

Thursday in the Third Week of Advent: December 17, 2020

An angel appears to Mary and Joseph, informing these parents that it is safe to end their days as refugees in Egypt with their child and return to the Promised Land. Herod the Great had died. The death and destruction which he had rained down on his people died with him. His son Archelaus had been crowned king and sought better relationships with the peoples from Samaria to the north, Judea around Jerusalem, and Edom to the south. Mary and Joseph journey a few days by foot past the centre of political and economic power towards the north. Mary and Joseph along with their child settle in a small town beside the sea of Galilee. After a few years hiding from a megalomaniac, Mary is able to re-connect with her extended family, including her older relative Elizabeth. Mary's oldest son now has opportunity meet his cousin John in person.

Read Matthew 3:1-12. What catches my attention in this gospel reading?

Crowds go out into the wilderness to listen to John the Baptizer. John lives a simple life, full of humility. He knows how to live off the land, eating what Creator provides in abundance in the wilderness. Locusts survive the heat with little need for water so these creatures are plentiful. Bees find blossoms in this arid landscape and make hives of wild honey. Camel hair is available though rough and uncomfortable next to the skin. In his meditative wanderings in the desert, John also finds where and when running water trickles through rock and soil. John was raised in a devout family, his parents and ancestors knowing Creator and Great Spirit intimately and walking devotedly these ways. As in every generation who experiences the brutality of poverty and are subject to outbursts of violence, the crowds seek hope. The wealthy continue to accumulate great riches. Most in the Promised Land in John's generation struggle to find enough food to eat and safe places to live. The crowds long for an end to poverty, injustice, violence, and affliction. With very limited power over the circumstances and outcomes of their lives, the crowds search for the means to be in right relationship with Creator and Great Spirit whose authority they respect. Creator and Great Spirit have given John words to speak and people leave Jerusalem, their towns, their communities scattered in the countryside to listen to what John has to say. John calls each person and whole communities to identify whatever blocks their relationship with Creator and Great Spirit, confess these harmful patterns of behaviours, be cleansed by the clean waters of the wilderness, and walk forward in ways which demonstrate the love and generosity of Creator and Great Spirit.

One of the features of the gospel of Matthew is the use of direct language. In the wilderness, venomous snakes are treated with respect. Without anti-venom treatments, snakebite is often deadly. John baptizes those among the crowds who want to change their lives and live more constructively. John is astounded when the religious leaders, those who are undeterred in using their political authority for their own gains, and the wealthy landowners come out to be baptized too. John speaks plainly to them, **"You brood of vipers!!" Matthew 3:7.** John tells everyone that these snakes seek to protect their interests. These venomous people seek to cover all of the possibilities as history unravels and the end of time is expected to happen. Being blessed with wealth and power, the Pharisees and Sadducees want

to be among those who are welcomed into a new creation without doing the work to change their lives and demonstrating the fruits of true repentance.

John baptizes those who seek to change their lives from the inside outwards, demonstrating the same love and generosity of Creator and Great Spirit in their personal relationships and as members of caring communities. John objects to those who slither down to the water and expect that this water will only dampen their dry snakeskins. A true descendant of Abraham and Sarah trusts wholly in Creator and Great Spirit to provide a way forward in life.

John lives in the ways of the prophet Isaiah crying in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the Human One sent by Creator and Great Spirit. With every ounce of energy, John proclaims that in comparison to this Human Being, he is not worthy to tie the laces of the sandals of this unique and special person.

Reread Matthew 3:1-12. What is God saying to us?

Like John the Baptizer who prepared the way for the Human One sent by Creator and Great Spirit to arrive in his generation, you and I also prepare the way for the second coming of the Human One who lived, died, and rose from the grave to bring new life to all.

In this past week, **APTNI infocus** interviewed the Chief Commissioner Murray Sinclair as well as Commissioners Wilton Littlechild and Marie Wilson at five years after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Report on December 15, 2015. The TRC spent six years travelling from coast to coast to coast listening to the experiences of residential school survivors. The role of these Commissioners was to bear witness to what happened and to develop 94 Calls to Action to be implemented in bringing about reconciliation between non-Indigenous who came to these new found lands and the Indigenous Peoples who had lived here for thousands of years. Over 150,000 children and youth attended church operated and federally funded over a period of about 150 years. Chief Commissioner Sinclair noted that the truth about what happened in residential schools needed to be heard and shared for all to know. Senator Sinclair also pointed out that changes would take time to take root and bear fruit in relationships between people as well as in the policies and practices of every level of government. In the future, a national council of reconciliation as well as memorials to the survivors of residential schools will play important roles in moving forward in implementing the Calls for Action in the future. Commissioner Littlechild survived every form of abuse in three residential schools so listening to residential school survivors was difficult for him. Commissioner Littlechild spoke about the development of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the decade prior to being published in 1976 and the need for the federal government to pass legislation for Canada to implement these fundamental rights for all human beings. Commissioner Littlechild noted that the stipulation that Indigenous Peoples needed to give informed and prior consent to the use of resources from the land and waters was the framework for non-Indigenous Settlers and Indigenous Peoples to work together in the care of Mother Earth for generations to come. Commissioner Wilson spoke about how her knowledge about what happened in residential schools increased and her respect of those who survived grew. Commissioner Wilson noted that further work needed to be done to identify the children and

youth who died while attending residential schools and honour them. Commissioner Wilson also expressed concern for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the need for governments to follow up with the recommendations made by the Report of this Commission too. Some residential school survivors also spoke and asked question, expressing appreciation for the efforts of the Commissioners in listening and formulating the Calls for Action. As Commissioner Wilson reminded viewers, "Reconciliation belongs to each and every one of us as individuals, as governments, and as citizens."

Reread Matthew 3:1-12. What is God calling us to be and do?

Listen to students and teachers about what they are learning about the history of relationships between non-Indigenous Settlers and Indigenous Peoples from coast to coast to coast. Become a voice calling in the wilderness to prepare the way ahead in addressing our heritage of cultural genocide and spiritual harm with Indigenous Peoples. Advocate for the passage of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Be strategic in ways to provide tangible support for Indigenous Peoples in making a future for themselves and their descendants.

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