

# St James United Church

Message for September 26, 2021  
The Third Sunday in Creation Time  
and Orange Shirt Day



“Let Go and Listen” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 2:18-22; Mark 9:30-37; Excerpt from *The Ten Commandments of Laudato Si'* by Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam; portion of video from “Back to the Land” about medicine plants

To start I want to thank everyone who wore orange today. I encourage you to wear orange often or wear a pin of an orange shirt like this one on my lapel, as an opportunity to raise people’s awareness about Indian residential schools and the harm done to children taken from their families to attend them, some as young as six years old. That’s how old Phyllis Webstad was when she came to school wearing a sparkly orange shirt that her nan bought for her, a shirt taken away when she was stripped of her clothes and given a uniform. She never saw it again. The trauma of that memory makes the orange shirt a powerful symbol of the way the government stripped Indigenous identity from children without care for the impact.

Not to be confused with British boarding schools, Indian residential schools were a blend of poor house, penal colony and seminary. Education was focused on trades; hence children spending so much time working outside on the farm or inside doing domestic work. Religious instruction was a big part of the curriculum; hence schools being run by churches, including our own. That fact makes it difficult to understand how children could be subject not just to cultural and spiritual abuse but physical and sexual abuse too. So much for Jesus placing a child before the disciples and telling them that to welcome a child was to welcome him, and not just him but to welcome God who sent him.

But to do that you’d have to see the child as a child of God like you are, and sadly, teachers and other staff were as prejudiced towards Indigenous peoples as most Canadians. They were like the disciples arguing which of them was greatest. Cultural arrogance obscured their ability to see other views as valid. The apology made in 1986 by the Rt. Rev. Bob Smith expresses this: “Long before my people journeyed to this land your people... received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured... We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer.” The apology reminds us of what’s been lost, devastatingly for Indigenous nations, and sadly for Canada as a whole. A different nation was possible if settlers had partnered with Indigenous nations, the sharing resulting in something better than either people alone.

And that partnership could have been greater than just one with Indigenous peoples. Drawing on a value held in a number of Indigenous nations, that partnership could have been with the plants and the animals and the land itself. I invite you to listen carefully to the following video....

*(Video from "Back to the Land" about Anishnabemowin names for medicine plants.)*

As Joe reveals, there was a partnership between plants and people because people took the time to know the gifts that the plants wanted to share. As he says it's terrifying to think how the true identity of these entities, these beings may be gone forever with a loss of language that began in Indian residential schools.

An added tragedy is that the perspective that Joe shared is not as alien as residential school teachers may have thought. As we hear in Genesis, the first human named the animals. according to Jewish tradition, the non-gendered human that was split in two only named them after speaking with them. This was possible through the sharing of respect, a relationship of openness to the wisdom that each animal or plant offered. It comes with appreciating each plant's or animal's worth as children of God, or as Rev. Joshtrom reminds us, that this planet is permeated with the Spirit of God. An Indigenous view turns out to be equally Judaeo-Christian.

Sadly, that viewpoint had faded from Christian theology when Europeans began their colonial project. Despite the example in Genesis, getting to know the plants and animals wasn't top of mind. Explorers saw the land as an extension of their home and so named the plants and animals accordingly. Thus gapjagwej became a robin and waapiti misnamed as elk. We have porcupines and badgers in North America but they're barely related to their European cousins. Plants were christened based on perceived connections, often called "wild" versions of European plants like grapes, strawberries or rice, a practice that not only obscured biological differences but "proved" how Indigenous peoples hadn't looked after the land and needed to be taught how to do so properly.

This cultural arrogance had tragic results not just in North America but around the world. Take Australia. When settlers arrived, they saw a green land that reminded them of home and so they imported sheep farming and other practices that made sense in Britain. They didn't realize that the land was only lush because it was carefully managed by the Indigenous peoples of the region. Since then, overgrazing from sheep has magnified the fragility of an arid landscape. Add to this invasive species like rabbits and you get an ecological disaster that could have been avoided if the settlers had watched and listened to the people that had lived there for tens of thousands of years.

I realize all of this may sound hopeless, especially if, as Rev. Joshtrom observes, we keep looking at the earth as a storehouse or real estate rather than a sacred gift and our common home. Fortunately, all is not lost. The attempt at assimilation failed and Indigenous communities are healing, people like Joe revitalizing their cultures, including their languages and the knowledge held in them. In the end, a renewed environment is possible if those of us who are relative newcomers to this land take time to listen – to listen to Indigenous peoples, and more than that to listen to plants, to animals, and to the land. I pray that we do, and in the process we'll not only begin to heal the troubling legacy of residential schools, but we may begin to heal our planetary home as well. May it be so. Amen.