

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017
2 Samuel 7:1-11,16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

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**Story Telling and Story Dwelling:
Burning Cascade Head (Community & Ceremony)**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is a very full day. We stand this morning in the midst of the fourth Sunday of Advent, and by dusk we will be celebrating the Advent of our God, Christmas Eve, when the hope of this morning is fulfilled. I suppose a reminder is in order that in ancient Palestine days were marked from sundown to sundown. So we get to celebrate twice in a brief time.

We hear from Samuel of the divine promise to establish the house of David as an everlasting line—foreshadowing for us the Messiah who springs from that ancestry. Rituals of remembrance and hope connect to the promise of a messiah. Romans speaks of the promise revealed by God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. And Luke tells the story of Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to conceive and bear this holy child.

These stories are so familiar to us because they were created by the ancient communities from which we sprang and which we celebrate in this holy season. The communities of ancient Palestine and the church have created the ceremonies we enjoy. And our ceremonies now help us to create community. We are shaped by what came before, and our remembrance forms us anew into the people God yearns for us to be. Community creates ceremony creates community—to put it succinctly.

In Advent, God is doing something new—creating anew. And our work is that of restoration or “re-story-ation,” inspiring story-tellers to be also story dwellers. In hopes that we live into better stories, I again borrow a story from the book “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer (pp. 241ff.).

“Far out beyond the surf they felt it. Beyond the reach of any canoe, half a sea away, something stirred inside them, an ancient clock of bone and blood that said, ‘It’s time.’ Silver-scaled body its own sort of compass needle spinning in the sea, the floating arrow turned toward home. From all directions they came, the sea a funnel of fish, narrowing their path as they gathered closer and closer, until their silver bodies lit up the water, red-mates sent to sea, prodigal salmon coming home...

“When the boats are too long gone, their families go down to the beach to light a blaze among the driftwood, a beacon to sing them home to safety. When the canoes

finally approach, laden with food from the sea, the hunters are honored in dances and songs, their dangerous journey repaid alight with gratitude...

“Far out, beyond the pounding surf, beyond the reach of canoes, in the inky darkness that swallows light, they move as one body, a school, turning neither east nor west until they know.

“So he walks the path at nightfall with a bundle in his hand. Into a nest of cedar bark and twisted grass he lays the coal and feeds it with his breath. It dances and then subsides. Smoke pools darkly as the grasses melt to black and then erupt into flame, climbing one stem and then another. All around the meadow, others do the same, setting in the grass a crackling ring of fire that quickens and gathers, white smoke curling upward in the fading light, breathing into itself, panting across the slope until its convective gasp sets the night alight. A beacon to bring their brothers home.

“They are burning the headland. Flames race on the wind until they are stopped by the wet green wall of the forest. Fourteen hundred feet above the surf it blazes, a tower of fire: yellow, orange, and red, a massive flare. The burning prairie billows smoke, roiling white with undersides of salmon pink in the darkness. They mean for it to say, ‘Come, come, flesh of my flesh. My brothers. Come back to the river where your lives began. We have made a welcome feast in your honor.’

“Out at sea, beyond where the canoes can go, there is a pinprick of light on a pitch-black coast, a match in the darkness, flickering, beckoning below the white plume that drifts down the coast to mingle with the fog. A spark in the vastness. The time has come. As one body they turn to the east, toward the shore and the river of home. When they can smell the water of their natal stream, they pause in their journey and rest on the slackening tide. Above them all, on the headland, the sparkling tower of fire reflects on the water, kissing the reddened wave tops and glinting off silver scales...

“The fish course by the camp in great throngs, unmolested as they make their way upstream. Only after four days of fish have moved safely by is the First Salmon taken by the most honored fisher and prepared with ritual care. It is carried to the feast in great ceremony on a cedar plank in a bed of ferns. And then they feast on the sacred foods—salmon, venison, roots, and berries—in sequence for their places in the watershed. They celebrate the water that connects them all in a ritual passing of the cup. The salmon bones are placed back in the river, their heads facing upstream so that their spirits might follow the others. They are destined to die as we are all destined to die, but first they have bound themselves to life in an ancient agreement to pass it on, to pass it on. In so doing, the world itself is renewed.

“Only then the nets are set out, the weirs are put in place, and the harvest begins. Everyone has a task. An elder counsels the young one with a speech, ‘Take

only what you need and let the rest go by and the fish will last forever.’ When the drying racks are full with winter food, they simply stop fishing...

“It is an odd dichotomy we have set for ourselves, between loving people and loving land. We know that loving a person has agency and power—we know it can change everything. Yet we act as if loving the land is an internal affair that has no energy outside the confines of our head and heart. On the high prairie at Cascade Head another truth is revealed, the active force of love for land is made visible. Here the ritual burning of the headland cemented the people’s connection to salmon, to each other, and to the spirit world, but it also created biodiversity. The ceremonial fires converted forests to fingers of seaside prairie, islands of open habitat in a matrix of fog-dark trees. Burning created the headland meadows that are home to fire-dependent species that occur nowhere else on earth.

“Likewise, the First Salmon Ceremony, in all its beauty, reverberates through all the domes of the world. The feasts of love and gratitude were not just internal emotional expressions but actually aided the upstream passage of the fish by releasing them from predation for a critical time. Laying salmon bones back in the streams returned nutrients to the system. These are ceremonies of practical reverence...

“Ceremony focuses attention so that attention becomes intention. If you stand together and profess a thing before your community, it holds you accountable. [*Think about confirmation here.*]

“Ceremonies transcend the boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm. These acts of reverence are powerfully pragmatic. These are ceremonies that magnify life.

“In many indigenous communities, the hems of our ceremonial robes have been unraveled by time and history, but the fabric remains strong. In the dominant society, though, ceremony seems to have withered away. I suppose there are many reasons for that: the frenetic pace of life, dissolution of community, the sense that ceremony is an artifact of organized religion forced upon participants rather than a celebration joyfully chosen.

“The ceremonies that persist—birthdays, weddings, funerals—focus only on ourselves, marking rites of personal transition. Perhaps the most universal is high school graduation...

“And, at least in our little town, we know it’s not an empty ritual. The (graduation) ceremony has power. Our collective good wishes really do fuel the confidence and strength of young people about to leave home. The ceremony reminds them of where they come from and their responsibilities to the community that has supported them. We

hope it inspires them. And the checks tucked into the graduation cards really do help them make their way in the world. These ceremonies too magnify life.

“We know how to carry out this rite for each other and we do it well. But imagine standing by the river, flooded with those same feelings as the Salmon march into the auditorium of their estuary. Rise in their honor, thank them for all the ways they have enriched our lives, sing to honor their hard work and accomplishments against all odds, tell them they are our hope for the future, encourage them to go off into the world to grow, and pray that they will come home. Then the feasting begins. Can we extend our bonds of celebration and support from our own species to the others who need us?

“Many indigenous traditions still recognize the place of ceremony and often focus their celebrations on other species and events in the cycle of the seasons. In a colonist society the ceremonies that endure are not about land; they’re about family and culture, values that are transportable from the old country. Ceremonies for the land no doubt existed there, but it seems they did not survive emigration in any substantial way. I think there is wisdom in regenerating them here, as a means to form bonds with this land.

“To have agency in the world, ceremonies should be reciprocal co-creations, organic in nature, in which the community creates ceremony and the ceremony creates communities. They should not be cultural appropriations from Native peoples. But generating new ceremony in today’s world is hard to do. There are towns I know that hold apple festivals and Moose Mania, but despite the wonderful food, they tend toward the commercial. Educational events like wildflower weekends and Christmas bird counts are all steps in the right direction, but they lack an active, reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human world.

“I want to stand by the river in my finest dress. I want to sing, strong and hard, and stomp my feet with a hundred others so that the waters hum with our happiness. I want to dance for the renewal of the world...

“The First Salmon Ceremonies were not conducted for the people. They were for the Salmon themselves, for all the glittering realms of Creation, for the renewal of the world. People understood that when lives are given on their behalf they have received something precious. Ceremonies are a way to give something precious in return...

“Out beyond the surf they gather, tasting the waters of home. They see it against the dark of the headland. Someone has left a light on, blazing a tiny beacon into the night, calling the salmon back home.” (Here ends the story.)

Ceremonies are to give something in return. Reciprocity. God is doing something truly remarkable for us, so inexplicably amazing that it defies adequate expression and adequate appropriation. Our ceremonies on this full day are but a beginning, but they

are a start—and they do their work of shaping us as we give new dimension to the world in return.

May the ceremonies we shape form us. And may we begin to perceive the tiny beacon just now becoming visible on the horizon that will lead us back home. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.