

Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 40:1-11

Mark 1:1-8

Occupy Christmas

*We have just entered the season of Advent. The season where we prepare our hearts minds and souls for the birth of Jesus. The coming of Emmanuel - God with Us. The song "Being Awake" by Velma Frye that we began our service with has been speaking to me this season. As the melody ticks away it calls us to "set the clock of our hearts. - breathe in the dawn - raise high the chalice of your life - take the joy of being awake - it's the best medicine of all - being awake."

Advent in a similar ways calls us to *be awake to the presence of the holy who is coming, who is always coming to us each and every day, in every nook and cranny of our lives. I love this Advent season because it gives us an opportunity to refocus and remember what Christmas is about. It's not about the getting of everything we want on our long Christmas list. *Rather it's about occupying our hearts with hope, peace, joy and love.

*"Occupy Christmas is the latest incarnation of the campaign by Adbusters, the Vancouver-based magazine that inspired the Occupy Wall Street movement. This same magazine has been promoting "Buy Nothing Day" for years – a movement to bring a halt to over consumption and the environmental and cultural catastrophes that accompany our voracious appetite for more and more of creation's limited resources. Adbusters most recent campaign is 'Occupy Christmas' – a call to resist the hyper consumption of the holiday season and return to the initial spiritual impetus of this time of year. The magazine is getting all the credit –but Christians and other faith communities have been on about this for decades!"¹ Prophets, teachers, Pastors and preachers have been spreading this message every Advent and every other season for that matter, for... well forever.

In last weeks lectionary text Mark's apocalyptic message called us to be awake. Be alert to what is happening around you and be aware that the master will come again when you may not even know it. In today's scriptures, Isaiah calls for comfort for oppressed and outcast peoples. "A voice cries out in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God....A voice cry's out...but what shall I cry?... Get you up to a high mountain ...and lift your voice up in strength..." "Here is your God!" ...He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." And Mark continued this week said "I am sending my messenger ahead of you,

¹ Bowman, Rev. Debra Ryerson United Church Nov. 27, 2011

who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”
And John the Baptist appears.

John Vandelaar wrote: “It goes without saying that our world is as much in need of prophetic messengers as it has ever been. In the face of the combined crises of our time, we need voices that will speak loudly and bravely of the implications of God’s presence and purposes for the world. It may well be that movements like Occupy Wall Street are part of this prophetic proclamation, but there can be no question that those who are called by the name of Christ are to be messengers of God’s justice, God’s generosity, God’s grace and compassion, and God’s liberating reign. The problem, though, is that all too often the Church has been quick to speak out about things we oppose and slow to act in ways that demonstrate our own commitment to God’s Reign.”²

It seems to me Occupy Christmas and these prophetic and apocalyptic calls to attentiveness actually have a lot in common. Both are speaking to a large majority of people who oppressed and feel cut off from cultural norms. Debra Bowman writes “both offer strategies for those who feel powerless, who have come to expect no good to come from the present they live in. Both signal alternative possibilities. Both are most often dismissed as hallucinatory, colourful, unfocused imaginings of people on the wrong side of reasonable.”³

Honestly when I felt I might go in the direction of speaking about Occupy Christmas today and then I discovered it was “John the Baptist” week I couldn’t see anything more perfect. I think many of us look at those who are Occupying Wall Street and Vancouver and every other city in the same way folks would have looked at the untamed John the Baptist. And yet this is who God sent to prepare the way for Jesus, to prepare the world for a new way of life. Just like those of the Occupy movements the prophetic and apocalyptic messages ask us to resist the way of the world. Mark calls us to embrace a new way of life, he calls us to live into the bringing forth of the Kingdom of God.

Bowman points out that *Mark and Isaiah* “wrote with the same urgency as the Occupy voices, with the same cry for immediate action as that of David Suzuki and Michael Moore. Mark implored Christ’s disciples to decide now, immediately, to follow Christ and turn away from what stifled life and oppressed joy.”⁴ Both ask us to be alert and awake to the in-breaking of God’s kingdom. Prophet’s, preachers and biblical writers write for a time in Jewish history when the world seemed without hope and despair the only recourse to the sharp disappointment of possibilities, apocalyptic writings rallied the faithful, calling on them to watch and wait as God’s intentions became realized in the world around them.

² <http://sacredise.com/lectionary/2011/11/advent-2b/>

³ Bowman, Debra sermon November 27, 2012 Ryerson United Church

⁴ IBID

Just like any movement in any age there is always a danger of just waiting and watching. Cults wait and watch for a time when God will come in and destroy the earth, punishing people for their evil. We can even be guilty of apathetic faith, expecting God to change everything without any action of our own. One of the reasons I appreciate the Occupy movements or at least their impetus is that it is calling people to be awake to what is happening in the world around them. There is a group of people out there who expect us all to act more ethically than we currently are. They are voices crying out in the wilderness hoping to prepare for a new way. They are calling for truth, exposing injustice and oppression.

*The Occupy movements although in many places have gone astray began with a call for truth. The Occupy movement is “apocalyptic literature in-carnate, in the flesh. A voice crying out “Something is not right and we’re not getting out of our tents until you notice.” The Occupy movement joins our contemporary theology in understanding that there must be engagement between the will of God and the way of God’s people. That each step and decision we take is a step and decision towards participating in the fulfillment of God’s realm or a step away from the righteousness for all creation that is the profound yearning of God.”*⁵

Walter Brueggemann writes this regarding those who watched and waited/those who watch and wait, on God: “This radical hope [among those who are powerless, who expect nothing more from the present world] appears absurd to people who still trust in the world, but such hope is indeed the work of people who have no other ground for hope.”⁶

Craig McInnes wrote an article in the Vancouver sun titled “Occupy Xmas, or how to turn Christmas into a day of mourning” Subtitled “Buy Nothing Day idea ignores increasingly desperate needs of merchants, and the hundreds of thousands of retail jobs that would be lost.” He ends his article * “We might all be better off with a less commercial Christmas, with paying more attention to the spiritual side of the holidays. But the notion that our economy could survive a consumers' boycott is as far-fetched as the idea harmony would continue to reign in my happy home if I were to unilaterally declare I was overturning generations of tradition with a personal moratorium on gift-giving.

The black in black Friday is not about mourning, it is about survival. This year, the shopping frenzy today - or the eerie quiet - is under even closer scrutiny than usual by economic forecasters who fear that poor sales may be a sign that the great engine of the American economy - the consumer - doesn't have the horsepower to keep that country from

⁵ IBID

⁶ (Walter Brueggemann, Reverberations of Faith, 8)

falling back into recession. Canada would quickly follow. What a merry Christmas that would be.”⁷

Even better listen to this quote “Sally Ritchie, vice-president of communications for the Retail Council of Canada, ups the rhetoric, the resistance to the resistance. She denounced ‘Occupy Christmas’ as an outrage that would threaten the livelihood of workaday Canadians....” saying “It’s a highly undemocratic sentiment, really,”⁸ Hmmmm....So what she is saying is that if we live into our faith and the ancient voices who call us to a new possibility, a new world, a new hope we are being ‘highly undemocratic.’*

It seems to me these are just the voices these movements are speaking to. *As I “set the clock of my heart this season and I feel the joy of being awake and raise high the chalice of my life” I hope I do not do so snuggled up to a billion strangers waiting to make it to the cash register with just the right toy for my niece or nephew. Rather I hope I do so breathing in the dawn, taking in the joy of being awake as I prepare for Christ who is coming, who is always coming each and every day in every nook and cranny of my life.

“The challenge of the Advent call is for us to embody what we proclaim – even as John embodied in his dress, diet and actions, the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. What this means is that, as much as we might speak about Christ and the change that God’s justice requires of us all, we are to live it out in our own commitment to small acts of justice, inclusivity, grace, compassion and generosity. It means that rather than just blindly participating in the status quo, we are to be conscious and critical participants, acknowledging the inherent flaws in our systems and boldly speaking out about the injustices and woundedness it creates, while striving to live an alternative way in the midst of the current one.”⁹

I decided to research the* “Occupy Christmas” movement a little and here is what I found. First of all Adbusters wrote “Occupy Xmas” is not really about refusing to spend a dime over the holiday season. It’s about taking a deep breath and deciding to opt out of the hype, the overcrowded malls, and the stressful to-do lists. It’s about reminding ourselves to really think about what we are buying, why we are buying it, and whether we really need it at all.”¹⁰

Some suggestions were: Perhaps when we write letters to *Santa we can write letters asking for how we would like to make the world a better place. Some are already writing Christmas carols about justice, and greening rather than about what Santa is bringing. If you want to be

⁷ <http://www.vancouver.sun.com/life/Occupy+Xmas+turn+Christmas+into+mourning/5767885/story.html#ixzz1fET28q19>

⁸ Bowman

⁹ <http://sacredise.com/lectionary/2011/11/advent-2b/>

¹⁰ [Adbusters.org](http://adbusters.org).

entertained a little look at revbilly.com/work/music. (I don't promote everything I see on the site just to clarify).

Or what about these simple suggestions. Go to Christmas Craft fairs and local businesses rather than Walmart. *Or if you do need to go shopping what if in every shopping trip you included a drop off to a clothing or food drive in your community. Or what if you intentionally chose the greenest purchases possible.

I'm not telling you what to do. You know what is in your heart, you know what feels right I just want to invite you to be awake and pay attention. Here is a quote from the OccupyXmas facebook page. *"Don't be afraid to take the unpopular course if you feel in your heart it is right. An entire generation is waking up all around the globe right now because when they stopped and observed the world around them, and they know in their heart it is not right. What our page is 'telling you to do' is realize the impact of the choices that you make extend beyond you and are radiated out to the entire world like waves from a pebble dropped into a pond.

This movement may be new but it has always existed because it is based on the creative guiding principle that governs all things. What started as a flickering idea in the mind of a single human being has now grown into a worldwide movement. This is how energy works; it is the basic guiding principle of creation in the known universe. It cannot be stopped. As Albert Einstein said...this is not philosophy, this is physics. Like a few small burning embers scattered throughout a forest, each individual focused on this positive change has sparked the flame in others around them. Those small embers begin to gain intensity as the energy spreads further to those around them and soon what started as a few small embers burning individually has amassed into a raging inferno which will continue to burn and spread long after the original ember has gone out.¹¹

*Set the clocks of your heart to breathe in the presence of emmanuel. Keep awake Jesus called to his disciples in the last moments of his life. The prophets and teachers of old call to us to Keep awake, to prepare the way of the Lord. Listen to the apocalyptic message of the day that calls for the kindom of God on earth, that calls for the healing of humanity and creation. That calls for equality for all of God's children. The world will not collapse if we don't over consume - God is much bigger than that.

Boman writes "Keep awake, keep watch, be ready. As the light breaks in it exposes the complex webs in the corners of our lives, of our culture, of our world. The light unveils the truth – and history shows us that the world will resist the light and the truth. Business columnists extoll the consumer as the engine of stability; the gospel declares instead that the engine is Love. It is the living, loving God incarnate, enfleshed in the pregnant possibilities of a baby which drives our

¹¹ <http://www.facebook.com/notes/occupy-christmas/a-few-more-words-from-occupy-christmas/255191227871503>

hearts, which sustains our hope, which assures the wellness of our world. Keep awake – it’s going to be a rocky ride. The light comes again.”¹²

“We like to think of Advent as a time of preparation for Christmas. .. When all we’re doing is waiting for a baby, that’s easy. We do it all the time when friends or family members await a new addition to their families. We wait, we celebrate and then, when the happy event is over, we go back to our lives as per normal. Even if the baby we wait for is divine, even if the man the baby becomes is “God With Us,” it requires little from us. God walking on earth is nothing more than a curious phenomenon if all it asks of us is to accept a miraculous idea.”¹³ But this is not what John the Baptist is talking about. Advent is not just a preparation for a day when we google at a babe in a manger. It’s about preparing for the coming of a whole new way of being, a whole new world. It’s about setting the clocks of our hearts to tick differently. It’s about being awake to the reality of a new life and a new world occupied by the presence of the most holy incarnate God.

***Advent calls us to be awake to the presence of the holy who is coming, who is always coming to us each and every day. It’s about occupying our hearts and souls with hope, peace, joy and love. “ Taste the joy of being awake - it’s the best medicine of all! Being Awake”**

¹² Bowman

¹³ [The Change Within and the Change Without](#)