

*Occupy ... & Sing!*

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

December 11, 2011

This service also included Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* offered by the All Souls Camerata

Okay. It is an unlikely story: a young, unmarried woman is visited by an angel who proposes that she give birth to the son of God. "Do not be afraid," he says to her. Sure.

But how about that Mary!? She wonders about this bewildering visitation, considers the prospect and then agrees. "Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word." Then she does what anyone would do. She makes haste to share this news. Elizabeth is also with child and when Mary arrives on her doorstep, Elizabeth feels that child within her leap for joy. Something important is emerging; Elizabeth feels it and says so to Mary. And Mary responds:

*Luke 1:39-55 (NRSV)*

*My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

It is as unlikely a story as it is compelling. Most compelling stories are unlikely, after all.

Here's the nut of this amazing story. At this point in time, the Jews, as oppressed as ever, are still waiting for the Messiah. The prophecies are dramatic and quite violent, in fact. If you were at Advent vespers you heard this language in the lyrics of the Mendelssohn piece offered by the choir. Talk of armies laying down the oppressors etc. And then several Biblical chapters later who does this God send to save the world from itself: a baby. *A baby*, for goodness sake. And the faithful vessel for this miracle is a most unlikely woman; not a queen, not even a princess but an unmarried woman, a regular girl who is just as surprised as the rest of us are that she is the chosen one. An unlikely story.

Which brings us to another unlikely story: the Occupy movement. Oh yes it does.

My friend Tom Schade – minister to First Unitarian in Worcester – has an idea about the *Magnificat*. He points out that at the start Mary is focused on this thing that is happening to her. This task, so amazing. At first, she is trying to wrap her brain around it. Well, sure. But

then her thoughts turn outward. Her vision is projected from generation to generation as she reminds us of God's power to scatter the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. She imagines that the powerful will be brought from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. She imagines that through this miraculous event, the hungry will be filled – finally – with good things and yes, that the rich will be sent away empty. She focuses on what may come of her offering, this child.

And it is good.

And the world changed. Mary, a regular girl, has a sense that her actions would bring about radical change that would benefit generations to come.

And so is our world is changing. And it is being changed by regular boys and girls, young women and men, the middle aged and elders.

The rumblings began in Tunisia last spring. You all know what happened in what has been named the "Arab spring." Is it no wonder that some of that fervor would travel over oceans ... really over Twitter and Facebook ... and nestle in the hearts of a bunch of state workers in Madison, WI? And grow a movement seeded at Wall Street and spreading to cities – large and small – throughout the country and right down the street. We are witnessing the 21 century's first mass movement in which the lowly – regular folks – are crying out for economic justice. Born in the age of swift communication, schooled in the potential of non-violent resistance, it is a movement that is consciously leader-less but rather leader-full. One observer wisely noted that this movement is not like a book with a pat beginning, middle, and end. Rather, it is like the Internet. Networked & vast. And that is driving the media ... politicians ... and Wall Street ... crazy. "What is it all about?" they ask.

They all know what it's about. We all know what it's about. We know as sure as Mary knew all the ways that her God would come to the aid of the marginalized. We know. All talk that goes something like, "What do they want?" "They're all over the place." "If only they would focus." is at best disingenuous. Here's what Senator Bernie Sanders, an Independent from Vermont said in a recent Senate Budget Committee hearing:

This country does in fact have a serious deficit problem. But the reality is that the deficit was caused by two wars — unpaid for. It was caused by huge tax breaks for the wealthiest people in this country. It was caused by a recession as result of the greed, recklessness and illegal behavior on Wall Street. And if those are the causes of the deficit, I will be damned if we're going to balance the budget on backs of the elderly, the sick, the children, and the poor. That's wrong."

Basically, that's what it's about. To Senator Sanders I say, Amen.

We are feeling our power as a collective force for the first time in a long time. One of my favorite protest signs: "The 99% has been sleeping. We're awake now."

And protesting non-violently. And this is the second point I'd like to consider this morning.

You may have seen the video of non-violent protesters being doused with pepper spray by police officers at the University of CA (UC) at Davis. Horrifying. But there is another video making the rounds. It is a video of that University's Chancellor leaving her office in the wake of the violence. She is accompanied by a University Chaplain named Kristin Stoneking. That chaplain wrote about what transpired on her blog. She explained that the Chancellor and a few other administrators felt like they were in danger and were afraid to leave the office for fear that the student protestors would lash out at them. They were afraid despite assurances of a peaceful departure. The chaplain was called. With the administrators, she watched the videos of the students being pepper sprayed. She talked with them and ultimately, accompanied the Chancellor from the building to her car. Students agreed to sit in silence as the chancellor walked through the crowd with the chaplain by her side. It is the most profound footage that I've ever seen.

In the aftermath, Reverend Stoneking wrote the following on her blog:

*Why did I walk the Chancellor to her car? Because I believe in the humanity of all persons. Because I believe that people should be assisted when they are afraid. Because I believe that in showing compassion we embrace a nonviolent way of life that emanates to those whom we refuse to see as enemies and in turn leads to the change that we all seek.*

*The Chancellor was not trapped ... tonight, but, in a larger sense, we are all in danger of being trapped. We are trapped when we assent to a culture that for decades, and particularly since 9/11, has allowed law enforcement to have more and more power which has moved us into an era of hypercriminalization. We are trapped when we envision no path to reconciliation. And we are trapped when we forget our own power. The students at UC Davis are to be commended for resisting that entrapment, using their own power nonviolently. I pray that the Chancellor will remember her own considerable power in making change on our campus, and in seeking healing and reconciliation.*

And that's what it's all about. As amazing as this movement is for the values it represents, that the protestors have been committed to non-violence from the start is as significant.

And for the second week in a row, I'm asking what how we are inserting ourselves into this issue. As individuals and as a congregation. One of our Clara Barton District staff, Meck Groot, writes in this month's newsletter: "In a way, the greatest test faced by our congregations is the same as that faced by occupying groups: the challenge of remaining faithful to our deepest values even when doing so becomes bitterly difficult."

We are being invited to occupy our faith.  
To Occupy the Church.  
To Occupy our hearts & minds.

May we be prepared to step up to the task.

May it be so.

Amen.