They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat,
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. *Isaiah 65:21-22*

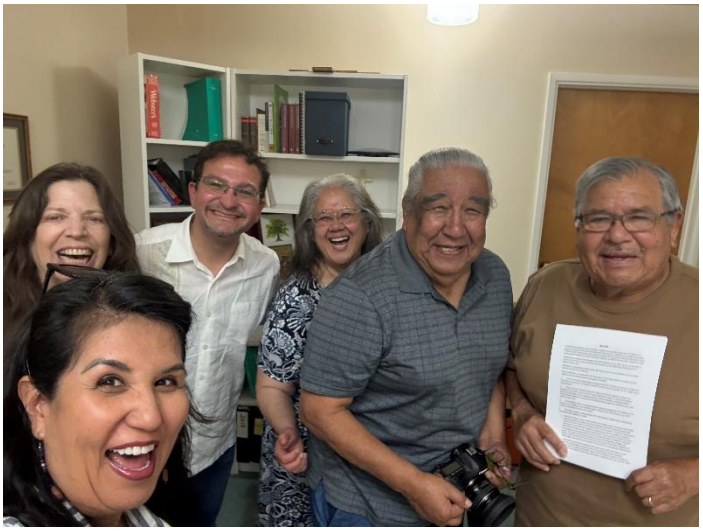
Sibagna

Several years ago, I started to consider this passage to be representative of a core concept in the Old Testament: just ownership and work as a sign of shalom. Shalom is not just peace, but peace that comes out of reconciliation and restoration, which is a fruit of God's justice being fulfilled. There are several variations of this passage throughout the Old Testament, sometimes turned on its head:

- as a sign of unusual, unearned blessing from God (Deuteronomy 6:11 and Joshua 24:13: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant"), or
- as punishment (Amos 5:11: "because you trample on the poor . . ., you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine"), or
- as restoration (Amos 9:14: "they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit").

In other words, God's design for humanity was not that people would live without effort, but that work was expected, and workers would be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Conversely, imperialism and the taking of land (and the subjugation of the native inhabitants of the land) are a direct violation of God's plan.

So it was an extremely important day this last Friday, when several of us gathered at the Presbytery office—Chief Anthony Redblood Morales, his brother Art, and Kimberly Morales Johnson of the Gabrieleno/Tongva Tribal Council, and Roberto Ramírez and Deidra Goulding, president and secretary of our corporation.



As you can see, it was an unexpected, informal, joyous, and holy moment. Kimberly is a scholar in Indigenous Studies, and from her research she believes this is the first time a church has returned land to a tribe, at least in California. But Art shared something that floored me—we thought this would be a great property to return to the tribe due to the proximity to the Mission, but the Mission was there because there was already a village, and from what they can tell, this may be the first time a landback actually involves land at the edge of the original village that the tribe inhabited!

The village was Sibagna, so that is what they will call this new home base for the tribe. I went to my trusty Wikipedia to learn more; another spelling of the village is Shevaanga. According to Wikipedia, this village was the birthplace of a Tongva man the Spanish called Nicolás José, who joined with Toypurina to attempt to retake their sovereignty from the missions. By contrast, the current tribal leaders continue to work for justice, but they do so with a surplus of patience, affirming spirit, and Christian faith. They mentioned again their dream that this will continue to be a place of welcome for the community, and I trust that they will have the grace and the savvy to welcome folks, but with clarity about whose land this is.

Chief Anthony, who is a humble servant leader, expressed his gratitude, but Deidra spoke for all of us when she shared how grateful we are to be able to participate in this. Truly we can feel God smiling over all of us in this moment!

As we've mentioned, the public celebration of the return of Sibagna will be Saturday, August 2nd, starting at 10 am. This will be a historic day, but more importantly, it is a significant step forward towards God's will being done on earth, as it is in heaven.

As we move towards the 4th of July, as we acknowledge the rights and privilege we enjoy in the United States (and fight to preserve those rights), may we also raise a prayer of thanks for the hospitality and partnership of our Indigenous hosts—and continue to pray and dream for a community of peace for all of God's people.

Thanks be to God!

Wendy