

"On the Edge of the Wilderness": An Ash Wednesday Homily, by Jennifer Henry

Note: We have also received many requests for this amazing sermon, given at the Ash Wednesday worship service of the Festival of Radical Discipleship, Feb 18, 2015. Jennifer Henry was the Executive Director of Kairos Canada.

Isaiah 58:1-12, Mark 1: 1-13

You and I, we are standing on the edge of the wilderness with Jesus; you and I, on this first day of Lent, driven by the Spirit; you and I, on this Ash Wednesday, made of earth and water. Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return. Today, whatever our justice ministry, we are invited, reminded, compelled, driven to enter into the wilderness to confirm our identity, to remember our names, and to reclaim our integrity, finding each other along the way.

This wilderness journey is no idyllic trip to the cottage on Cape Cod or in the Muskokas. It's not a vacation spa in Ojai. There's nothing easy about it. But neither is it a threatening place for us conquer or domesticate. Nor is it a demonic space, as if somehow the wilderness is the only neighbourhood where Satan hangs out. Those narratives—the narratives of my Puritan ancestors—do not serve us. The wilderness is neither idyllic nor demonic—but it is true, a place where things get real. It's a place where with few distractions, the backdrop is stark, the contrasts are clear, creation is powerful, and false pretenses get revealed. In the wilderness, there is nowhere to hide, and we must come to grips with our work, our lives for what they are. It's where you figure things out. It's a place where you can reclaim integrity, or lose it.

The first words of Mark's Gospel reveal Jesus' identity. He is anti-imperial, the real "good news" (1:1). He is in the continuity of YHWH, "as it was written in the prophet Isaiah" (1:2). He is much more than the movement that preceded him, "the one more powerful that is coming after" (1:7). His identity is marked in these ways, but also through the actions that connect him to water and earth. Jesus' first gesture is to claim his watery essence—two thirds of the water in his body is, like our own, from the watershed of his place, connecting him to all the vulnerabilities and possibilities of the Jordan. He immerses himself in the Great River, intentionally locating himself, diving deep into place, the act of submerging INTO as critical an action for the inauguration of his ministry as the opening of the skies above.

And then he goes to the earth, reconnecting with the dirt that is the stuff of him, of us—ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Placed INTO the wildness, he is attended by the angels but accompanied by the wild beasts. Verse 13 is intriguing: "He was WITH the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him." This is confirmation of his place among the species, not over or above them.

Mark inaugurates Christ's ministry by literally integrating him with water, with earth, placing him WITH his companions in the watershed, WITH all his relations. The Spirit leads him, drives him, to the place where it gets real—the wilderness, where he is tested, but ultimately strengthened, his integrity confirmed.

I serve at KAIROS, an organization that brings Canadian churches together in common commitments to ecological justice and human rights. At this time in our Canadian history, many churches and communities, many individual settler Christians, are poised on the edge of the wilderness, some of us maybe a step or two into the journey, but each of us desperately seeking to confirm our identity anew and reclaim our integrity. It is a watershed moment.

Through our imperfect gestures of solidarity with Indigenous peoples over 40 years, and more recently

through an extended national Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we have become painfully aware of our multiple complicities as settlers, as Christians; painfully aware of how some of our ancestors of blood and faith were collaborators, or protagonists in colonial horror; painfully aware of our own alienation from the land that is inextricably linked to our violations of the people of the land; painfully aware of how our citizenship still links us now to the re-colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the globe through relentless resource extraction pursued in our name.

Convicted by the truth, we are working—very imperfectly—to un-settle ourselves from colonial injustice and re-place ourselves in right relations. Invited, undeservedly by Indigenous peoples, we are striving through an embrace of justice to be reconciled anew to the land and the original peoples of the land. It is a wilderness struggle. And, God willing, it will stay true, stay real, until we get it. Until we understand enough, act enough, to find a new identity in restoration. Perhaps as repairers of the breach, reconcilers in the watershed.

I can tell you today that the ancient words of Isaiah 58 are a strangely faithful companion in this journey. This text, also the appointed one for Ash Wednesday, is poignant in its challenge to us but also in its promise. Radical disciples know this text. We know that it is likely post exilic, from the period when the people of Israel are returning from Babylon, struggling with the possibilities but also the challenges of community reconstruction after trauma. They are holding in their hearts the hopeful promises that come to us from earlier Isaiah, even while facing the day to day practicalities of nation-building anew. It is an unsettling time.

We do not know the precise controversy that provokes verses 1-5. Perhaps there were rivalries between different forms of religious observance. But the prophetic message is clear: to turn away from empty fasts and from religious piety that serves primarily one's own interests. The critique here is not about the irreligious—those who do not know Yahweh or who have forsaken God—but those whose religion is found to be false pretense.

Speaking into our Canadian context, this feels like a piercing challenge. Our colonizers were not irreligious. Christianity was moral architecture to this project; it was fuel for the colonial fire. The faith of so many of our Christian ancestors—of my ancestors—got distorted by racial superiority, their own interests in land and security, and a missionary zeal. In the name of Christ, four Canadian churches sat with empire and collaborated with the federal government in a 130 year project of boarding schools intended to “kill the Indian in the child.” Seven generations of Indigenous children—young children--were isolated from their families, cultures, languages, and traditions in Indian residential schools run by the churches.

Seen through Isaiah's critical eyes, and with the benefit of hindsight, what might we call that distorted sense of mission? A self-serving religion—I fear so. It not only failed to do justice—to accomplish the compassionate justice that is the prophetic challenge—but it perpetrated injustices in religion's name. In the schools, there was unspeakable cruelty, humiliation, and abuse—sometimes even in the name of Christ.

The problem is that it is a little too easy to join ourselves to Isaiah and criticize our colonial ancestors for their practice of faith. The challenge of Isaiah in the present is to ask: “Have we really fully turned away from this kind of religion?” Are there colonial remnants in our faith? How might our religion continue to serve our own survival and security ahead of justice? Are we actively seeking reconciliation to the land and the peoples of the land? Where do we have residue of “subdue and dominate”—even in our more sophisticated stewardship concepts? Where are we still more monuments than Jesus movement, more institution than community convicted by the radical gospel?

Isaiah is clear: turn from false religion; embrace the ways of justice. Beginning at verse 6 the prophet delivers the call to “loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, break every yoke.” Offer bread, home, clothing, hospitality... This text, echoing similar themes in Micah and Amos, and anticipating Jesus’ teaching, defines true worship in terms of expressions of justice. This turns on its head all the ways in which we make false divisions between faith and witness and justice and peace, between acts of worship and acts of justice. Our expressions of justice are liturgies of holiness and faithfulness. Actions of justice are as a prayer. Justice is the fast that God requires. For the Canadian churches, this means that their apologies for colonial complicity in residential schools and their prayers for Indigenous peoples mean little without a commitment to Indigenous justice in the now. There is no way to decolonization that fails to address the situation of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, that is unconcerned with “boil water” advisories in reserve communities, or that ignores scathing deficiencies in First Nations education.

This means deep solidarity with Indigenous people who are demanding free prior and informed consent before any development project impacts their traditional territories, wherever that happens in the world. This means the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. For some settler Christians, it may very well mean standing in front of trucks with Indigenous peoples in British Columbia as they block the building of a pipeline across their traditional territory, or kneeling with Indigenous women in New Brunswick as they put their bodies between fracking and Mother Earth. Our failure to do justice—to rise to the solidarity call—will confirm that not just our ancestor’s faith but our own may be for naught.

Today Indigenous peoples are seeking our partnership in justice—not for their own rights only, but for the health and wellbeing of the whole inhabited earth. What a humbling and generous invitation. In the movement originating in Canada called Idle no More, the message was a call to partnership in justice for the sake of our world. The motivation was the Canadian government’s complete removal of environmental regulations and continuing rapacious resource extraction without limits. The motivation was threats to our waters. Indigenous peoples, with a closer connection to creation, were sounding the alarm and inviting us into the call.

This invitation to partnership is present also in the global cry for climate justice, echoing from the Indigenous peoples at the front of the New York Climate March. Placing ourselves with Indigenous communities, welcoming their land wisdom, their creation literacy—something which we previously demonized and rejected—opens us up to re-placement and re-connection to the earth, air, and waters. But it is an ethical re-placement in the watershed that respects and recognizes the First Peoples and their deep custodianship, which has no termination date.

Turn from false religion, embrace the way of justice... Beginning in verse 8 is the final challenge, but it has turned into a promise—a promise of restoration, a promise of identity, hoped for renewed integrity, and new names. In a wonderful series of “if...then” expressions, the prophet confirms that it is only from justice, that restoration flows. If you embrace justice, then... your bones will be strengthened, your gardens watered, your ruins rebuilt.

It is this just action that will reveal your identity, that will change your name: “You shall be called repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in”(58:12). Only this just action, will confirm your integrity. For settler Christians, it may just be possible to find new names from the ones theologian Tink Tinker accurately but bluntly summarized as “liars, murderers and thieves.” Maybe we could be allies. Maybe we could be treaty partners. Maybe we could be companions in the watershed. Just maybe, we could be friends, like in the peace and friendship treaties that were originally

extended. What we must be is “nation to nation,” in a new covenant written on our hearts. For Isaiah, justice is the precursor to restoration. The “if...then” construction is essential. We cannot expect reconciliation within our churches, within our country, without our tangible, sustained commitment to justice. Reconciliation will follow rather than lead actions for justice, which becomes a form of testing intention and resolve. What I love about this passage is that as clear as the critique of hollow religion, as clear as the call to justice, that same kind of clarity is also present in the commitment of restoration. Look at what is promised. It is both personal healing—strong bones, satisfied needs—and communal restoration: restored houses, rebuilt ruins.

I need the promise of Isaiah because sometimes the horror at what we have done to one another, the depth of our failure to protect traumatized people or a traumatized creation, the relentless challenges of the present injustices—somewhere in there my hope is obscured. I can’t see for the anger or the guilt or the shame. I can’t see for the tears.

But Isaiah makes restoration tangible, a reality of transformation confirmed for us as Christians in the Easter event—in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Justice, peace, reconciliation can be so. It must be so. Our actions must live up to that promise.

Let me leave you with one example, one taste of restoration, that I recognize through Isaiah’s eyes: It was Victoria Island, the traditional gathering place for Indigenous peoples on the Ottawa River that has a clear view of the Canadian Parliament buildings. Our leaders, six Algonquin Kokoms—grandmothers—began with a smudge, followed by a teaching on the sacredness of water. We were a mixed group, young and old, settler Indigenous and newcomer. We blessed 200 water offerings from all across the country, and four from different parts of the world. Each was sent as signs of commitment to protect watersheds when our government, in repealing environmental protection legislation, had abdicated its responsibility. Each was sent as a sign of resistance to all that threatens our watersheds—tar sand in Alberta, fracking in New Brunswick, pollution in Manitoba. Each was sent as a sign of connectedness, one watershed to another, by those being harmed around the globe by Canadian mining.

Strawberries were shared, and water was poured on the ground as a sign of respect for Mother Earth. Tobacco was offered to the Ottawa River and there was a moment of deep shared acknowledgement of the Source of all water—all living things. Public liturgy, held in the view of empire. (From: [www.kairoscanada.org/dignity-rights/indigenous-rights/gathering-of-the-w....](http://www.kairoscanada.org/dignity-rights/indigenous-rights/gathering-of-the-w...))

One of the participants, a white settler woman, said this felt more like worship to her than many church services she could remember. No doubt Isaiah would have agreed. Closer to true religion than what sometimes happen in our churches. In this place and for this moment, imperfect and humble, it felt a step closer to the fast that God required. Watershed Discipleship. Reconciliation in the Watershed.

This Lent, I am going to continue the process of unsettling the settler that is still within me. It is time to get real: to ask myself again what colonial ideas and practices are still part of my fabric of being. And I am going to work to re-place myself in the land of my chosen watershed, to work harder to reconcile to the earth in right relations with Indigenous peoples. It is time to get real: what ways am slipping back to comfort and convenience away from ecological integrity, what ways am I ignoring racism, cause I’m just too tired to make a fuss? In this wilderness time, I am going to strive to renew my identity as an ally, I am going to push my own church to greater boldness—to stand up in Indigenous solidarity, even when the empire pushes back and calls us names.

The Spirit may need to drag me into the wilderness—as she often does, in her unsettling, challenging,

relentlessly liberating, but connecting way. But she will do it for my own good, for my own integrity, because she knows my name. If she is successful, when she is successful, I expect I'll see you there.