

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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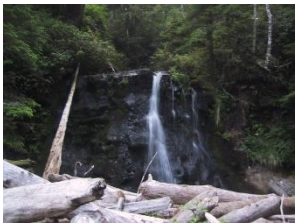
December 15, 2019 – Third Sunday of Advent

The Hope for Peace

The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea –

Isaiah 11:1-9

Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near! – Matthew 3:1-12



A few years back, my brother and I hiked the West Coast Trail through the temperate rain forest on the West coast of Vancouver Island. (slide) One day, we came across this little waterfall, with an enormous pile of driftwood at its base. At first I puzzled how these huge logs got there, until I realized that when it is raining hard, this little waterfall must swell to become a raging torrent, which could toss

around massive trees like matchsticks. In that pile of logs, I found this old weathered veteran of many, many years. (slide) The tree had fallen many years before, and it seemed pretty dead. And yet, from that old log was growing this tender shoot. Foresters call fallen trees like this “nurse logs.” One day, that shoot may become a mighty tree, as big or bigger than its nurse log, like this one. (slide)



Nurse logs weren't unknown to the prophet Isaiah, either. In the days of Isaiah, the royal line of king David and his father Jesse was rotten and corrupt, but the prophet looks for new life to grow from what seemed dead and incapable of producing further growth, a shoot from the stump of Jesse.



In the same way, sometimes, the forces of compassion and justice seem so weak in our time; the forces of greed and domination seem so powerful. But for those who have the eyes to see, those who have prepared to recognize the new thing God is doing, there are many such shoots, holding out the promise of new possibilities.

At this time of year, we tell the stories of John the Baptizer, and I sometimes wonder what a strange figure he must have been: dressed only in what he could make himself out of coarse, itchy, camel's hair; the lean figure, nourished only by locusts and wild honey that he could gather himself. Those details indicate that he was opting out of the economy, like a “back to the lander” might do today. And yet

this bizarre, counter-cultural figure drew crowds. And perhaps it was because he was different that he was so attractive.

What a figure he would make today, that Baptizer. What would he wear? Perhaps only what he could make himself or find in the thrift shops. What would he eat? What he could gather himself perhaps: Berries, wild mushrooms, grubs, insects and the odd rabbit. He would not be a mainstream figure. No church minister I suspect – too offensive, too challenging.

But, who cares? Why spend time on this bizarre figure from the distant past, in this season of preparation for Christmas? Why put off any longer hearing the Christmas story and singing the carols. You've been hearing the carols on the radio and doing Santa pageants in school for more than a month now. Why are we spending time on the Baptist?

This season of Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. It is not Christmas itself, but preparation for Christmas. And so, in this season of preparation, we remember the one who came to prepare the way of the Lord. Advent is the reminder that you cannot just jump right into the coming of Christ without preparation.

We need preparation because Christmas is a direct challenge to the way of thinking that dominates our world. We call this dominant ideology “imperial thinking,” patterns of thinking that emphasize hierarchies and coercive power. It is no accident that the Christmas stories all share how challenging the birth of Jesus was to the kings and empires of his time. (slide) He was not born in a royal palace and laid in a silk lined crib, but born in a stable and laid in a manger. He was not born to royal parents but to homeless ones, refugees and migrants.



When the Christmas stories speak of Jesus as Lord, Saviour, Son of God, Light of the World it is because those phrases that were all originally used for the Roman Emperors. In saying that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Saviour, Jesus is Son of God and Light of the World, the Christmas stories are explicitly saying that the Emperor is not Lord, not Saviour, not the Son of God, not the Light of the World. God’s way is not the way of empire.

Likewise, today, it is no accident that we have to constantly struggle to discover the “real meaning of Christmas,” in a season dominated by commercial, consumer images, images that enforce and perpetuate imperial thinking. We have to prepare by changing our minds, changing our way of thinking.

Today, the empires we have to resist are mainly commercial ones. I was struck on my recent trip to New York, that the license plates (slide) proudly proclaim New York to be the Empire State, a title that also gave its name to the building that was the tallest in the world for 36 years after its construction in 1931. The tallest, the biggest, the wealthiest, the best, the most are the crowns of imperial thinking. It is no accident that Santa sits on a throne, (slide) a symbol of royalty and empire. The symbols of a commercial Christmas are familiar to us. Those symbols evoke the lust for power and wealth, the quest for supremacy and domination that are so much a part of our economic and political system.



Those symbols are so ubiquitous that we just take them for granted, but what gets overlooked in that way of thinking are the ugly consequences of empire thinking. In a system of competition, of course some people, will be winners and some losers. The system looks attractive only when we focus on the winners, and the losers stay invisible. Perhaps you saw the television commercial that showed a little boy who sees a “Help Wanted” sign in a store window, and goes in to ask for the job. The store owner says that he was looking for someone older, and says the boy should be playing hockey, not working. The boy responds that playing hockey is what he is trying to do. I never knew, before I saw that commercial, that one-third of Canadian families cannot afford to enroll their children in organized sports. That reality was invisible to me. Empire thinking keeps it invisible, most of the time.

Usually commercials are used for very different purposes. The power of modern advertising is devoted to cultivating our dissatisfaction. So often modern advertising uses powerful images of spiritual hungers, promising, quite dishonestly, that those hungers can be satisfied by purchasing a new car, or the latest electronic gadget. Our modern economy is driven by the dissatisfaction generated by advertising, the illusion that we can gain spiritual peace, fulfillment or freedom through consumption.

When the prophet Isaiah imagines a wise and just and faithful leader, he says that that leader will not make decisions by what his eye sees or what his ear hears – a wise and just leader will not be led astray by advertising’s ability to manipulate images and present a false picture of reality.

In contrast to the false peace promised by commercial advertising, Isaiah says that this wise and just leader will make possible a real peace, a deep, inner joy that makes it possible to be at peace with others, at peace with creation, and at peace with God. Isaiah offers the image of a renewed creation. The picture of animals

and humans at peace with one another is idealistic, but at its heart is a hope that the world will be safe for those who are vulnerable.

In order to experience that kind of peace, we need to resist the power of empire thinking. The manger and cross, symbols of God's new creation, invite us into a different pattern of thinking, a way of thinking which consciously resists empire. The stable and manger are reminders that because Jesus was born in poverty, without a home or a bed to lay down his head, every person is precious to God, and no person is unimportant. As the prophet Isaiah says, the wise and just leader will judge the poor with justice, and decide fairly for the meek of the earth. The cross exposes the ugliness and brutality of the way empire treats those who either can't or won't climb its hierarchies of privilege, power and prestige.

Where empire thinking treats only those with economic and political power as important, this alternative wisdom values everyone. Where empire thinking builds hierarchies, the way of manger and stable breaks them down. Where empire thinking makes the suffering invisible, the way of the cross holds them up as God's beloved. It is with the manger and the cross that the real light of the world lie. It is with the manger and the cross that real salvation and real peace lie.

Because empire thinking is so powerful, and so seductive, we have to constantly resist it. It is that resistance that John the Baptizer invites us to do in preparation for the coming of Christ. Repentance is the spiritual preparation of turning from patterns of thinking and behaving shaped by empire and turning to patterns of thinking and living shaped by manger and cross. Without that preparation, Christ's coming will be invisible to us and we will not even see, let alone recognize him. Without that preparation, the true meaning of Christmas will forever be a mystery, and we will be caught in the powerful grip of a consumer empire that promises everything and delivers almost nothing.

Without that preparation, John the Baptist seems like nothing more than an odd character, a misfit to be avoided and dismissed and rendered invisible. With that preparation, we realize that John the Baptist, and those like him who challenge the settled conventions of empire, are the signs of a new and more hopeful future.

The story of John the Baptist reminds me of the young people today, who die their hair strange colours (slide) and wear clothes that make the more conventional of us cringe. Their dress is, in some cases – not all but some – a social commentary, a rejection of the values of empire. (slide)



The story of John the Baptist reminds me of those who march to the beat of a different drummer, those who live off the grid, those who strive to find new patterns of living in the recognition that the ways of empire are neither socially just nor environmentally sustainable.



Most of us aren't quite so radical. We live in the in-between spaces between commercial empire and emerging kingdom. We get most of our food and clothing and income from the system of empire. And for the time being, we may not see any viable alternative. But what we can do is to avoid criticizing and ridiculing those who try something new. We can use our money and our time and our moral authority to nurture new possibilities, to encourage those who are stepping outside the normal ways of living. We can encourage the nerds and the oddballs and the wierdos, because in their experiments with new ways of living, they, through many false starts and failures, will point us in new and more hopeful directions.

And we can help to give them roots. (slide) The significance of the nurse log is that the new shoot is not completely new. Real hope is not a creation out of nothing. It needs roots, roots in a community of spiritual and moral reflection. One of the reasons I believe in the church is that it can help provide a bridge between the past and the future, and between people of many countries and many different experiences. In its global scope and its capacity to bring the resources of the past to bear on the future, the church can be like that old nurse log. Even at a time when so many think that the church is dead and lifeless, I think we can help nurture the future.



John the Baptist and those like him, are signs of hope to me, like shoots emerging from a old and dead log. Someday, not yet, but someday, they will be tall and mighty, (slide) like a towering tree, but for now they are rare and vulnerable and easily overlooked. But don't miss them. They are the new thing that God is doing, the new possibility for a just and sustainable future that is growing in the wilderness of our own time.



Let us pray: Open us, we pray, O God, to the new thing that you are doing in our midst, to the tender shoots that are easily overlooked and easily dismissed. Help us to resist the seductions of empire thinking and nurture a deep peace in our hearts, our minds, our communities, and our world. Amen.