

**Walk This Way**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5**

It is good to be here.

It's good to look out at all of you and feel I've come home.

Of course, home isn't all that familiar to me yet, today being my first official day in ministry with you at Plymouth Congregational UCC.

Home is where I feel I've come, and yet, there is much I do not know about this place to which I've been called.

There are sacred cows to be touched and traditions to figure out. There is always something to indicate the individuality of a church community. Always customs not to be questioned.

Take Advent, for instance: At one church in which I preached regularly, I knew that this particular Sunday had arrived by the unsteady pile of apples that appeared on either side of the pulpit.

I knew, also, when the New Year had come, by the fruit flies that buzzed around them as I preached.

Traditions can be funny things, and I'm sure I'll encounter some fun ones here.

But as the spirit of Thanksgiving has not yet quite evaporated, I continue to express my very real thankfulness for being here. – There is plenty of time for the “*what have I gotten into?*” to settle in.

So I am here. Happily. In expectation of what this part of our journey together will bring. In possession of a job description, but not quite knowing how that will live out in everyday details. It's uncertain, unpredictable, but basically, we know why I am here.

What about you? Why have *you* pulled yourself from home on this very snowy Sunday after Thanksgiving? What calls you? Why are you here?

Perhaps it's the first Sunday of Advent.

Maybe you're here to relive the traditions of Plymouth or the memories of childhood – the lighting of the Advent wreath can be particularly touching.

Or it's the warmth of seasonal decorations.

Maybe you've come for the oh-so-familiar and comforting scripture passages we hear repeated in these 4 weeks of preparation.

Familiar, and yet something new always surprises me each time I come to them.

This year, Isaiah's great poetic vision catches our imaginations and emotions once more:

“they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks”, and “neither shall they learn war any more.”

Yes! ...But... When?

This passage can provoke such ambivalence in us when we hear it. We long for it, but with wars or “military action” around the globe, we wonder when and IF it will ever come.

It's been *thousands* of years since this Word of hope was spoken – and not just by Isaiah, but by the prophet Micah as well (Micah 4:1-4).

Perhaps both were drawing on an even older tradition, trying to catch their congregations' attention, preaching this promise of unimaginable peace to people just as unsure but hopeful of its possibility as we are today.

Unfortunately for our expectant selves, the only preface to the prophecy is “in days to come.”

How up in the air! How uncertain.

Can you recall how very important birthdays were when you were a child? If you have kids of your own it may be even easier to picture the excitement.

In the grocery store this week, the checkout woman shared that the day before had been her daughter’s 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. The 2 had been riding in the car together when the 10 year old started asking, “what time is it” every half minute.

Finally, after about 5 minutes of torturing her mother, the girl sighed loudly with relief and explained: “NOW I’m really 10.” ...She had the day, the hour, and the minute of her birth marked.

It’s nice to have an exact calculation of when we may expect something.

Sometimes it seems that we, too, hold our breath awaiting the moment of Christ’s birth and the unimaginable peace foretold.

A future we anticipate but which has not yet been revealed.

Advent seems like a paradox in that sense.

On one hand, we know the exact time of Christmas’ coming. We can count the 4 weeks of the season.

We light each candle in turn and when the center candle, symbolizing the return of the Light of the World, is lit, Christmas is here, the Prince of Peace reigning.

For me, the moment always came in church Christmas Eve at precisely midnight, when from the 5<sup>th</sup> pew, sitting with Dad and brothers, I’d catch my mother’s eye in the choir loft and mouth: “Merry Christmas.”

We can mark Advent time in such a precise way.

On the other hand, Advent fluctuates in time.

There may be 4 weeks each year, but Christmas Eve could fall on that 4<sup>th</sup> *Sunday night*, or wait another 6 six days until the following Saturday...

Advent can last between 22 and 28 days! (if my math is correct).

Not only that, but as a liturgical season of preparation, of expectation, advent *deliberately leaves us up in the air*.

Despite consumerism’s attempts to convince us otherwise, *Christmas is not here yet!*

We are walking a road that, hopefully, will lead us to the light of Christ being reborn to our spirits – but that cannot happen unless we prepare for the journey.

So you and I are here, this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, to search out the path.

But what, besides the temporal Christmas day, do we seek?

Isaiah asserts: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of mountains.”

Now, this cannot be read as literal. – As far as I know, Mt. Everest and K2 still contend for the particular honor of the peak soaring above all others. Rather, the “highest of mountains” in scripture refers to the conceptualized home of the gods for ancient peoples.

Consider Mount Olympus and the colorful pantheon of Greek deities.

Recall, also, Moses’ trek to Sinai and Elijah’s flight to Horeb (which are, actually, the same mountain).

Yahweh, as the “other gods” of the age, was to make home the very highest peak,

to show to the world that this is, indeed, the God above all others. The One God.

So we are drawn to “the mountain of the Lord’s house.”

Jewish heritage names it Zion: the hill of Jerusalem on which the city of David was built.

Zion, today, is hardly a place where spears have become pruning hooks.

Instead, it is a land so *holy* to 3 of the world's major religions that

blood sacrifices in the form of terrorism and "protection" are made almost daily.

A physical place; earth so associated with its God that a story is told in second Kings of a foreign man

healed in Israel who determined to take "2 mule-loads of earth" back to his homeland,  
so he may continue to worship Yahweh from there (2 Kings 5:17).

That's powerful earth.

But again, Zion, the "mountain of the Lord's house", is NOT the highest of mountains in a physical sense.

Many of us do not view a pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a *necessary* part of our journey as Christians.

For those of us who live our lives in dedication to God, however, the dwelling place of Yahweh *is*  
established as the peak we strive to attain – we look to God for direction.

But the home of God is not "out there" somewhere. It's right here.... We carry it within.

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The concept of a "God-shaped hole" has become a popular image in some Christian circles. From song lyrics  
to book titles to comics that proselytize, the idea is that *every* person has a piece of herself missing  
until an experience of God can fill it.

Once we allow God to enter that hole, then we are truly whole (with an H).

And yet, while using this imagery of "the God-shaped hole" to stop people from seeking less fulfilling  
alternatives, many of these same people understand God as far away and untouchable – not here within.

But to fill a God-shaped hole, God must be *in* it. God: carried in us – bourn in our very selves.

The "mountain of the Lord's house" has come home to wherever we are,  
not just the physical land in which Yahweh's worship began.

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Isaiah preached, "The Lord's house...shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall stream to it."

People are being drawn to the house of God!

Plymouth has been witness to this phenomenon. As bearers of God within life here, this congregation has  
drawn people in: about 100 in the last 2 years, I understand. What an affirmation of God's presence in this  
place! In YOU!

But signs of people's search for God is showing up everywhere.

The need for God is found in the interest in Eastern thought, and the thriving of New Age  
communities. It's evidenced in the growth of fundamentalist religious groups.

You, personally, may not be drawn to all of these, but you *are* drawn.

You're here! You are moving toward the mountain. You seek God in the highest places of yourself.

And yet there is paradox!

We don't have to walk to Jerusalem but we do tend to *go* physically somewhere - so we come to church.

This is where we may begin to equip ourselves for the Advent Road.

This is where we acknowledge God's very real presence in our beings.

We are not exempt from the longing to journey. We are bearers of God, yes, but we also remain seekers.

We are part of the "many peoples" of Isaiah's vision, having come to worship saying,

"Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that God may teach us the ways of the Divine and that we may walk in God's paths."

We, as does the world, long to hear the "instruction that goes forth from Jerusalem."

We long to encounter the Christ as child once more.

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Now, every one who searches, who answers this powerful call to "go up" only finds *part* of the way.  
Buddhist practitioners have excelled in the realm of compassion

and offer great paths for our prayer and meditative lives.

Fundamentalists have no fear in inviting others to enter the quest for Christ.

And we UCCers work hearts and minds in our commitment to creating justice for all people.

Each person carries some spark of the light of God's home within.

But without the others' sparks to brighten the path, we just can't quite get there.

And still we struggle with each other over "the Way" and the instruction that goes out from Zion.

The fighting that continues in that Holy Land,

the physical representation of Yahweh's home,

is a powerful illustration of the spiritual struggle for each group and

individual to *claim God* and *God's Way* for ourselves.

One expression of trying to negate that attitude of "God is mine"

found voice in this election year's admonition:

"God is not a Republican...or a Democrat."

...No side has a handle on "the Way."

We're all traveling this path together.

But when we get mired down in the pit of hopelessness that seems to come with our knowledge of (quote):  
"the way things REALLY are,"

especially in this season when we are trying to prepare for God's Light to emerge once more in a world that desperately needs it, we are drawn back to this wisdom from Isaiah.

In it God acknowledges our tendencies to not get along.

God recognizes there must be repentance, a turning.

It is God who will "judge between the nations" and

"arbitrate for many peoples." It is God's justice that must emerge.

And our natural response is peacemaking.

In answer to God's Way, we create life out of death,  
gardens from instruments of war.

The way of this path is one where, when we're getting it right,  
we in ourselves live in peace.

And the light of peace you bear will reflect in the person on the path beside you – like you or not.

Isaiah's call to the House of Jacob and to ALL peoples is

"Come, walk in the light of the Lord."

"Walk this Way" is an imperative for us to CONTINUE our journeys to God.

"Walk this Way" is also our invitation to others

to seek out their highest mountains –

an encouragement for them to walk with us on the way.

*The day, the hour, the minute of*

*Christ's birth is ALWAYS, as we carry him within*

"Come, *all of us*, let us walk in the light of the Lord this Advent."