

June 17, 2018
National Aboriginal Day
Ezekiel 17:22-24
“Sacred Stories”
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St. Andrews United Church, Bayfield

Ezekiel 17:22-24 Good News Translation

*This is what the Sovereign Lord says:
“I will take the top of a tall cedar and break off a tender sprout;
I will plant it on a high mountain, on Israel's highest mountain.
It will grow branches and bear seed and become a magnificent cedar.
Birds of every kind will live there and find shelter in its shade.
All the trees in the land will know that I am the Lord.
I cut down the tall trees and make small trees grow tall.
I wither up the green trees and make the dry trees become green.
I, the Lord, have spoken. I will do what I have said I would do.”*

The primal symbol of the circle, has special significance to many different cultures and traditions.... including Indigenous peoples – to whom it may represent a variety of things.

The circle might signify wholeness – unity and connectedness; It might be a sign of continuous movement and balance;
When gathered in a circle for a meeting or discussion – a circle suggests equality – with no one person in a higher position than another.

In the natural world it might correspond to the cycles of the seasons, or represent the eternal circle of life.

In many First Nations cultures, the hoop dance is a showy ritual in which solo dancers use a dozen or more hoops to tell a sacred story.

And in most Indigenous traditions, we find the circle depicting a medicine wheel - divided into four quadrants – each with a different colour – typically black, white, red and yellow – and each quadrant associated with different directions, symbols or characteristics.

There is mystery, power and sacred meaning associated with the circle.

Although readings from the prophet Ezekiel don't often appear in our lectionary cycle – one of the early central images in this book, is also the circle.

Ezekiel dreams an elaborate vision with fantastical mythological creatures and the mystical image of ‘a wheel within a wheel’ – gyrating in all four directions. The rims of the wheels are described as full of eyes that see everything – and as they move, these strange wheels rise and fall like living creatures.

It's understandable that Ezekiel had disturbing nightmares. He lived during turbulent times.

It was about 600 BCE, and the city of Judah had been ravaged and destroyed – its surviving inhabitants all sent to exile in Babylon.

The holy temple was sacked and demolished – the people, devastated as they were forced to leave behind their homes, their language, their culture – and relocate to a foreign country.

The Prophet Ezekiel writes during a bleak time of turmoil – addressing the grim reality of his people who are disenfranchised, and desperate.

The book of Ezekiel is a story of invasion, forcible removal and crushing defeat. It recounts the trials and tribulations of a group of people whose land, religion and sacred objects are laid waste by a rampaging army.

It's the story of a people who become subjected – left without voice or power; repeatedly trampled and overturned by the strong and mighty.

It's not necessarily a story that 'we' can relate to.

Here in our little bubble of Bayfield, our lives are pretty good. Safe and secure, for the most part, our biggest worry is whether or not we'll get any more rain this week.

We're generally not concerned with being invaded or sent off into exile.

As second or third, even fourth or fifth generation Canadians of primarily European descent – our roots run deep in this land....and in a democracy where we all have the right to vote, we like to think our voices are heard.

We have the right to gather freely for worship – we speak a common language – and we try to be polite to one another.

In our comfortable modern-day lives, where we have the unmerited luxury of affluence, entitlement and privilege.... hearing God's powerful promises of hope and restoration as proclaimed by Ezekiel – perhaps does not resonate much with us quite so much.

But on this day of honouring and acknowledging Indigenous peoples with whom we share these lands, let's imagine hearing this story from Ezekiel, based on their background and experiences.

This story of invasion, forcible removal and crushing defeat. The trials and tribulations of this group of people whose land, religion and sacred objects are laid waste by rampaging invaders.

The story of a people who become subjected – left without voice or power; repeatedly trampled and overturned by the strong and mighty who have taken over their homeland.

In this story of colonization and exile, if the Indigenous peoples are aligned with the Judeans, where does that leave us? With the conquering Babylonians?

With the settlers and descendents of those who colonized this country – pushing its native peoples to the sidelines – forcing them to give up their traditional lifestyles and change their native ways? Sending them into exile?

And what does ‘exile’ look like to Canada’s Indigenous people?

It looks like disproportionate numbers of them in our prison populations.

It looks like lower levels of education – and higher levels of child poverty.

It looks like living in communities where drinking water is unsafe, the cost of fresh food is exorbitant and housing is sub-standard.

Where addictions and suicides are rampant.

Cultural identity is suppressed.

Where meaning, purpose and hope, are scarce.

What do these people hear in the words of Ezekiel’s prophecy, to a people suffering in exile?

How do they hear the word of hope spoken to the Judeans?

The great reversals, promised by God, of the large being brought down, and the small uplifted?

The tender words spoken by a God who will plant sprouts that will thrive and flourish into trees that will provide shelter for all birds, all creatures, all peoples?

In recent years there has been much needed focus on Canada’s Indigenous women and children. But statistically, Indigenous men in this country, remain the most socially excluded population.

Where once there were male ‘elders’ who played integral roles in shaping and preparing young boys for manhood, and extended family systems that supported and modeled healthy relationships, now there are the lingering multi-generational effects of colonial policies and systems that broke up families and destroyed their society.

The lasting impact of residential schools continues to reverberate through their communities – revealed in negative patterns of parenting, and a lack of role models.

Indigenous men have high rates of incarceration, substance abuse and domestic violence.

They struggle to find their place and identity, and with so many coming from broken families, they particularly struggle to define themselves as ‘dads.’

First Nations, Inuit and Metis fathers have been described, in the words of Grand Chief Ed John, of the BC First Nations Summit, as “one of the greatest untapped resources in the lives of Aboriginal children.”

How to break these multi-generational patterns of abandonment and abuse?

How to get these fathers more involved in the lives of their children?

How to have these men, and their families, return from exile?

Well, neither with the Judeans, nor with Indigenous communities, does God swoop in as a superhero and rescue those in exile.

But God does plant seeds.

And like the tiny sprig broken from the top of the cedar tree, like the scattered seeds of the mustard plant – programs and support groups are sprouting.

The First Nations Health Authority has begun to provide resources and skills training aimed at helping young Aboriginal fathers to succeed. They have published guidebooks with titles like 'Fatherhood is Forever' and 'Strengthening the Circle of Care' encouraging fathers to become more involved in the lives of their children.

Of course gearing written publications to a target market with high levels of illiteracy, poses a particular challenge, but it's a start.

Other initiatives include all male support circles where cultural identity is affirmed and there is ample space for expressing anger and healing.

Experiencing the love and encouragement of their own community is empowering to these young men – who are able to reconnect to their tradition, reclaim their identity and finally begin to move beyond the long-lasting effects of cultural exile.

Although the seeds may be small, God has promised, they will flourish, to become magnificent places of shelter and rest.

And so what seeds has God planted in us? The colonizers – the privileged ones – so often on the side of the oppressor rather than the oppressed?
What small changes might sprout forth in our hearts?

Like God, neither are we meant to be superheros – swooping in to rescue and make amends.

Which is why Indigenous communities must have their own leaders, and governance and be empowered to make decisions for their own wellbeing.

But perhaps our role, is to listen, and to learn.

To acknowledge their pain and suffering, and our part in it.
To hear their stories, and respect their traditions.
To support their initiatives and contribute to their projects.

Maybe this means reading a book by an Aboriginal author.
Watching a film with a First Nations perspective.
Paying attention to stories in the news about Indigenous issues –
Broadening our understanding and re-building our relationships.
Because when God's people do not live in harmony, we are all in exile!

Honouring National Indigenous People Day might be a start.

May the seeds be sown within us all, to bring reconciliation and wholeness to our broken circle.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Magnificent Creator God;

We give thanks for this land upon which we live – for its rich resources that sustain us, and for all peoples who have been faithful stewards of it through the ages.

We give thanks for different expressions of spirituality – and the variety of ways to proclaim our praise and gratitude.

From drum and dance, to sweetgrass and prayer –

We give thanks for your sacred wisdom – passed down through parable and story and song.

And we give thanks for the seeds planted – as ideas, as inspiration, as hope.

On this day of celebrating Indigenous peoples, we pause to honour their unique contributions to our shared history.

We acknowledge their struggles – and our part in being complicit – whether through the actions of our ancestors, or our own inactions.

Help us to let go of pre-conceptions and mis-conceptions that lead to stereotypes, judgments and assumptions about our Native brothers and sisters.

Open our hearts to listening and learning – to sharing wisdom and story and finding our place together on this sacred journey we share.

Help us to walk alongside one another in peace;

To work together towards reconciliation;

And to share in the universal healing your pour out upon all peoples.

As we also celebrate Father's today – we give thanks for all those who have been sources of strength and support in our lives. For the tender love shown by fathers to their children – and the dedication of fathers to their partners and families.

We pray for young Aboriginal men, and all those who struggle in their role of father;

May they find the role models and resources that will inspire them to be kind, loving and respectful – and the humility to recognize the great influence they can exert on young lives.

We also pray for all those in exile – whether physical, cultural or emotional – may your shelter and embrace provide the hope they need to carry on, and find new meanings for 'home'.

For all those who are suffering – especially due to oppression – or political policies and regimes that instill fear and destruction –

And for those whose suffering is of a personal nature – from pain of illness or grief...or internal torment....

In silence, we uplift these concerns that weigh on our hearts....

God of Mystery – you hold our prayers in your heart – and you transform our lives so that we may be agents of change and action in answer to the prayers of others....

We raise our voices in unison with faithful disciples through the ages who have prayed to you as a loving and guiding Parent, as our father who art in heaven.....