

2nd Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."'*

Dredging was a fairly unfamiliar term to me prior to moving to Shelter Island; there is not too much dredging that goes on in metropolitan Atlanta. The recent dredging at the South Ferry has successfully removed much of the sediment that has, over time, built up beneath the surface of the water. If left "un-dredged" the sediment would have eventually built up to a level that would have made it difficult for ferries and other ships to navigate the passageways that are crucial to maintaining life here on our little island. This most recent dredging effort removed somewhere between 50 and 60 thousand cubic yards of sand. Interestingly, this sand is going to be used to build up beaches here on the island that have been receding due to erosion.

In addition to the very practical benefits of this recent dredging process, as the church engaging in today's lectionary passages from Malachi and Luke, the necessity of dredging reminds us that sometimes things need to be taken down and sometimes other things need to be built up; sometimes, a "leveling" is necessary in order for life to resume its intended balance.

This week's current events remind us, yet again, that we are terribly unbalanced as a society, aren't we? And, you know what causes unbalancing? Mountains and valleys, as John the Baptist would remind us. According to him, "every mountain and hill shall be made low"

We have many mountains in our lives. Areas that are in desperate need of dredging. Parts of our lives that, like the situation at South Ferry, need to be taken down a notch so that it makes room for navigation of the Holy Spirit. Many of these mountains that leave us "high and mighty" have, like the sand beneath the ferry dock, accumulated so slowly that it is almost imperceptible.

Way up on the mountain, we have come to take for granted our racial privilege, forgetting that the immigrant getting his morning coffee at Schmidt's has barriers that you and I may never have had to fight against.

Way up on the mountain, we have come to obsess over guns, forgetting that the "founding fathers" did not have AK-47's and handguns in mind when they wrote the 2nd Amendment.

Way up on the mountain, we have been taught by society to see every latino person as a lazy freeloader and every hooded black teenager as a gang banger, forgetting that we are *not* all-knowing.

Way up on the mountain, we come to believe that we are entitled to certain things, forgetting that others risk their very lives fighting for things that have been simply handed to us because of our last name, or the color of our skin, or the gender to which you are attracted, or the part of Long Island that you were born in.

Friends, dredging is called for. We can join in John the Baptist's call for taking down mountains to prepare the way for the Lord or we can simply sit around and wait for the sand to build up until we are paralyzed and left with nowhere to go.

We also have many valleys in our lives. And our friend, John the Baptist, tells us that those "valleys shall be filled." Valleys are areas that are in desperate need of being filled because the beach has been eroded by tide after tide after tide of relentless strain. Parts of our lives that, like the some of the beaches here on Shelter Island, need to be built back up so that it makes room for the navigation of the Holy Spirit.

Deep in the valley, we have broken relationships that are in need of restoration.

Deep in the valley, we have people who have succumbed to substance abuse.

Deep in the valley, we have people who are struggling to get ahead.

Deep in the valley, we have people who have been surrounded by unimaginable grief and fear.

Deep in the valley, we have immigrants who cry for justice, shooting victims in San Bernardino that cry for peace, and LGBTQ persons that cry for acceptance.

Friends, dredging is called for. We can join in the dredging or simply create deeper valleys and taller mountains.

Every where, it seems, the valleys are already deep enough and the mountains are quite lofty enough.

Those on the mountain get their daily overpriced nutritious organic food from Whole Foods while those in the valley buy their affordable, unhealthy, processed foods at Walmart.

Those on the mountain complain about helicopter noise while those in the valley complain about lack of affordable health care.

Those on the mountain fight against universal background checks for gun purchases while those in the valley are shot down by a mentally unstable person who had no business owning any gun, let alone an AK-47, in the first place.

Those on the mountain come to Shelter Island to spend their money while those in the valley work 4 part time jobs with no benefits just to live paycheck to paycheck.

So many mountains and so many valleys.

It's downright depressing isn't it? Like we said last week, we are caught between hope and a reality that seems to deny it.

What if I told you that there is at least one place we can go where there are no valleys and no mountains, where all lived in harmony and there is no disproportionate wealth, or gun violence, or racial discrimination, or poverty, or homophobia? What if I told you that there was at least one place in this world right now where all are invited to come as equals? What if I told you that there was at least one place where, right this very instant, everyone can see and touch and taste the salvation of God? Sounds pretty good, right?

Well, it's right in front of you; right here at the Table. Right here at the Table is where God's dredging comes to a reality. This holy place, this "thin place," is where the line between heaven and earth is blurred and we embody an alternative reality to the caste systems that we bring upon ourselves (or are forced upon us). The Table is where you are welcomed, whether you are in a valley or a mountain or, as is often the case, *both*, to be fed and loved. This Table is where valleys are filled and mountains are torn down. This Table is where we prepare the way of the Lord so that the Lord can prepare a path for unity, equality, and peace. This Table is where things that have gotten too "high and mighty" are taken down and the sand is used to fill places that have become too barren and sorrowful.

So often, we like to stay in our corners, we like the view from our mountains or have become numb to the reality of our valleys. This Advent Table, prepares us to come down from our mountains and overcome our valleys by helping one another lean into the peace that God calls us to embrace.

So, friends, come to the Table. Come take part in this advent dredging project that we are called to by John the Baptist, that voice crying out in the wilderness. Come, prepare the way of the Lord, that the empty parts of our lives might be filled and the privileged parts of our lives might be shared with those who need it most.

If all of this makes sense to you, if this sounds like great news, then come out of your valley and join us at the Table.

And if none of this makes sense to you, if what I have said sounds like it doesn't apply to you, then you might be on a mountain. And for those of us that are on mountains, do we have what it takes to be made low and come to the table with those who are being built up?

Either way, join us at the Table because we are all, valleys and mountains alike, invited by Christ to level the way of the Lord and prepare the pathway to perfect peace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.