

St James United Church



Message for June 23, 2024 Indigenous Peoples Sunday

“United and Uniting” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Sam. 17:1-8; 33-49; Mk. 4:35-41; Richard Wagamese, *Embers*, 91; Jesse Wentz, “Remembering our Future”

I was tempted to step away from the lectionary today. It's Indigenous Peoples Sunday and what do we have but a story of a storm alongside a battle scene, and a famous one at that. It didn't bode well, not if we wanted to celebrate. And to compound it, the battle is between Israelites and Philistines. I know Philistines aren't Palestinians even though they're conflated on-line, but that still impacts how we hear the story. But again it's Indigenous Peoples Sunday, so not a time to reflect on the war in Gaza. And to make matters worse because it's Indigenous Peoples Sunday I added in a reading from *Embers* by Richard Wagamese. You see my quandary.

And yet I am glad I chose to stay with the lectionary because as I wrestled with these texts, I had the good fortune to hear a talk by Jesse Wentz on “Ideas” on CBC Radio One. He's an Anishnabe writer who leads the Canada Council of the Arts, chosen in part because of his work supporting Indigenous story telling. He opened his talk on the future of Canada in 2080 with a word of hope for the apocalyptic storm we are in with conflicts and climate crises and economic inequality, pointing to how Indigenous peoples have been through an end of the world moment through colonization but are still here, and not just still here, but strong and growing stronger, reclaiming their languages, practicing ceremonies, telling traditional stories, advocating for their collective rights, and despite the apocalypse that colonisers put them through, are ready to work with non-Indigenous people in this new storm.

And this is where he shared an interesting fact I had never heard before. He shared how in his great grandparents' time, when schools were being set up, that they only sent five of their eight children to school so that some would learn English and other needed skills, while the rest would learn traditional knowledge. They even moved off reserve so they could evade the Indian agent. He explained how this was not unique to his family but happened in communities across the country, which is why ceremonies have come back, people can teach the languages, stories which carry important knowledge about living more sustainably with the land are being told again. And to top it off, they did this in preparation for now, knowing that a storm was coming and we'd collectively need both types of knowledge in order to get through it. They were listening to Wagamese' Old Woman, listening to the wisdom of Creator spoken all around us. As I listened to him it felt like they have been Jesus, asleep in the stern of the boat, waiting to be roused so that together we can restore calm to our world. The key is whether or not those of us who are settlers

will do that or keep trying to fix the problems we face with the same approaches that caused them in the first place.

It is here that our David and Goliath story offers wisdom, or more to the point, that it, alongside another biblical story offers wisdom. As Wenthe shared, stories carry a worldview, offer values by which we structure our societies. We choose what stories to tell and what parts we will highlight. The David and Goliath story is one of those with a reach beyond its nation of origin. Originally it was told by Israelite monarchs as a way to shore up power, especially as they enshrined David as a model king. Then after the nation lost independence and was subsumed into one empire after another, the people looked again to the story as they yearned for the coming of a messiah like David to stand up for them. This gave the story legs with a focus on him as a boy overcoming a giant through God's power. From there the story took on a mythic quality that shaped how the people saw themselves and those who were their "enemies". It's also had an influence beyond the Jewish people, becoming a motif in Western culture of the little guy overcoming larger power. Ironically, it even shaped how Europeans approached settling this land, feeling like David against the Goliath of the wilderness, generally blind to prior claims of Indigenous peoples in relation to the land or seeing them as part of the wild Goliath that needed to be vanquished. We sadly know the tragic consequences of settlers seeing themselves through the lens of that mythic story.

But as it goes there's an alternative biblical narrative that could have shaped a different Israelite and even global history, one I think Jesus drew from more than David overcoming Goliath. It's Leviticus 19:33-34 and reads: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. [They]...must be treated as native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." The foreigner is as much the Philistine as any Canaanite, so points to a different history than what the bible's conquest stories suggest, namely that the twelve tribes did not displace the Canaanites but lived beside them as they gradually extended into the coastal lowlands from their home in the hills. It's not a story of victory but collaboration, more like the worldview carried in Indigenous languages, stories and ceremony. Can you imagine if that had taken on mythic status rather than that of David overcoming Goliath? How might that have shaped European expansion in the age of discovery? Would we have had colonialism at all? What kind of Canada might we now live in? We'll never know but can choose this story for our future.

That is the future I pray that we will embrace, choosing new stories to favour rather than the ones like David and Goliath that put us in the midst of the storm we are living through. All we need to do is turn to our boat companion, roused from sleep and ready to share the knowledge that they held on to at great cost. Together we can be attentive to the way of Old Woman, to what God is saying not just through one group, or even all humans, but teaching through all of creation, a way that will bring calm to our world again. I pray that we do just that, hearts open to the knowledge of First Peoples, told alongside the collaborative stories that we find in sacred scripture. Drawing on both types of knowledge we will find a way out of the storm. May it be so. Amen.