

1st Sunday of Advent

The only mountain I ever climbed was near Antigua, Guatemala. About 30 years ago I was studying Spanish there and visiting my missionary cousin. From Antigua you can see a nearby mountain. I asked my teacher if people climbed it. He said, "I'll take you there." At the time, this sounded like a good idea. Early one morning we stuffed a backpack with food and a few bottles of beer. We took a bus to get closer and started our hike. The weight of the backpack made the climb more difficult. The trail was long, and I had zero experience in mountain climbing. My Spanish wasn't very good either. But, alone with my teacher, the only way to communicate was in a language I was trying to learn. About halfway up, I realized this was a mistake. With sore legs, a tired back, and an exhausted brain, I wanted to turn around. When my teacher understood this, he said, "Absolutely not. We are going to the top." I thought he was out of his mind. But we plodded on, step by step, until at last we reached the summit. We ate lunch. And we drank the beer. The view was spectacular. Going down went more quickly because of gravity and because the backpack was considerably lighter. At the bottom we went to the bus stop, rode back to the city, said goodbye, and I walked to the place where I was staying. I could barely put one foot in front of the other. I was dirtier than I ever remember being in my life, and for days afterward I wondered if I would ever walk like a normal person again. That climb taught me a lot about struggle, conquest, and cost. If you have a goal, you will struggle to achieve it. If you do make your conquest, you feel great. But afterwards there is a cost.

As we begin Advent, the first image the scriptures give us is a mountain. Jerusalem sits on a hill, and the nearby mountains are taller. Isaiah imagines that in the future Jerusalem "shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills." People will want to climb it, no matter the struggle. In their conquest at the top, they will gain wisdom. Isaiah writes, "For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." But all of this will come at a cost. When they return to their homes, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." They will have to change their ways, relying not on weapons of war, but on tools for peace.

In the first week after the presidential election the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded 701 incidents of hateful harassment and vandalism: 206 anti-immigrant, 151 anti-Black, 80 anti-LGBT, 60 swastikas, 51 anti-Muslim, 36 anti-woman, and 27 anti-Trump. Here in our parish, members of the hispanic community report increased harassment in the streets of Kansas City. We have a mountain to climb. The persistence of bigotry in our country indicates that none of us has climbed the mountain of the Lord, received instruction, and fulfilled our mission when we returned to level ground. We need to see the world from the mountain, from God's perspective. We climb that mountain principally by prayer, listening to God's word diligently and deeply, letting it take root inside of us. We gain wisdom when we listen for the voice of God whether here at mass or even in the words of people we don't much like. Isaiah says the day will come when we will have peace. We will only reach that day if we see it rising like a mountain in the distance. Let us struggle uphill, receive God's instruction, and - whatever the cost - share what God wants with the world.

Sunday, November 27, 2016