

There are a lot of things about our trip to Costa Rica that have stuck in my mind since we got back, moments, experiences that I go back to frequently, but there is one in particular that I have found has seeped into my vocabulary and I'm pretty sure it's going to be with me permanently now.

On Sunday morning, we gathered for worship in the space where we had had the clinic set up all week, there was a stage at the front with three tv monitors above where the lyrics of all the hymns were displayed. Their band was...impressive. They played with such passion and joy and you could tell that their faith just moved through everything that they sang.

The songs were split roughly 50/50 of Spanish and English so there were some that I obviously had no clue what we were saying because I don't speak an ounce of Spanish, but there was one song that we sang that even though I had never heard it before has stuck with me intensely. I can't tell you any other part of the song, probably not even the tune, but I can tell you this one lyric...You are God of the mountain and God of the valley. I don't know why it struck me the way it did, I don't know if it was being in a part of the country that was literally in a valley with a circle of mountains all around, if it was bearing witness to such abject poverty and massive tourist culture in the same space, if it was the whiplash of highs and lows that came with various parts of our trip, but for some reason that one line...it's stayed.

Christmas, at least how the world treats Christmas, feels like it should be all one mountaintop moment. It's all about the highs and the chaos and the joy. Everywhere you turn there are things just screaming out, be excited, be happy, it's Christmas!!! It's all candy canes and twinkle lights and going to tell it on the mountain, and yet...we all know that sometimes Christmas isn't all that mountaintopy.

I mean let's be honest, the first Christmas wasn't exactly the peak of Hallmark joy. You have first time parents who have been thrust into this role entirely unexpectedly, parents who are young and scared and have no idea how exactly they're supposed to raise God's son, parents who have nowhere to go and so end up hunkering down in a stable amidst cows and sheep, hoping they can keep the little guy warm in the elements. I'm sure there were mountain moments, but there were some valley ones in there too. They're welcoming a son...a son who is being born into a world of occupation and fear and violence, who is going to have to bring a message of hope to a people who may not want to hear it, some of whom will be downright hostile to it. Silent night, holy night is also a night filled with anxiety, worry, and wandering in the valley wondering how exactly they're going to do this.

Even our most comforting of Advent texts aren't filled with mountaintop moments. Most of them were written for a people who were in the deepest, darkest valleys, longing for a message of comfort and hope to get them through and help calm their hearts. Our text tonight is no exception. The prophet is promising God's people that while the world spins around them in chaos and uncertainty, God does not grow weary, God remains steadfast and everlasting to the very end. Isaiah tells them that the greatest comfort is in knowing that God is there amongst the valleys, even when those valleys feel as far away from God as possible.

Let's be real, even a good portion of the Christmas music that has been blaring out of our radios since long before Thanksgiving aren't exactly all uppers, filled with tidings of joy. You can't turn a corner without Wham! crooning about their heart being given away last Christmas. Don Henley says it's the time of year to be with the ones you love, while then begging his love to try and be home by Christmas, but if not, at least by New Year's. One of my favorites, U2's version of Christmas (Baby Please Come Home) carries the same vibe, everyone else is singing Deck the Halls, but he doesn't feel like it's Christmas at all. Even the iconic Mariah Carey, if all she wants for Christmas is you, well that would indicate she doesn't have the person she loves yet, so not exactly a positive note for the holidays. Everywhere

you turn there is the reality that Christmas isn't always jolly, and yet, the *expectation* that we feel that joy is so hard and so insistent that it's hard to ignore sometimes.

And that is what brings me back to that one little line, from one little song in Costa Rica. It's easy to remember God is the God of the mountain. Those moments that are exuberant and joy-filled and feel like everything is going right, those are the moments when faith feels a bit easier, more comprehensible because God feels so close, but when the mountains sink into the valleys, when life gets dark and hard and lonely, well sometimes we need the reminder that God is God of the valley too.

Each of us finds ourselves here tonight for vast and various reasons. It may be that you are in a valley moment right this very second, where you aren't sure which way to turn, where faith feels fleeting and you feel alone. It could be that you carry with and within you a grief that is deep and harrowing, either fresh or a long time felt. It might be simply that the chaos of the season is too much and you desperately want a moment of respite, a moment to breathe and rest and pause. You may not even truly know why you are here, but something within you is longing for a message from God that says peace, hope, grace. At the end of the day, what truly matters is that

for whatever reason you are here, God comes with consistency and hope to say, I love you and I will walk with you, guide you through this valley.

We are three weeks into Advent and the light of the wreath grows brighter and brighter with the reassuring hope that the life which is the light of all people, a light that shines in the darkness and cannot be overcome is what is coming into the world. That is the true message of Christmas, not the bright, shiny baubles that hang on our trees or the perfect gift wrapped just so under the tree, the true message of Christmas is that the darkness doesn't get to win, even when we feel like it might. The light of Christ, the hope of the Messiah is so bright that it can pierce through any valley, shine through any darkness, and guide us to peace and hope.

Over the next week, I'm sure each of us will have our fair share of mountaintop moments, but we will also have those moments where we are like Lord, here I am in the valley again, it's the reality of the holiday season. My hope and most ardent prayer for each of us is that no matter the moment, high or low, dark or bright, we remember that God is the God of that moment, you are not alone in it, but walk with the Messiah, with Christ the Lord by your side, guiding you through. And so may the God of the mountain and the God of the valley fill you grace and hope not only this night, not only at Christmas, but all of your days. **AMEN!!!**