advent we will be welcomed to the summit of Mount Zion and will find that it turns out to be a level place of peace, even between animals and between animals and humans, peace among all living things (Isaiah 11:6-10). On the Third Sunday of Advent, we will find ourselves on Mount Zion again, described as a level and safe place for all, even

for strangers, for no one will lose their way there, “not even fools,” the Prophet adds, an important note of reassurance to many of us who are directionally challenged (Isaiah 35:8).

The mountain referred to today in the opening words of Isaiah is, geographically and historically, Mount Zion, the mountain on which the ancient city of Salem stood, from which the mysterious Priest-King Melchizedek came out in procession to bless Abraham with gifts of bread and wine as we read in the Book of Genesis, the site of the later city of Jerusalem and the Temple to the LORD built by Solomon and rebuilt under Ezra and Nehemiah, under the King Jonathan and the Maccabees and under King Herod the Great.

Though a visible place is described here, the words of the Prophet Isaiah are copied and proclaimed for a

people who cannot see that place any longer, for the Jews captive in far away Babylon, for those who loved Jerusalem and its Temple and every stone of it as only those can who are torn away from their homes. How is this people going to be able ever again to sing with the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’ Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:1, 2)? But the exiled People of God will journey to Jerusalem and to the Temple by faith, not only in the future when the Great Shah of Persia permits it, but *now*, in their hearts and minds, in their lives as the Covenant People of God. ‘Next year in Jerusalem!’ is the joyful shout of the Jewish people every Passover. Even with Jerusalem now a real destination, the capital of a real Jewish homeland, the journey to Mount Zion continues in Jewish homes and hearts and in Hebrew congregations

around the world as a journey and as an ascent of the *soul*.

Isaiah points the way for our Jewish elder brothers and sisters in faith *and for us*.

According to Isaiah, Israel is now not only God's elect people *from* the nations of the world. Captive Israel is God's elect people *among* the nations of the world, perhaps captive with other nationalities conquered by the Babylonians, and exactly so has the LORD ordered Israel's history. There is a reason and even a *mission* in the tragedy of the 70-year exile. Isaiah is granted a vision of what the LORD is going to do *with* those nations *through* the faithful remnant of Israel, the Jews. It is not a vision of counter-attack, not a vision of payback and retribution, but an *elevation* of perspective, a vision of *lifting up* those nations, *all* nations, to worship the One God of them all on Zion, 'the mountain of the LORD's house.'

Mount Zion and all it symbolizes—the teaching of the Commandments of God, the sacrifice for the atonement of sins, God’s *high* ethical standards of justice and mercy as proclaimed by the Prophets—suddenly becomes much more than a geographical point on the map, a place to be remembered and cherished and venerated, to be guarded and defended, a place to be taken, lost and retaken in armed conflict, all of which has happened time and again down through Zion’s long, long history, destroying God alone knows how many lives.

In the Prophet’s vision, Mount Zion, which the exiles cannot see, becomes much more a *spiritual* place, a common destination of the spirit for *all* people and for all peoples, for Jews and for Gentiles, for those like us and for those different from us, a place *higher* than where we sons and daughters of Eve now stand. That *higher place* is

where the LORD of all awaits us as we fulfill the destiny for which He created the whole world and the human race. *That* is where we need to journey together this Advent, to that *higher* place within, to that destiny toward which the Holy Spirit calls us, for God's promise awaits us there, in that *higher* place. The playwright Oscar Wilde, very much aware of his own brokenness and inexplicable contradictions expressed this ideal so well in that wonderful Irish way of his when he wrote, "We *may* all be standing in the gutter, but *some* of us are looking at the stars!"

Churches stand, literally, in the architectural sense, to point us in that direction. Like that original *high* mountain of the LORD, they are built where possible on hilltops or hillsides, on *high*, natural promontories, or on man-made ones with steps (not forgetting ramps!) to lead not only the feet but our souls upward, to that one *high*

*place* toward which all men and women in all times and places are called, that *high place* within us where the living God dwells in by His grace and by His irrevocable and unshakeable love for us. Just to make sure that the sign of Mount Zion is evident for all to see, just to make sure that no one in the community misses the summons to gather to a *higher* place, our churches are crowned with domes and spires and steeples throughout the world, just as ours is here. Church architecture must seem very impractical to those who do not know the great Temple the Holy Spirit is building in the souls of those whose eyes see the Holy Cross lifted up, and who understand that sign with deep joy and hope.

So much does the Father of us all want His sons and daughters to rise up out of the depths of sorrow and grief

and out of the gutters of guilt that He gives His own and only Son, that the Father lets the Son step down from Heaven's throne to make that upward journey with us. He, the God Who simply is and who needs us and our kind no more than a fish needs a bicycle, loves us simply because He *does*, and He enters this life He has created good, which we have turned to every purpose but good to see this life through with us and to *redeem* it, no matter what. *Higher* He lifts us, and *higher*, each time we place our trust in His love and in His mighty hands through which the universe itself was wrought. *Higher* and closer to that Mount Zion within, to that high and peaceful place of love He takes us as we think only of Him holding us because He can and because He will. He takes us higher as we see only Him suffering in the neighbor who needs our strong arms and

our helping hands, and know the freedom of forgetting ourselves. ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and for ever. ✠ Amen.

