

I have seen the Rocky Mountains a few times.

The first time was during a summer road trip with my family.

After that, I went skiing in the Rockies during high school.

I have also been to the White Mountains in New Hampshire.

I have seen Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa.

Sure, I grew up in what is probably the flattest state in the nation, but I have seen my share of mountains.

When I think about the sheer size and scope of those ranges, how they seem so huge, so inaccessible, always far away no matter how close you get, it makes today's text just sound outrageous.

Every mountain and hill made low?

That's impossible, they're just too high, too majestic.

And a highway in the desert?

The prophet Isaiah was writing long before bulldozers and earthmovers.

And keep in mind, the Israelites had wandered in the desert for a really long time.

They knew that it was a dangerous place without any food or water.

The idea of building a highway through such a place was inconceivable, and it would have been life-threatening for anyone who attempted it.

They didn't want to go to the desert.

I bet that when the prophet first wrote these words, the Israelites wanted to have a real talk with God.

The mountains are too big.

The terrain is too dry.

We don't have the workers or the tools.

God, your vision is unrealistic.

This justice you speak of in which your glory is revealed, well, it's just not going to happen this side of heaven.

And after patiently listening to our excuses, God would respond, "Now," and the Israelites and us and all the people in between, we would respond,

"Now? Now is when we must heed this call to prepare a way?

Now, in the current political climate?

There is no way our government can level the playing field and work together, God."

And God would respond, “Now.”

And we reply, “Now? The kingdom of God is at hand now? There is no way your kingdom is at hand in the Middle East right now. There is no way through that. Not now. And probably not ever. No highways, sorry God.”

(Adapted from “The Kingdom? Here? [www.bethscib.com](http://www.bethscib.com), 12.1.14)

Or, do we say “okay”?

Do we accept the call to discipleship?

Can we possibly have the courage to say, okay God, we’ll do it.

We will do our best to manifest your realm on earth.

We will try to get along with our racist, bigoted family member at Christmastime.

We will try to save more money so that we can give it to those who need it.

Even though we don’t like going to protests because they’re intense and stressful, we will go to the streets and stand up for the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Even though I hate my boss and I am treated unfairly, I will try to bring my whole, compassionate, Christian self to the table.

Even though recycling and composting and reusing my water bottle and turning off the lights and turning down the thermostat are all a hassle, I am going to do it because I care about this planet that is in peril.

What if we stopped with the cynicism, and finally, for once, said “yes,” to God’s wild plans for us?

Those mountains are really tall, and there are a lot of obstacles between us and the world as God wants it, but all of those tiny little actions, those are shovels full of dirt, and we’re each dismantling that mountain shovel by shovel.

We don’t have dynamite to detonate the mountain, that’s not how humans work; massive change can’t come quickly and swiftly.

We each have to buy in, each picking up our shovels, doing our little bit of work, to make the path that much smoother between the world as it is and the world as God wants it to be.

This passage offers us hope in the midst of dire circumstances, and we have a choice.

We can turn our backs on the hope and say no way, never gonna happen, valleys too deep, mountains too high, wilderness too treacherous.

This is how the world is and how it’s always going to be.

OR.

We can turn towards the hope that God offers us, we can say, okay, we are each going to do our part to make a difference.

Every. Single. Day.

We never get a day off, because that mountain needs to be chipped away at.

There's a lot of work to be done.

It's on us to clear out the rocks and the boulders.

It's on us to push aside the cynicism and despair, the hopelessness and apathy to make way for the kingdom of God, even while standing on the tallest mountain, or while feeling parched in the driest desert.

If you're feeling a bit overwhelmed by all of this, there's good news.

We don't have to do it all ourselves!

We are not alone in this.

It's not just us in this congregation, or this community, or this denomination, or this country, it's not even just about the people who are alive right now.

ALL people who have ever lived since the beginning of civilization all the way until the world ends, we can all grab shovels and chip away at the mountain of the world's problems that stands between us and God.

The scripture today tells us this.

Well, sort of.

It tells us that we are like grass, and grass withers.

We are like flowers, and flowers fade.

But the word of God stands forever.

Humans are flawed, imperfect, unreliable, inconsistent, prone to inflated egos and pride and vanity which all keep us from working to further God's realm on earth.

Those times are when we're using our shovels to add dirt TO the mountain.

But God is wholly other- constant, reliable and able to stand forever.

Enduring.

The message given is confident and hopeful, as the prophet says, "Here is your God!"

Here is a God who comes to feed the flock, to gather the lambs, to lead the mother sheep -- to bring comfort.

Here is God in whom one may have hope.

Comfort, Comfort, O My People.

God is with us, God cradles us, helps us, holds us, pushes us when we need it.

God abides with us, God gives us the strength to change the unjust human systems hurt and oppress God's own people.

God gives us the tenacity to continue to work to save the planet in the midst of unparalleled growth.

Each of us, must do the best we can, while we are here, and then we pass the shovel to the next generation.

We must be careful not to make idols out of ourselves, we can't do it all and we aren't supposed to, because we aren't God, but we are supposed to do what we can, when we can.

When that social worker emailed me with the list of Christmas wishes for the 8 children, I had several thoughts.

One of them was hesitancy.

Christmas is right around the corner, I thought.

It's such a short timeframe and that's a lot of gifts.

We've also already asked our people to give to the church, to give food at Thanksgiving, to give gifts to the Wish Tree, to give coats to City Mission, I don't know if we can ask them to give again.

I also thought, what good are our gifts, anyways?

Clearly this family needs a lot of help beyond some Christmas presents, shouldn't we be doing more?

But she didn't ask us to do more.

What I was overlooking was that this opportunity, this email from the social worker was literally God handing me a shovel saying, "Go. Dig. This is a chance to help bring about my realm on earth, to make the mountain that much lower."

It's not a lot, but this gesture of kindness will make 8 kids happier on Christmas morning.

Will it solve all their problems? Nope.

Are there still other kids around the world who will wake up with no presents to open?

Unfortunately, yes.

But do those facts mean that we shouldn't help these kids in this way? Not at all.

We have been asked to help, and so we will.

It's not monumental, it's not leveling the whole mountain or building a direct highway from us to God, but it will get us that much closer.

Those kids and those caretakers, will hopefully feel a sense of happiness and gratitude, and who knows, maybe they'll pass on that kindness and compassion when they have the chance.

The first thoughts I had were so cynical.

The mountain is too high.

The desert too dry.

The journey too treacherous.

It would be easier to reject the offer to help.

Every time we're given a chance to do something to better the world, it's so easy for these cynical thoughts to creep in and undermine what God would like us to do.

Coming up with reasons why we shouldn't do something can be so easy, just quickly turning our backs on the belief that a better world is possible.

When you get in that mindset, I pray that you'll remember that, while it's not about us, every bit counts.

Because if everyone refused God's invitation, if everyone refused to chip away at the mountainous obstacle between us and the world as God wants it, then we'd never get anywhere.

But if each of us turns towards the hope and says, 'yes,' when God says, "Now,"

Then we will each be making the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone.

Amen.