Grace and Peace to you, the saints of the parish of St. Andrew’s, Camrose. It is a real blessing to be able to join you for worship this morning, and with any watching online. I’m also very grateful to my colleague, Rev. Trina, for her welcome. I had only ever met Trina on a computer screen, so I’m glad that has finally changed.

I bring you greetings today from our bishop, Steve. I’m here in my role as Canon to the Ordinary for the diocese. ‘Ordinary’ is another word for the bishop, and so a ‘Canon to the Ordinary’ basically means a special assistant to the bishop. And in that capacity, Bishop Steve has asked me to visit a different parish one Sunday every month for the simple purpose of building up cohesion between the parishes and regions of our diocese as we seek to live into a vision where we’re invited to think of ourselves as members of local churches not as parish communities going solo but as part of a bigger diocesan family in ministry – as a team where each and every member from the bishop to the youngest child in Sunday school and everyone in between is sharing the work of Gospel ministry and the leadership of our diocese together. This is a ‘synodal vision’, as we’re beginning to call it, after the Greek word ‘synod’, which just means ‘walking together’ on the way.

In our Scripture readings for today we heard a bit about traveling on a path or a way: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make God’s path straight’. And in two of these texts – the reading from Baruch and from Luke’s Gospel – we also hear several references to this idea of ‘mountains being made low’ and ‘valleys being filled up’ along that road. And it was this latter imagery that caught my attention as I was preparing for this sermon this week.

There are a few different theories as to where this language comes from in Scripture. One of those has to do with a figure know as Semeramis, who was the Queen of the Empire of Babylon during the 800s-810s BC. Her time as Queen is remembered as so successful that a series of mythic legends were written about her in subsequent centuries, including one by a Greek historian called Diodorus Siculus who live about 50-60 years before the birth of Jesus. Diodorus records in his accounts how Semaramis, when she would send the Babylonian armies into a new territory to seek to conquer it, would literally order her armies to dig down hills and mountains and to fill in ravines and valleys as they marched along the way. Now, of course, ancient Israel was one of these very places, falling to the Babylonians in the 6th Century BC. So, it may have originally been from memories of these very tactics that the prophets of Israel got the idea, and why this imagery was still in the consciousness of people in the time of Jesus.

Now of course Baruch and Luke are not talking about a military conquest strategy, but rather making an analogy for their belief that when God moves, God will be unhindered by obstacles on the way. Luke, in particular, puts these words about leveling out the mountains and the valleys into the mouth of John the Baptizer – the cousin of Jesus – as he went around in the years prior to the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus announcing his coming and inviting the people to get themselves ready to receive God in Christ by doing their part to bring the proverbial hills low and leveling out the rough and uneven places so that they could join God on the road.

We know the season of Advent we are in is a time for remembering the importance of this first coming of Jesus. We also know its a time for remembering that Jesus has promised to come again in glory in the fulness of time, and to likewise be making ourselves ready. And so, keeping this reading in mind, I want to suggest that part of that preparing is about wrestling with the question ‘what are the symbolic mountains and valleys that we are called to attend to in our time as we wait for God’s coming and God’s movement?’

It’s a temptation for us to want to begin by looking to things outside ourselves that we think need to be made level to make way for God. But I think it might be an even more useful discipline to look more closely and internally to our own personal lives, or at least to the state of our wider community, and perhaps to our Church context as well. Of course, the personal dimension is something that, by definition, is work of contemplation and prayer we can do between us and God, and Advent is often a traditional and good time for that. So perhaps we might ask ourselves in these final weeks of the calendar year ‘what are some of the things that have perhaps come to loom a little too large or become a bit too central in my life lately and could maybe stand to be leveled out some?’ And ‘what good things have maybe been unfortunately set down or fallen back and need to be filled in and built up again?’

But, of course, the words of Baruch, and the words of John the Baptizer, were really directed not to individuals so much as they were to whole communities – to a wider society, and to a religious community within that society. And so how might we listen to this call to prepare the way of the Lord by noticing the mountains and valleys that we might collectively think of as barriers to living together in a way that looks like the way of Jesus and the reign of God?

Several times during the almost 2 years of pandemic I’ve heard people talk about how it has revealed some things that were out of line or not in balance in our wider world. It has certainly shown in stark ways the inequalities that exist in terms of financial and infrastructure resources within regions and countries and between parts of the world. The existence of systemic racism has also been made very evident – not only by the pandemic but in what we have seen in the wake of things like the murder of George Floyd and other overt forms of anti-black racism, the recovery of unmarked graves at residential schools, etc. Now we’re hearing all about supply chain shortages and rapid inflation that highlight how the rampant consumption mentality so prevalent in the Northern and Western parts of the globe is unsustainable. And, of course, we can’t forget how, for much the past year, large portions of the world have been on fire, and then flooded out, and the visible effects of climate change and ecological crises are not abstract but right before our eyes.

All of these things are complex and multifaceted. But I think, at least to some degree, we can probably all acknowledge that part of their causes are rooted in having made some things to be mountains in overemphasizing their priority when they should not have been mountains; and some things to become valleys through our disregard or inattention when they should not have been valleys. And now we see some of the results of this disordering.

So how do we respond? Well, I think perhaps we can take this in the way that John the Baptizer’s words were intended in his time: As a reminder that God, who loves us, uses these times of upheaval and transition as an invitation to people of faith to notice the signs and to begin to turn around to go with God along another path. There continues to be a lot of talk out there about how ‘when all this stuff is over won’t it be great to go back to normal.’ But as people who follow the actually not-so-normal-at-all way of Jesus Christ, I think this is a time to step out, both with words and especially with actions and deeds, to say, you know what? That path wasn’t normal. Those were some rough and crooked ways, with misplaced mountains and valleys. Let’s not go back to that. And here’s some ideas for how to rethink what a new normal might be – upside-down things like ‘blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the peacemakers.’

In the Church too I think there are some of these misplaced mountains and valleys that we are being called upon to pay attention to in new ways. For much of the last 1500 years or so, the Church has existed in a position of establishment, with lots of influence and resources and power. But sometimes sitting atop this large edifice has caused the Church to lose sight of its vocation given from Jesus to be among the lowly and to walk in solidarity with those who face injustice. It has even led some misguided people to twist the Church to serve systems that exploit and abuse others in the name of prosperity and the building up of more and more power. The complicity of the churches in Canada with the project of colonization and cultural assimilation among the First Peoples is one sad and glaring example of this. That’s unquestionably one mountain that needs to be brought low, and the work of reparation and decolonization in the Church are integral parts, I think, of what following Jesus needs to be about today, for all of us.

But there are also some valleys in the Church that need to be raised up. Valleys, of course, are places that have been eroded over time. One of these in the Church context is in relationship to what is traditionally called discipleship – how people grow in faith in Christ and faithful Christ-like living. Because of the history of the Anglican church as an established church of a state, for a long time Anglican fell into a habit of just thinking all we have to do is open the church doors and people will show up because it is a cultural norm to do so. That era is now long gone, and we are needing to relearn how to explain what it means to intentionally follow Jesus, and why that might be attractive, and what difference that might make. And so we are in a time, I think, when intentional discipleship and formation of all the baptized for sharing the ministry of the Gospel is going to be essential in order to be the kind of Church we are going to need to be. It’s time to build up some valleys in these places in our life together in Christ.

So to bring this all to a final summary: God is always coming to us and calling to us. And God’s word says to us today, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make God’s 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.’” As far as it is up to us, may we too prepare pathways within ourselves and our churches for all that God wants to do for us, and for the world God loves, so that, walking together on that way, we may face the challenges that lie ahead with hope and faith, and without fear. Amen.