

**Isaiah 2:1-5** *This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. <sup>3</sup>Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup>He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. <sup>5</sup>Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

What defines you? This is a question many people are asking themselves these days. Especially these last few years, the concept of identity has really become a major issue in our society. How you identify yourself really answers the question of what defines you. Identity is important. Who you are defines where you are going, what you are striving for and what your actions are. By asking the question, What defines you?, you are seeking to understand the essential qualities that are important to you. What is it that makes you, you and gives you worth and value? What drives you, guides you, gives you passion day after day? Many today are searching for something to define them—a hobby, a quirk, a passion, something. Are you defined by the place you were born or the color of your skin? Are you defined by a particular physical trait—the color of your eyes or hair, your weight or height? Are you defined by your wealth and possessions (or lack thereof)? Are you defined by the neighborhood you live in, the car you drive or the amount in your bank account? Are you defined by a character trait—courage, cowardice, ambition or mediocrity? What defines you?

The season of Advent helps us to answer this question. Advent reminds us that one day Jesus is coming back to this earth. The season of Advent is a time of preparation for Jesus' second coming so that we are ready when that day comes. Today, the prophet Isaiah paints a picture for us of the glorious destiny that awaits us as the people of God when Jesus returns. He assures us that while it will be a time of judgment for unbelievers, it will be a time of grace for God's people. Knowing that Christ will come again to this earth and mindful of what he has waiting for us when he comes defines our present time. It affects how we live and go about our lives. It affects what's important to us and how we use the gifts we have. It causes us to live mindful of the fact that we don't know when Jesus will come so it is important for us to be ready for that day at all times. The season of Advent of Jesus energizes us to live as his people as we await his return.

**Jesus' Coming Defines Us.**

With this vision, Isaiah was looking ahead to both of Christ's coming into this world—the first time in Bethlehem and the second time at the end of time. Isaiah prophesied some 700 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. To encourage God's people to continue looking with anticipation toward this time, he pictures the kingdom Jesus the Messiah would establish when he came into the world the first time. This kingdom would be a never-ending kingdom of peace and joy for God's people. It would be established when Jesus came the first time and it would continue until he came again and into eternity. Of course, when we are talking about the kingdom Jesus came to establish, we are not talking about an earthly kingdom like many of the Israelites were expecting. The kingdom that Jesus came to establish is a spiritual kingdom where his word rules in the hearts of his people. This is what we know of as the Holy Christian Church. This is all people who in their hearts believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin. This is a kingdom of peace between God and his people. Isaiah gives us some neat descriptions of this kingdom. It would be "chief among the mountains." This spiritual kingdom established by Jesus would be the greatest of all kingdoms. It would be superior to all other kingdoms, secular and religious alike. It would be ruled by God himself and be the only kingdom to grant salvation to its people apart from works, only by grace, and would bring people true peace.

This kingdom would also be "raised above the hills." It would be different from all other kingdoms that are here today and gone tomorrow. It is a spiritual kingdom that would be permanent. It's the only kingdom that would overcome the devil, death and our own sinful flesh. In addition, it would be a kingdom that all nations would stream towards. It is a kingdom for all people. Time, race, sex, and age will have no boundaries on this kingdom. It will be for all people. It would be a kingdom where God would teach his people his ways so that they can walk in his paths. This is the kingdom Jesus came into this world in Bethlehem to establish. This is why Christmas is such a special time for us. It's more than the presents and decorations and time spent with family. At Christmas, we celebrate God's love in sending the Messiah as he had promised to establish this spiritual kingdom. Jesus established this kingdom by giving his life on Calvary's cross to make payment for our sins and by rising from the grave to conquer death once and forever.

Then God brought us into this kingdom through the work of the Holy Spirit. The very moment we came to know and trust in Jesus as our Savior from sin, we became part of this spiritual kingdom known as the Holy Christian Church. Here's how this defines us: It is not just a label that we carry. This is who we are. We are God's people, made holy in God's sight through the sacrifice of Jesus and certain to live with him eternally when life here on this earth is over. We not only will live in this kingdom when life here is over, we are living in this kingdom right now.

Maybe we don't think about that very much. The kingdom which Isaiah prophesied about spoke about wars ending, conflict between neighbors ceasing and there being nothing but peace. We look around us. We don't see that. There are wars. There is conflict. Neighbors don't always get along. Maybe when you got together with family this past week you were reminded of the fact that we are not fully enjoying the benefits of this kingdom. How can we be living in this kingdom now when these are still happening? So we see how Isaiah pictures both of the comings of Jesus. When Jesus comes

again on the last day, he will bring an end to all war and conflict along with sin and its consequences. When life here is over, those who have stakes in the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus will know a true and perfect peace. We will know in full the benefits of being citizens in God's kingdom. This is what we are so eagerly looking forward to and anticipating. We long for the time when there will be no more sin and its consequences. Oh, how wonderful it will be to no longer have conflict between parents and children, brothers and sisters, neighbors and co-workers. How awesome to enjoy the benefits of living in the presence of God in peace and harmony with all who are there. That's the glorious destination we have to look forward to as the people of God.

Until then, we still live in the church militant which lives in constant battle against sin and the devil. In the midst of this conflict, we live in the peace of knowing God loves us and watches over us. We live in peace with God knowing that our sins are forgiven and confident of what God has waiting for us. Our task now is to live as God's people in anticipation of the day when he comes back. The problem is that we don't know when that day will be. We don't know when God is going to call us home individually to join him in heaven. We don't know what day it is that he will return. So we are called upon in this text to always walk in the light of the Lord so that we are ready whenever that day may come.

So this defines our life. It reminds us of where we are heading and what it is we are striving for. It guides our actions so that we can reach the goal we are striving for. It shows what's important to us. The fact that Jesus has a glorious destination of heaven waiting for you and that he is coming back to this earth defines why you are here this morning. That's what made this a priority for you. Others are off traveling and enjoying leisure and fun this holiday weekend, yet you are here, giving an hour of your time to listen to God's word and sing his praises. You're not just here to go through the act of being here, but here to grow in your relationship with God through his word. You know the importance of having God work in your heart through Word and Sacrament to prepare you and keep you prepared for his coming whenever that may be. Your neighbors might be taking care of their yards today or washing their cars, yet your anticipation of Christ's coming has brought you here to prepare and strengthen you. Your faith defines you.

It defines how you parent your children. Anticipating Christ's return emphasizes how important it is that you bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. You can't believe for your children but you can teach them good habits and the importance of growing in their faith in Jesus as Savior. This leads you to take advantage of Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, Teen Bible Class, Catechism Class, our Lutheran Elementary School among other things to help and assist you in this. We have one main goal as parents and that is for our children to live with God eternally. That goal defines how we parent our children and the choices we make for them.

The fact that Jesus is coming again defines our mission as the people of God. Isaiah pictures God's people inviting others to "*Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.*" God's kingdom is one that is not spread by the sword but by word of mouth. Those who know of the kingdom of peace established by God will lead others to it. This is the mission of God's New Testament Church. As we prepare to see Christ in all of his glory and wait in preparation and anticipation for him to return, our mission is to invite people to the mountain of the Lord's temple. Every member of this kingdom, that is every person who trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Savior from sin, has a part in inviting people to come to the mountain of the Lord's temple. We tend to think this is only the pastor's job. We want to think that he is the expert and we just don't know what to say, so we'll leave it to the expert. But Scripture is clear here and in many other places that all believers are ministers. You come to the mountain as you have this morning to grow under the influence of Christ and then you go out and invite others to do the same. And as they come to the mountain, the process is repeated. You will have the opportunity to do that this Christmas season. By next Sunday, we'll have invitation cards ready for you to take and hand out to invite people to come to worship at Christmas and hear about God's love for them in Jesus. As we want to be prepared for Jesus' coming, as we want our children to be prepared for Jesus coming, so also we want everyone to be prepared for Jesus' coming. Our faith in his coming defines who we are and what we do as we wait for his return.

Finally, we are the people of God and seek to walk in his light whether here on earth or forever with him in heaven. Our faith in him defines how we live as we go about our lives. Our greatest desire is to live as the people God made us to be. So we seek to keep ourselves free from sexual immorality by keeping sex to a man and a woman within marriage. We control our intake of alcohol and drugs to remain alert and sober-minded as we live. We offer forgiveness to people when they sin against us and don't hold grudges. We seek to live in peace with one another and love one another as Jesus did. We are willing to sacrifice time to help people who need our help. We lend an ear to the one who needs support. We offer encouragement to those who are facing difficult times and do what we can to shoulder one another's burdens. Yes, God reminds us that to avoid his judgement we need to repent and turn from our sinful ways and cling to our Savior. Our sinful nature needs that thundering from God which says, "Look at what will happen to you if you don't!" But that isn't what God says in this text. He says, "Look at what has happened to you and even better what is waiting for you and let it define you and shape what you do." We aren't yet at the end of wars between people and nations, but God gives us every reason and encouragement to be the Church God intends that we be: people who live in the grace of Jesus our Savior and walk in the light of our Lord.

You don't have to search for identity. You don't need to seek something to define you. God has done that for you in Jesus. You are his church and God has a glorious future waiting for you. Let Jesus' coming define you as you wait for his return. Amen.