

It’s a simple idea, and one that you’ve probably heard many times before. When it comes to starting something new, begin with the end in mind. There’s something very stimulating about that. Begin with the end in mind. In other words, what is your hopeful outcome for the task at hand? What is your preferred future for your project? As soon as you can envision it, you can start taking the first steps toward making it happen.

I know of a young man who, upon becoming a father, envisioned himself in much better physical shape for the sake of his family. With “the end” of better health in mind, He texted a friend who was a personal trainer and asked for help. Over the course of a decade he lost almost 100 pounds. He began with the end in mind.

Or just think of St. Mark Lutheran Church. A little over sixty years ago, a small group of people envisioned a Lutheran Church in Chesterland. With “the end” of a vibrant church in mind, they made sacrifices, raised funds, and reached into this community, and here we still are today, because they began with the end in mind.

When people have a compelling vision of the future, something that captivates them, they will take action today. So it is that we are beginning a new church year with the end in mind—we launch into Advent with a compelling vision provided by the prophet Isaiah. Here’s the vision he casts:

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.
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.
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.
Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the Lord.

As far as compelling visions go, this is pretty good, don’t you think? I mean, for a vision that’s around 2,600 years old, it speaks to some deep, universal desires in a beautiful way. It features

people from all nations gathering at God's temple to be taught by Him, a melting pot of believers streaming up the mountain to meet Him. It features the Word of God moving outward, being broadcast, inviting others to turn and come to what's happening up on the mountaintop. And it features the end of war, the vivid image of a sword being bent into a plow, not just a cease fire, but violence and oppression as a thing of the past. What a vision! More than just a preferred future, it is the end that God has in mind.

So we're here at the beginning—not only the beginning of Advent; not only the beginning of another journey to Christmas; but also the beginning of the rest of your life. What does Isaiah's vision say to you?

Maybe we ought to consider what it meant to Isaiah. The world in which Isaiah lived was chaotic, unjust, and war torn. Israel was a storm-tossed nation, threatened by the powerful Assyrians to the north and east and menaced by the Egyptians to the south and west. The king and his advisors were occupied with what they needed to do to protect themselves. Events were getting out of their control. Fear was running rampant.

With fear came despair. The neediest of the needy, orphans and widows, were neglected. What's worse, many people just didn't seem to care, or had grown numb from bad news piling on top of bad news. Is any of this sounding familiar? Yes, I'm talking about Israel around 600 BC, but I might as well be describing life near the end of 2022. In either case, right in the middle of all that turmoil, to a world wracked by war and violence, to a culture of greed and grasping, one single voice dares to call out with a word of hope. One voice describes a future that is sure to come, because it's a future that depends on God's intervention.

Now here's the question: Was Isaiah just being a foolhardy idealist, impractical and other-worldly? Or is it possible that he was the only realist of his age, that his vision penetrated more deeply into the essence of reality?

Into his world of death and destruction, Isaiah was sent with nothing but words. But these were no ordinary words. They were words that described the view from God's perspective. These words cry out an invitation to you right now. Do you long for the close, real presence of God? Do you eagerly desire real racial harmony, especially within the body of believers? Would you like to know a world in which bombs never fall, missiles never strike, and soldiers are no longer scarred? God says: that day is coming. It's rolling towards you, and nothing can stop it. That is a compelling vision. That's the end you can have in mind as you begin your task.

That is great, hopeful news. But there's more. Isaiah's vision is already happening. It's already coming true. It's breaking in even now.

Do you see? Six hundred years after Isaiah spoke these words into the storm of his society, a person was brought to the temple mount in Jerusalem as a baby. The old man who held this baby in his arms took one look at him and said, "my eyes have seen the salvation the Lord has prepared in the sight of all people—a light for the Gentiles and the glory of Israel." When this baby grew, as a twelve year old, he said that being in the Word at the temple was "being about his Father's business." When that twelve year old grew into a man, he told people, "Destroy this

temple and I will rebuild it in three days,” which both predicted his own death and resurrection (which was amazing enough), and was a claim that he was replacing the temple! If you were looking for God, you were not to find Him in a building, but in a person. In Jesus. And then, on another mountaintop in Jerusalem, this Jesus was crucified, the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. At the moment when Jesus paid the full cost for our sin, the great temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. The way to God was torn open. Now, anyone who is sick of sin and death has access to God’s mercy, forgiveness, and life. After Jesus returned to resurrected life, he instructed his closest followers to make disciples through baptism and teaching. He told them to preach a message a repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins, which He had purchased with His death. With the Holy Spirit’s special blessing at Pentecost this message went viral in the ancient world, and has continued to spread for the past two thousand years, bringing countless people from every culture into the light of the Lord.

That light is shining in through the cracks of our dying world. It’s like Isaiah’s vision will not wait patiently. It’s happening.

God is present with His people now, wherever they receive Jesus and His gifts. You don’t have to be in Jerusalem to get them. You just need His Word and Sacraments.

Jesus is teaching His ways now, through His Word and Spirit, and through faithful servants of the Lord. The words of Jesus still, to this day, are creating a people who earnestly desire to walk in His paths.

The Law and the Gospel—the bad news of our sin and the good news of our Savior—continues to go out, to move out, to be broadcast, shared in every imaginable form. Every attempt to silence the Son of God ends the same way. Human beings can’t stop what God has planned.

And no, Isaiah’s vision is not yet completely fulfilled. The wars and violence continue their dance of death. But look with the eyes of faith and see what’s really happening. Begin with the end in mind and see Jesus is already working, already redeeming and repairing. Let’s go with Him. Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.