

Thursday in the Second Week of Easter: April 15, 2021

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus grows up with his mother Mary and her husband Joseph with younger siblings, benefitting from their devotion and the stability of living in a small town of Nazareth. However, Jesus also demonstrates a knowledge of the Source of All Life and Love as well as wisdom far beyond his years in living according to this knowledge.

Read Luke 3:1-14. What catches my attention in this gospel passage?

The life of Jesus from Nazareth is identified at a specific time in history and a particular location on this planet. Out in the wilderness near the River Jordan, one of the Hebrew People is given words to speak by Creator and Great Spirit bringing good news to Human Beings in every part of the world. John the son of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth teaches those with ears to hear and eyes to see how to identify how evil emerges from thoughts and behaviours so that Human Beings can find ways to speak words and demonstrate behaviours which bring life into being as the Source of All Life and Love intends. Through the waters of baptism in the River Jordan, John celebrates new life in those who seek to live day by day walking in a new direction. John gives direction to those seeking to maintain their positions of power and privilege, **“Bear fruits worthy of repentance!” Luke 3:8**. For those seeking to put an end to the harm which they caused others, John gave practical examples about how to live a new life putting the needs of others ahead our own with a sense of justice based on the generosity of Creator and Great Spirit. John tells the baptized to be generous ensuring that each and every Human Being has their basic physical needs met.

John the Baptizer is clear about the ability of the Source of All Life and Love to bring new life into this creation, transforming even stones into living beings who give witness to ongoing presence of Creator and Great Spirit.

Reread Luke 3:1-14. What is God saying to us?

In her book, **BRAIDING SWEETGRASS: INDIGENOUS WISDOM, SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, AND THE TEACHINGS OF PLANTS (Milkweed Editions Canada, 2013)**, Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts how Lake Onondaga near her home in northern New York became one of the most polluted lakes in the United States of America over a century of industrial development and the faithfulness of the Onondaga People of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in the care of their traditional territories. With an abundance in resources from the lands and waters in the watershed for Lake Onondaga as well as the construction of the Erie Canal, manufacturing entrepreneurs erected industrial complexes with smokestacks which turned the air into “a choking miasma”. Millions of tons of industrial waste were dumped into the watershed and Lake Onondaga becoming a toxic slurry at the bottom of the lake. The city of Syracuse added sewage to these waters. Wetlands and shorelines were filled with twenty metre (sixty foot) waste beds of chemical sludge. The Solvay Process was a chemical innovation which combined limestone, freshwater, and rich soil to produce soda ash, essential in glass manufacturing as well as in making detergents, pulp, and paper. Local limestone was melted in coke-fired furnaces and then salts from underground caverns were added to produce the soda ash. Other chemical plants produced

organic chemicals, dyes, and chlorine gas. Trains took products to other major industrial cities while pipes took waste in the other direction. The extraction of limestone resulted in huge open pits dotting the countryside. Freshwater was forced into the fissures in the limestone to flush out the salts below the surface of land. Creatures and plants in the wetlands were destroyed. Rainwater was absorbed into the white paste in the waste bed taking minerals to the bottom, becoming part of a drainage ditch rather than a stream. As a result, rainwater became a slaty soup known as leachate and as corrosive as lye. Waters from the headwaters and the sky can no longer be called water in passing through the wetlands and Nine Mile Creek to Lake Onondaga. The western shores of the lake have become cliffs of Solvay waste looking like the White Cliffs of Dover with erosion made gullies coming down to the shoreline. In the heat of the summer sun and the cold of the winter, this pasty surface dries and then particles are carried by the winds out over the lake. Underwater, a long white, smooth shelf extends barely submerged below the surface. Cobble-sized pieces of calcium carbonate known as oncolites are scattered on the bottom of the lake. The waste beds continue to leach tons of salts into Lake Onondaga every year. Rooted aquatic plants cannot grow in this environment. Lakes rely on submerged plants to produce oxygen through the process of photosynthesis. A host of fish, insects, amphibians, and birds depend on swaying beds of vegetation near the shoreline but in low oxygen aquatic environments a whole food chain is absent. However, floating algae thrive on the high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous fertilized by decades of municipal sewage added to the lake. Algae blooms eventually die and then sink to the bottom, further depleting the oxygen levels so the waters begin to smell like dead fish. Any fish which have survived cannot be eaten. Fifty years ago, mercury levels exceeded safe levels for fish to be consumed. Mercury continues to be trapped in the sediment at the bottom of the lake. Core samples also indicate the presence of concentrations of cadmium, barium, chromium, cobalt, lead, benzene, chlorobenzene, assorted xylenes, pesticides, and PCB. Prior to 1880, Lake Onondaga was known for an abundance of whitefish, great beaches, restaurants, and hotels. At the south end of Lake Onondaga, muddy waters enter from the Tully mudboils where silt bubbled up from underground. Oral history from Elders of the Onondaga People provides stories of clear waters flowing down Onondaga Creek until the factories ran out of wells of salt and a prominent chemical manufacturer used a solution mining to force salt out of the underground caverns in the limestone. When these caverns collapsed, groundwater came to the surface under pressure causing gushers bringing sediment down the creek to the lake. The chemical manufacturer claimed that the phenomenon was a natural feature of those headlands, refusing to take responsibility for wounding the waters flowing to Lake Onondaga.

The traditional territories of the Onondaga People stretched north from the headwaters near what is now Pennsylvania north into Canada. For thousands of years, this land was covered in woodlands and expansive fields of corn providing food, shelter, clothing, tools, and medicines for the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the waters flowing into what is known as the Finger Lakes provided safe, clean drinking water as well as fish and a host of plants for various uses. The Onondaga People as part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy reciprocated by taking on the responsibilities of caring for these lands and waters so that future generations would benefit from these resources and survive. Traditional knowledge, wisdom, their language, cultural expectations, and spiritual practices ensured success in protecting what Creator was so generously providing for each generation.

However, since most of the Onondaga People fought as allies of the English during the American Revolution, President George Washington ordered that their villages be destroyed. Within a year, a Nation of ten thousand people was reduced to a few hundred. Their traditional territories were greatly reduced as Settlers and the State of New York seized much of these lands and waters, placing the Onondaga People on a land not much bigger than the Solvay waste beds. Some Indigenous parents attempted to hide their children from Indian Agents but many children were taken to residential schools like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania, established in 1879 and closed in 1918. Use of their language was forbidden, preventing the teaching of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving and the Great Law of Peace upon which the first democracy in the world had been established. Missionaries challenged the matriarchal structure of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy in which equity had been established between males and females. Federal policies and Indian Agents established a patriarchal structure of governance on the Reserve. Longhouse ceremonies were banned by federal and state laws.

Although the Onondaga People were powerless as chemical manufacturing and resource exploitation wreaked damage on the environment, their core spiritual values and identity were never surrendered. The Onondaga People maintain that Creator continues to provide for their needs and that each and every member participates in a sacred covenant to protect the lands and waters with which Creator has entrusted them in the past and for generations to come.

In March 2005, the Onondaga Nation filed a complaint in federal court to regain title for their traditional territories in order to exercise their care-giving responsibilities for the land and waters. Other members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy also filed complaints in federal court. The Supreme Court ruled that Haudenosaunee lands were illegally taken and the Peoples were wronged over the past two hundred years. The State of New York was ordered to forge a settlement with the Haudenosaunee Peoples but little has come out of these court proceedings. The Onondaga People sought recognition for their role as stewards of the land and waters: "The Nation and its people have a unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationship to the land, which is embodied in *Gayanashagowa*, the Great Law of Peace." The purpose of the legal action was not to evict their neighbours nor to build a casino nor to obtain more property to add to their Reserve. Corporations were also listed in their court action in order to seek resolution for the degradation of these lands and waters. Unfortunately, plans have yet to be developed among all of the parties as well as state and federal environmental agencies to restore the watershed and Lake Onondaga. The Onondaga Nation insists that a full cleanup of the watershed is a significant part of the restitution needed for reconciliation to take place. Settlers established a partnership as non-Indigenous allies in this endeavour as *Neighbours of the Onondaga People*.

There are many parallels to the history and challenges of the Onondaga People north of the border in Canada too. Mercury contaminates the waters of Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows) First Nation, causing serious medical conditions and deaths over the past sixty years. In Canada, there are 105 drinking water advisories, of which 59 are in Ontario. In March 2021, Indigenous Services Canada noted that many First Nations may not have safe, clean water for years to come. The Great Lakes have been emptied of a variety of fish stocks. Waterways and shorelines have been altered so aquatic life has been radically changed. Increased carbon dioxide contributes to climate changes leading to increased temperatures, the disappearance of ice in the mountains, and significant ecological transformations in

northern territories. Much needs to be done here in this country to support Indigenous Peoples in respecting and supporting their efforts to care for the lands and waters in their respective traditional territories.

Reread Luke 3:1-14. What is God asking us to be and do?

Acknowledge the unique spiritual, cultural, and historic relationships of Indigenous Peoples to the land and waters in their traditional territories. Participate in celebrations which identity the need for each and every Human Being to be stewards of this creation so that generations in the future may also benefit from her abundance. Take action to protect land and waters suffering degradation by human actions in the past and now in the present.

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