

Every Valley Shall Be Lifted Up

Isaiah 40:1-11

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Very often, I ride my bike on the Air Line Trail between East Hampton and Colchester. It is part of the rails to trails system all across America. There are a few places along that trail where I just have to pull over and admire the engineering that was required to build the viaducts. The ravines are unusually steep and wide making rail construction impossible unless there be engineers to lift up the valley floor until it is even with the rest of the land. I stand there on the East Hampton side and look out and what I see is that it took both inspiration and perspiration to prepare a level way for the train tracks to come across. That valley has been lifted up! Thank God for civil engineers!

Isaiah, the prophet, anticipated the coming of a Messiah to liberate the lives of people everywhere. He saw that a Messiah's coming must be preceded by an intentional engineering of a different sort, an engineering of the heart. He saw that the barriers to true peace and to life-giving community are like the high mountains and the deep valleys along the Air Line Trail. Isaiah saw that the work of churches is the work of engineering the human heart to be a well-spring of peace, a force field for justice, a blueprint for inclusive community. I don't know if Isaiah ever rode a 12 speed bike, but he saw that some serious engineering was required to usher in the day of God's Messiah.

Before there was a building committee or a campaign committee, at South Church there were mountains and valleys, barriers to true peace, barriers to life-giving community. Some of those barriers are called stairs.

We have stairs to the choir loft, to the classrooms, to the offices, to the restrooms. But we now have a prophetic vision of a building without a dependency on stairs. The new building calls for a lifting up of the valleys, a leveling of those mountains. It calls for the kind of engineering that makes the Messiah's love more accessible to the wheelchair bound, to those unsteady on their feet, to those for whom the thought of one more stair is like the thought of me climbing Mt. Mulanje before I die. It's an exhausting thought.

At first, I was slightly reticent about having this Decision Sunday fall during Advent. At first they seemed like strange bedfellows. But when I looked at the text for today,

“Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall be made level,
and the rough places a plain,”

I knew the two are simpatico. Decision Sunday and Advent go arm in arm. What better way to prepare for the coming of God's Messiah than to do what the engineers did on the Air Line Trail; eliminate the barriers.

On Laity Sunday, November 9th, I sat in the back pew on the north side. I got a very different perspective from back there! As the deacon was trying to quiet everyone down to start the service (and there was a full house that day), I watched a first-time visitor, a child, maybe 9 years old, take in a panoramic view of the Meeting House community, and then say in a loud whisper, “Everybody goes to this church.”

At first, I was thrilled to hear such a comment from such a young guest. But later, on reflection, I knew he was not 100% correct. I knew that though there is a very visible crowd here from time to time, there are also those less visible ones who are waiting for Isaiah's vision to become real.

The South Church building is not the only place in the world waiting for the valleys to be lifted up and the mountains to be laid low. **That is why we are so committed to mission work.** And the building of this new building must not deter us from our other mission endeavors!

Last Sunday, we heard from two sophomore girls who invited us to help children in Philadelphia by raising up the valley of illiteracy so the glory of an education can be realized. They invited us to be engineers of literacy through the I Can Read ministry.

Last Sunday, we heard from our Covenant to Care social worker inviting us to level the playing field for a single mom with an infant, both of whom are homeless. The social worker asked for diapers and warm clothing to fill in the valley of nakedness so the glory of self-respect can be realized. She was inviting us to be the engineers of family stability through the Covenant to Care ministry.

All week, we have been hearing about lives ravaged by terrorists in the Taj Mahal Hotel in India. I keep trying to image what sort of engineering needs to happen in that part of Asia. What does it take to engineer peace where people are bent on hurting one another? I don't know the specific answer to that one, but I do believe in Isaiah's vision of a day when the rough places will be made smooth, when the lion and the lamb will lie down together, when the valleys will be lifted up and the mountains leveled off, when the Engineer of engineers will cause flowers to blossom in the desert. I think if our Department of State would turn this matter over to our South Church youth, a strategy for peace would be in place by the end of next week!

I have to tell you I am excited to be part of a faith community that takes the Advent texts to heart, a faith community that still identifies the steep crevasses and the rugged mountains in our society where an viaduct is still needed, and then sets out to do the engineering.

We are calling today Decision Sunday. The question is whether the time has come, finally, to smooth out the rough places in our own property, to raise up the valleys, such that ALL God's children will find access to the stories of a Messiah's love. We will need some engineers who graduated from MIT or WPI or NC State or other fine schools of engineering. But mostly, we will need hundreds and hundreds of the other kind of engineers, those who hear Isaiah's call, roll up their sleeves, and say YES to embodying a spirit of peace with justice.

In the greatest of hope, Amen!