

Mountains and Molehills

A Sermon for Morning Worship on the First Sunday in Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 27, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5

Mountains and molehills are real things. We tend to forget that when we only focus on the idiomatic phrase containing them both, “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Of course, this colorful phrase refers to the all too human tendency of making too much out of a minor issue. This happens primarily when our definitions of what is and what isn’t a minor issue clash with each other. For example, I might think that the lovely climbing vine I plant adjacent to my neighbor’s new fence is no big deal while for him it might be a huge big deal once it climbs up and over the pristine fence. Once concerns are raised, this is a situation ripe for descending into a mountain and molehill showdown. I might feel my lovely climbing vine is an asset to everyone’s landscaping with its cascading tendrils of green, even if it is strangling the shrubbery my neighbor planted on his side of his fence. To me therefore, he is clearly making a mountain out of a molehill, or a climbing vine in this case. He, on the other hand, probably would see my reluctance to remove the vine from my property as mountain building when only a molehill existed. Clearly, mountains and molehills take shape in the eyes of the beholders!

Indeed, mountains and molehills are real things, real objects on the landscape which we can see and touch, climb up or trip over. So, this made me wonder, what are mountains and molehills, precisely. This is where it got really interesting. It seems molehills have a precise definition and mountains don't. Really. A molehill is defined as a conical mound of loose soil raised by burrowing mammals one species of which are moles. Molehills are the waste material of the burrowing process. That process is actually beneficial to the soil because it aerates and tills it, adding to its fertility. Some people regard molehills (think about the movie *Caddyshack* here) as unsightly and damaging to gardens and lawns but truly the most negative thing about them is that they can pose a hazard to walking and horseback riding. King William III of England actually died when he was thrown by his horse which had stepped into a molehill!

Mountains, surprisingly, do not have such a precise definition. Well, more accurately, there is no universally accepted definition of a mountain. Generally speaking a mountain is a natural elevation of the earth's surface attaining an altitude which is notable or impressive relative to the geographic area surrounding it. That's clear enough. The surprising thing is there is no universally accepted altitude which a natural elevation of the earth's surface must attain in order to be classified as a mountain. In Rhode Island, the highest elevation is Jerimoth Hill which is

812 feet. It is called a “hill” but there are other 800 foot range elevations in both California and Oklahoma which are called mountains. No less an authority than the US Geological Survey states that it provides no technical definitions of what is a mountain and what isn’t. Informally, the standard seems to be a minimum of 1000 feet of altitude that makes a mountain but this is far from universal. Case in point, the *Dictionary of Physical Geography* defines a mountain as being at least 2000 feet high.

So, where does all this mountain and molehill business leave us? Well, I invite you to consider the irony of the fact that we have a precise definition of a molehill – that which is considered insignificant in the idiom – yet we do not have any such precise definition of a mountain. This would seem to mean that we are clear about what is insignificant in these disputes – the molehill so identified. But the mountain it is being built into is less precise. Is it being built into an 800 foot mountain? 1000 feet? 2000 feet? 29,000 feet – Mount Everest height? Just when do we cross the line between molehill and mountain and when it is justified to do so? Is there a time, a situation when a molehill really needs to be a mountain and it’s up to us to build it up?

Isaiah, help us out here! The text we read this morning begins with Isaiah’s pedigree, so to speak. It is presented as prophecy, as “the word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” In other words, Isaiah is telling the people

how God views their current situation and how it differs from God's intentions for them as God's people. He starts off with the mountain image right away – the mountain of the Lord's house which is the highest of all the mountains. This is a very typical description for its time when gods were understood to dwell on mountaintops and perhaps in temples constructed there. The fact that it's on a mountaintop – the tallest – means that it will be visible to everyone. More than that, it will be compelling just in its physical presence – “the nations shall stream to it” Isaiah says. In other words, God's presence will draw all the people to it, like water flowing upstream back up the mountain, in direct contrast to the laws of nature we think we know.

The people are drawn to the mountain of God and once there, God will teach them how they are to live according to God's will and God's way. This teaching will transform the people of all nations, so much so that they will realize war is no longer necessary! And the technical know-how which allowed them to create these weapons of war will now be used to create tools for cultivating food and a peaceful way of life: “...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” And, more than that, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Neither shall they learn war anymore. Wouldn't that be simply amazing? Wouldn't that be incredible? And isn't this the most absurd thing you have

ever heard in your life? War ceases to exist? People streaming to mountains and temples, to churches and synagogues and mosques for the specific purpose of learning God's ways instead of the ways of war? Peace and justice more important than power and wealth? That's crazy! That's impossible. That is simply absurd. . . Or is it?

Michael J. Chan, a theologian writing an article online this past week argues precisely this – that Isaiah's promises in this text are absurd because Isaiah intends them to be. Chan feels that this particular text offers both the promise of judgment and of salvation. Judgement, he says, serves the outlandish promises of this text by making it clear the people will be confronted by and need to acknowledge what they need to do differently in order to be worthy of the peaceful existence God promises. To do this, they will need to be instructed in the ways of God. They will need to unlearn war, literally. And to do this they need both to be judged by God for their inclination to war and to judge for themselves that war is never worth the price it demands in terms of loss of human life and destruction of God's creation. The judgment of this text, in other words, makes the fulfillment of Isaiah's absurd promises possible. That these promises are absurd in the light of human history is true, Chan argues. But this absurdity is precisely what makes them so powerful. These promises are not absent

from the tragedies of human history. They are hiding behind them.

Think about it. For all the awful stories of the concentration camps of World War II in Germany and Japan, we have the counter-stories of Anne Frank and Ellie Wiesel, the survival stories of the nuns and priests and missionaries imprisoned in the Philippines. For all the heartbreak and death and horrible destruction of the Civil War, our nation rose above its violent, bloody divisions to reunite as a nation freed of the curse of slavery. For all the fear and beatings and murders which accompanied the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, the descendants of slaves finally achieved the recognition of their struggles through the passage of the Voting Rights Act. This history is our history. These tragedies are our tragedies and they still exist in our lives even today as has become all too clear. That's why Isaiah's words are so important for us to hear still today. Isaiah reminds us in this text that God's will for us, God's hope for us, God's vision of shalom for all of us is not just an idle promise, even though it so often feels like it is. God's promise of hope we celebrate this First Sunday of Advent is in fact a commitment to radical hope in the possibility that God's vision for a world where violence no longer exists can be more than a dream.

Put another way, God expects us to take a molehill sized hope in God's promises and build it into a mountain of hopeful

possibilities for all the world. God expects us to make mountains of molehills when it comes to all the promises of Advent – promises of hope, peace, joy and love. And we are to do this in spite of what the world says about its absurdity, its impossibility. We are to choose the molehill of joy-filled faith right in the face of the mountain of hopelessness and resignation the world wants to tell us is the only thing possible. God wants us to take those molehills of hope, peace, joy and love and build them into huge mountains too big for anyone to miss or ignore.

That is my challenge to you this Advent Season. I want you to grab hold of these promises of Advent which we celebrate each of the next four Sundays – hope, peace, joy and love – with all of your heart and soul. I want you to wrap your minds and your arms around each of them so that you can transform them from gifts you receive passively from God into actions you take on behalf of God in our hurting, fragile world. How will you do that? How can you do that? Only you know for sure because only you know what opportunities will come to you each day as you live your life.

I can give you one suggestion, though. Remember that none of these things can be any more than words on a page until and unless you give them to someone else. So, this week when we are to look for and become the hope the world needs, remember that hope hoarded is hope lost. Hope that a better world is possible,

can happen, will only happen if you make hope real to someone else. And I mean real as in tangible. So what might that be? A safety pin is a tangible sign that you are willing to offer a kind, hopeful word to someone who is fearful and anxious about the current situations we face in our country. A prayer shawl or lap blanket given to someone who's hurting and worried can offer a sort of fabric hug at a critical moment. A prayer candle lit and a name lifted up in prayer can produce just that ember of hope someone needs, reaching across time and space in ways only God makes possible.

Mountains and molehills. Big things and little things, so easily intertwined in unhelpful and counterproductive ways, so easily able to draw us away from God and into the place where the light of God's love becomes hidden in the shadows of our own making. Mountains and molehills. God's challenge to us is to take the molehills, the smallest sparks of God's light and God's love as the foundation of a mountain of hope built solidly on the absurdly wonderful and transformative promises of God. So, who's up for some molehill making? I'm ready! Let's get started. Amen.