

Reconciliation in the waters

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Mark 1:1-11

The basic story line of the birth of Jesus has Jesus being born in a stable in Bethlehem to poor parents, and almost immediately becoming a refugee in Egypt. Right after he is born Jesus is fleeing for his life as a refugee. Here is a thought for all Christians who are hesitant about, or resistant to, welcoming refugees who are fleeing for their lives.

What if – what if Egypt had had a border patrol or had built a wall or had met Joseph and Mary and Jesus with chariots and spears drawn. What if Egypt had said “no” to Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus, and sent them back into the cruel arms of King Herod? Would Jesus even have survived? Would there even be any “Christians” today?

What if – what if the Canadian government had said “no” to us Russian Mennonites in the 1920’s – as they did to that Jewish ship in the 1940’s. We were, after all, German speaking – an enemy people, and we were from a Communist country, another enemy people. And we were Mennonites, a strange – and pacifist – sect of Christians. Would any of us who have a Russian Mennonite background even be here today?

What if – what if the indigenous peoples of North America – now thinking particularly of Canada – had said “no” to us settler peoples, had not allowed us in. But how could they have known that we “whites” wouldn’t be satisfied with co-existence and partnership but would be hell bent on control and domination. Would any of us whites even be here now if our earliest peoples had said “no” to us?

I know that our overall theme this Advent has to do with “A stable Place”, and our particular theme for today, the second Sunday of Advent is “Reconciliation in the Waters”. And then there is another huge theme – “Reconciliation between indigenous and settler peoples”. And then there is

something about “stones” yet. My mind is swirling with waves of images – waves which can’t be contained in any sermon structure I can figure out.

So, let me start with stories and images, and see if this goes anywhere at all.

Water

I start with water. I grew up on an irrigation farm in Rosemary, Alberta. Water was our life-line. We got our irrigation water from the Bassano Dam. It fed water to the rather massive Eastern Irrigation region, of which Rosemary is a small part. The soil there is excellent. But the region is semi-arid. Without water there would be no significant farming there. Water was our life-line.

The other thing about Rosemary was it’s mix of peoples and religions. There is a Mormon temple- though it wouldn’t really qualify as a temple - a Buddhist temple, and a Mennonite Church, in Rosemary. That’s it. What we had in common was that we were all refugees. The Mormons had fled persecution south of our border. The Japanese Buddhists had been dispossessed by Canada and kept in camps in the mountains until released. We Mennonites were refugees fleeing from persecution in Russia.

There in Rosemary we had a shared history of persecution and fleeing. There we became friends and there we all relied on water – water from the Bassano Dam. I’ll come back to this.

Our personal story

Lydia and I had no idea what we were getting into. We had no idea what God was getting us into. We just wanted a daughter. We already had two sons. So, we decided to apply for adoption – for a daughter. That is when a beautiful black-haired indigenous girl came into our family – and our lives were forever changed -enriched- but also made far more complicated. We were very thankful – and very naive. Only much later did we hear the term “The sixties scoop” applied to what we were a part of.

As it happened, when this daughter was 19 years old, she discovered, with our help, her place of origin and her family of origin. She came from the Siksika nation of Blackfoot peoples. Her nation was located just west of Bassano, relatively close to Rosemary. And then we learned that the Canadian Pacific Railway, which sold the land to all of us immigrant farmers – sold it at a good price because of irrigation – had build the Bassano Dam, source of this water, on Siksika nation land without their permission. It really was an illegal dam, built on stolen land. Life giving water. But coming from land stolen – stolen from land which belonged to our daughter's people (More recently there has been a settlement between the Alberta government and the CPR and the Blackfoot nation).

Many, many, many stories later, we are invited into a sweat lodge ceremony on Sagamok First Nation's land – on Ojibway land here in Ontario. Our Blackfoot daughter was marrying an Ojibway man. For the second time. They had already been married here in TUMC earlier. First a Christian and then an indigenous wedding.

Fred's parents – Fred was our new son-in-law – welcomed and hosted us so warmly. There is a story here too. Fred's parents (as were Kristen's parents) were both badly wounded and damaged by their experience in the residential school system, one run by the church – the Catholic church. They were searching for healing - in native spirituality. They had good reason to be suspicious of us Christians.

And yet they totally affirmed and celebrated the Christian wedding here at TUMC, and now invited us into their space, their nation, their spirituality to celebrate marriage all over again. And this celebration started with a sweat lodge ceremony.

The lodge was built that morning. It is pitch dark in there. There is a fire pit outside the lodge, fire hot, large stones heated through and through. Rocks. That's one of our themes, isn't it? We did a rock ceremony this morning. Before these hot rocks were brought into our sweat lodge, we are given some advice. "Cover your nose and mouth so they won't be damaged by the heat. Feel free to leave if you have to."

We gather inside the lodge. A large bowl of blueberries is passed around- the body needs sustenance to endure the heat. But there is one more piece to our preparation before the hot stones are brought in. We have a prayer meeting – a good old fashion Mennonite-like prayer meeting. The elder asks for prayer requests – all kind of requests pour out – something like our prayer time here. The elder prays for each request – sometimes in Ojibway, sometimes in English.

Then its time for hot stones – it is after all a “sweat lodge”. About half the stones are brought into the fire pit at the center of the lodge. Water is poured on them (see, we are back to our water theme). I start to sweat profusely. It is unbelievably hot in there. And then – and then another prayer meeting breaks out. Everyone is praying at once, out loud, in different languages, almost like Pentecost. And I find it so easy, so natural, to add my own prayers to that noise of joyous assembly.

Fifteen minutes pass. The flap opens. The elder suggests that if we have had enough heat, we could leave, and that would be fully acceptable. Some of us whites leave. I stay. (Lydia, though, has had enough). The rest of the hot stones are brought in and added to the fire pit. The flap closes. The water is splashed on them. And now it’s even hotter than before. The prayers resume, as does the even more profuse sweating.

I feel a bit light headed, cleansed, thankful that I am there, amazed at the hospitality and inclusion offered. Maybe we caught at least a small glimpse of “reconciliation in the waters”. And that is the big theme for us this morning. Reconciliation in the waters. There on the solid bed-rock of the Canadian Shield, amidst abundant lakes and rivers, we “whites” are welcomed into healing and reconciliation.

There is a small river just yards away from the sweat lodge. We jump in to cool off. Now we are ready for the feast of moose and fish, and, yes, some Mennonite zwieback and cookies. And for a smudging ritual and an Ojibway wedding ceremony, followed by a “friendship dance”.

Our personal story is so very, very small – and yet so important to us. The history remains. Colonization. Violence. Forced assimilation. The residential

school system. The “Sixties Scoop” which we were a part of. Countless children taken out of indigenous homes in the explicitly stated motive of “taking the Indian out of the Indian”. Prejudices that run deep. Social agencies and police forces that are racist. We’re not doing very well in finding the stories of missing indigenous women.

And we realize how complicated even our own personal relationships with our larger indigenous family are – different life style, different values, different patterns of life, different way of looking at finances and money, a different meaning of time, a different sense of spirituality. Slowly we are learning.

But maybe things are changing in our Canadian context, and in our Christian context – surely too slowly – but changing none-the less. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has unleashed change. It has unleashed “repentance” (I will come back to the word repentance). It has unleashed “truth telling”. (and yet, can anything be slower than the “Grassy Narrows” mercury poison cleanup)?

Repentance. Change. That is what John the Baptist preached. He preached repentance.

Mark 1

We turn to the story of John 1 – a story told beside a very small river – the Jordan – a story about water and about repentance -and about a voice that came from God.

Mark describes John this way. “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:6). I kind of picture him with waist long tangled hair, a long, unkempt beard, fiery eyes, and a total inability to make small talk.

This John, named by Mark as “John the baptizer”, proclaimed a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Mark uses the Greek word “metanoa” here. It means “to change directions – to turn around. You are going in one direction and you need to turn around and go in the opposite direction.

You need to turn around so that you can face God's direction and find your true home there.

It is the Gospel writer Luke who fleshes out some practical expressions of what turning around might look like. The crowd asks John "What shall we then do"? (Luke 3) Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise". And then he tells tax collectors to collect only what is required (not more for their own pocket), and he tells soldiers not to extort money with threats.

Maybe we should all be asking what repentance means for us as a society, and as a church, and as individuals in terms of our relationship with first nation's peoples. What kind of "turning" would it mean for us?

Back to Mark 1. Jesus comes to John to be baptized. Why? Why would Jesus ask to be baptized by John who proclaimed a baptism for the repentance of sins? Did Jesus too need to "repent" that is, to change directions? Was Jesus simply identifying with his people – or identifying with all humans in their humanness?

However we might understand the reason for Jesus requesting baptism, there is a part of this story which I think was crucial for Jesus – and I think for all of us. That story line is this: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased",

I think Jesus needed to hear this voice from God – "You are my beloved". It was this voice which comforted and strengthened Jesus through the temptations in the wilderness which immediately followed giving him the strength to resist the appeals of Satan. And it was this voice which sustained Jesus all through his ministry and crucifixion. "You are my beloved".

And this is the voice we need to hear over and over again – whether baptised or not. "You are my beloved", says God. That is our "stable place". (See, I did get to our overall theme.) Our stable place for everything we are and everything we do is this voice. We are loved by God. Period. We can't earn this

love. And neither can we run away from it. But we can live into it, and we can live out of it.

Our stable place is not some edifice of life which we build – build with our hard work, with our education, with our accomplishments. It is a safe place provided by God – provided for Joseph and Mary and Jesus – and for us. It is a safe place for each of us where we discover that we are loved – profoundly loved by God.

“You are my beloved child, my beloved daughter, my beloved son. With you I am well pleased. The water of baptism is the sign of this love.

Reconciliation in the waters. The stolen waters of irrigation needed repentance and restitution and reconciliation – which did eventually happen. The waters of a sweat lodge brought healing to my spirit and reconciliation with a larger family and people. The waters of baptism pour out love and blessing from God.

There is reconciliation in the waters. Let’s just plunge into these waters. They are life-giving. They tell us that God loves us, and that we can love each other. And that is enough.