

Luke 1: 67, 76-80; Luke 3: 1-6

The Raging Grannies are activist organizations in many towns and cities across Canada, the United States and other countries. They are social justice activists, all women who are old enough to be grandmothers, who dress up in clothes that mock stereotypes of older women, and sing songs at protests. Their goal is to create a more humane, just and non-violent world for their grandchildren and all the world's people. Spoofing the granny image of a century ago they wear aprons, shawls, feathers and flowered hats, while singing humorous songs targeting their concerns.

The Raging Grannies emerged in the 1980's to bring attention to pressing peace, justice and environmental issues. Of course we have our own Montreal chapter located in the West Island and predominately made up of churchgoers. Last Saturday night, after being inspired by the Spirit filled musical show East Meets West, arranged and performed by Union Church Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Sheila Laursen a member of the Raging Grannies, arrived home and pulled out a just tweaked song form the Grannies repertoire. Inspired by the Paris Terror attacks and upset by the politicking around settling Syrian Refugees in North America, Rebecca Alwin of Madison, Wisconsin tweaked an earlier version that was more American focussed. Soon the revised version was circulating on the web and found its way into Vicki's inbox. She shared it with me. The song, *Oh, Fearful Ones*, points to the fear factor and challenges the many fearful voices resisting a compassionate response. For the Raging Grannies fearfulness is not part of the solution.

Fearfulness is also alive and well in our gospel lesson. When John the Baptist talks about **repentance**, he is really talking about the **fear factor**. He is saying, **“God is coming into our midst and we have to wake up and stop fearing what is going on. We have to be part of the solution.”**

John the Baptist makes this challenge to the religious rank and file, the serious folk who are coming to him from all over Judea and even Galilee. They are living in dangerous, fearful times. Under the State Sponsored Terror of Roman occupation for the past thirty years things are getting so bad, that folk **fear** things can't be fixed. Only a cataclysmic, divine intervention can make things right again. Only an avenging **God** can overcome the Roman occupiers. John the Baptist is a leading figure in this apocalyptic mindset. So, why is it taking so long for **God** to act?

The reason according to John is the people's sinfulness. So they have come out to Jordan to participate in **John's** symbolic re-enactment of the exodus from slavery

in Egypt and entry into the Promised Land. The people come out into the desert east of Jordan. They turn west and pass through the river and as the water washes their bodies, repentance washes their souls. They emerge into the Promised Land as a newly purified people. Now, **God** will surely act to clean up the mess of the world. **God** will have no reason to delay any longer. **God's** avenging advent should be any day now!

“Wake up.” He says. **“Look around. Turn from the distortions of your fears. Straighten the path within. Smooth out the unsettled situations. Level the rough roadbed. Get with the program, God is coming soon.”**

Now, what kind of hope is this?

Hope is an avenging, violent act of **God** that somehow spares the Judeans and wipes out all the occupiers is a dangerous hope at best.

What we see here is a religious / political movement that looks back to a golden time when the world seemed to work. It insists that it will still work if everyone conforms to the old pattern and enough people re-enacted the way it was before.

Fear is a powerful motivator and the good old days seem pretty good to those caught in a web of political intrigue, religious extremism and social insecurity. Sounds a lot like the fears and violent solutions surrounding us today. Many people today are caught up in such a fearful mindset. They sincerely love **God** and their families; they long for the good old days and just want the best for their communities and the future. Yet, fear filled religion tainted with political ambitions doesn't remain compassionate for long. John's harsh judgement upon the people who come out to him certainly points to this problem. The problem is fear filled solutions seek to be rigidly enforced. When we are caught up in fear, we want one solution and we want it now.

Jesus quickly moves away from John's program. He goes further into the wilderness and re-emerges far away in Galilee. He doesn't experience a no-hope-now, avenging **God** coming on the clouds, rather he experience a compassionate **God** connecting and blessing all life.

Jesus realizes that **God** is already here, already present.

Jesus realizes that **God's** compassion refuses to destroy human life.

Jesus realizes that **God** only works with us as we are willing to join in the solution. What appears to be a delay, says Jesus, is simply **God** waiting for us while we are waiting for **God**.

Jesus realizes that **God** is among us as **Hope-in-action**.

So the compassionate hope **Jesus** offers goes like this;

Hope-in-action is participating with a **God** who doesn't destroy people.

Hope-in-action recognizes **God** expects us to do the very transformational life sustaining things we expect **God** to do for us.

Hope-in-action only works with us, because it must by definition become our actions.

You see, **Hope-in-action** is helping others to help themselves, to help others to help themselves, to help others to help themselves, to help others to help themselves...

This is the kind of hope – a fearless hope that prepares us for Advent.

This is the kind of hope that empowers us,

to turn from the distortions of our fears:

To straighten the path within:

To smooth out the unsettling situations

and level the rough roadbeds for God is already here.

The Application for Advent

Let's stop being fearful ones and act as hopeful ones this Advent.

To help us, let's sing the Raging Grannies song, *Oh, Fearful Ones*.

Margaret and I have tweaked it a little more to fit the meter. The first two verses are to an Advent tune. The last four verses are to the Raging Grannies tune choice Oh, Christmas Tree. Amen.

Oh Fearful Ones

Tune: Winchester New / Oh Christmas Tree

Lyrics: Rebecca Alwin, Raging Grannies of Madison, Wisconsin
as altered by Sheila Laursen, Raging Grannies of Montreal, Quebec.

Oh, Fearful Ones, please hear us now,
to sing for peace, our constant vow.
We grieve for Paris and Beirut
So calls to war we must dispute.

Now Paris lives defiantly
despite the awful killing spree.
ISIS wants war, on fear they thrive
Their lust for war we must deprive.

Oh, Fearful Ones, we're not naïve,
We've watched what wars cannot achieve.
They don't bring peace, prosperity,
For that you need diplomacy.

You cannot bomb your way to peace,
For killing makes more enemies.
Reach out to help, disarm their hate,
Their fatal view we must abate.

Oh, Fearful Ones, show courage please
To help the desperate refugees.
They've lost so much, they've had to flee,
Do not ignore humanity.

Compassion brings out all our best
For when we help then we are blessed.
So show the world our care is great,
With helping hands, don't hesitate.