

**“Strange Places: Protest”
The Second Sunday of Advent
The Revs. Michelle Slater and Debra Bowman**

**Luke 3:1-18
December 4th, 2011**

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.”’*

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’

And the crowds asked him, ‘What then should we do?’ In reply he said to them, ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.’ Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’*

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

If you haven’t been paying close attention, it might look like the “Occupy” movement is over, or at least winding down. You know, the protest movement that began with Occupy Wall Street, the three-month-long occupation, sit-in, of a park in New York City near Wall Street, the symbol of Western culture’s rapacious greed and consumerism. As the movement spread to other cities, including here in Vancouver, so too did the criticism of the movement’s sometimes vague goals and lack of a central organization and leadership, as well as the public pressure to

remove the protestors.

But the movement is not yet over; it might be more accurate to say it is evolving. The Occupy movement was actually inspired by a Vancouver-based magazine called *Adbusters*. This same magazine has been promoting “Buy Nothing Day” for several years, encouraging us all 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. And *Adbusters’* current campaign is called “Occupy Christmas”. It is 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 if you listened carefully to John the Baptist this morning, you might be inclined to give him a little credit too.

In our reading from Luke’s gospel this morning, we hear John’s protest of the world’s values, his call to resist the world as it is and to embrace an alternative way of being. He called with the same urgency as the Occupy voices, with the same cry for immediate action as that of David Suzuki and Michael Moore. But his urgency comes from the fact that God is about to enter the world in a new way, is about to change the world forever, and for that, we must be ready.

But like participants of the Occupy movement today, John the Baptist knew that our complacency, our laziness, our busyness, our resignation, all help to keep us numb, paralyzed, unaware of what God is doing in the world, and how we are to participate. Yet like them, he knows that we need a good dose of our own reality, a reality that we would often rather ignore.

So John begins a protest movement. Instead of tent cities and peaceful protests in the corridors of power, John takes to the wilderness, the place of barrenness, danger, God-forsakenness in order to make his point. Like the Occupy protestors today, he takes aim at the leaders of his time: “You pack of snakes! Who warned you to escape the coming wrath of God? Then you had better live the kind of life that shows you really mean to repent.” In other words, you’d better show it in your living, not in your talking.

And like the Occupy movement, John the Baptist calls us, commands us, to tell the whole truth about our lives, and our world, about what is wrong and unjust and unfaithful, and then to do something about it. To engage in some meaningful action that addresses our situation, that changes it, that makes amends for it, that prevents it from happening again. The word for this, in the language of the Bible, is repentance. John is convinced that only when we can make room for repentance, for turning away from what doesn’t give us life, toward the God who can and does, that we can truly receive God’s reality, the reality that is embodied for us in the one for whom we waiting, the baby born in the stable.

For John the Baptist, this reality demands a radical reorienting of our lives, away from what gives death and toward what gives life. And not in any hazy or vague ways, but in concrete changes to our lives and our behaviour. When people asked him how they should live, he told them: “If you have two coats, give one away,” he said. “Do the same with your food.” Or in other words: resist the urge to acquisition and hoarding; resist becoming complacent to the fact that you have more than enough while others have too little.

To the tax collectors he said, “No more extortion—collect only what is required by law.” Or in today’s context: resist becoming wealthy on the backs of the poor and vulnerable; refuse to take part in and profit from economic and political systems that take advantage of those who are worse off than you are.

And to the Roman soldiers who asked him, “And what should we do?”, he answered, “No more shakedowns, no blackmail—and be content with your rations.” Put another way, for us today, perhaps: use the power you have, the position you hold at the top of the world’s economic pyramid, to ensure justice is done for all. Cultivate an appreciation of what you have, and an awareness of what is truly enough.

It turns out the Occupy Wall Street campaign, and John the Baptist’s call to repentance have a lot in common. While many regard the Occupy movement with some bewilderment, if not disdain, there is no getting around the reality that in its original impetus, a truth was named, a rottenness unveiled, and deep dis-ease revealed. An exposing of injustice, of oppression, of scales tilted fully in favour of the haves and contrary to the have-nots. Something is not right in the State of Wherever and we’re not getting out of our tents until you notice.

It is a modern expression of John the Baptist, in the flesh. Both movements are rooted in protest. Both appeal to those who feel powerless in the face of the forces at work in the world and in their culture. Both attract ordinary people who have come to expect no good to come from the present they live in. Both signal alternative possibilities, new relationships, a new way of being human community together. And, both are often dismissed as naïve, idealistic, unfocused imaginings of people on the wrong side of reasonable.

In Biblical times those who hoped in God were dismissed as no less unreasonable and irrational as many portray the participants in the Occupy movement. For example, *Vancouver Sun* business columnist Craig McInnes published an article last Saturday headlined: “Occupy Xmas, or how to turn Christmas into a day of mourning.” He argued that reducing consumerism during this season, to turn our back on rampant shopping and therefore increased production of goods we don’t need and increased destruction of our environment by both producing and throwing out those goods, will bring a financial depression, the total failure of the North American economy.

He did somewhat patronizingly concede that, “We might all be better off with a less commercial Christmas, with paying more attention to the spiritual side of holiday”. However, he warned, if we scale back too much, if we pay more than lip service to a reversal of our destructive consumption, we may engineer an economic apocalypse: “...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 falling back into recession. Canada could quickly follow. What a merry Christmas that would be.” (Craig McInnes, *Vancouver Sun*, Nov. 25, 2011, C2)

Imagine, here we are, feeling so powerless in the face of global economic decisions and fluctuations. Yet apparently, recognizing that we live beyond our means, admitting that we are destroying the planet with over consumption, responding to the good news of the gospel by reveling in the love of God rather than the artificial warmth of the sales clerk, will bring about

the financial ruin of North America.

Sally Ritchie, vice-president of communications for the Retail Council of Canada, ups the rhetoric, the protest of the protest. She denounced *Occupy Christmas* as an outrage that would threaten the livelihood of workaday Canadians, saying “It’s a highly undemocratic sentiment, really.” That we heed the ancient voices who call us to a new possibility, a new world, a new hope is called “highly undemocratic.”

The Occupy movement...the protests of John the Baptist...both sound like strange places indeed, to look for God. Yet I am reminded of the earliest Christians, living in the Roman Empire. Because they believed and worshiped only one God, the God of Israel, they refused to bring sacrifices to the Roman gods. But bringing sacrifices to the gods was seen not so much as a religious duty, as a civic one. If enough people neglected Mars, the god of war, then perhaps the next war might not go so well for Rome. If Ceres, the goddess of the harvest, did not receive her due, it might be that next year’s crops would fail.

So the earliest followers of Jesus were considered not only eccentric, but dangerous to the community’s well-being. They were considered anti-social traitors, whose refusal to worship the Roman gods was an active undermining of the empire’s well-being and social order.

Hmmm...sounds familiar, doesn’t it? While business columnists extoll the consumer as the engine of stability, the gospel declares instead that the engine of human well-being is love and justice. “This Advent season plays out against the backdrop of a materialist culture at its gaudiest, most materialistic, most vulgar; the season’s advertising will appeal to the least attractive human characteristics – greed and pride and our need to affirm ourselves by what we buy and consume.”

“Advent [and John the Baptist] responds by reminding us that a child will be born in the midst of a world and a time very much like our own, that the reconciliation and redemption his birth promises is not separate from the world, and that he will call us to follow him and be his people in this same sad, greedy, vulgar and beautiful world. His birth, which dark Advent anticipates, will be a light in the darkness that darkness will not overcome.” [John M. Buchanan, *Christian Century*, Nov. 29, 2011, Editor’s Desk]

This is good news indeed, worthy of our rejoicing. Thanks be to God! Amen.