**Service for Indigenous People's Sunday, replacing Columbus Day Holiday** -
Pentecost 19 (St Brendan's Deer Isle, ZOOM) October 11, 2020
ISAIAH 40: 25-31 JOHN 17: 20-23

I > Today is a Sunday on which we acknowledge a number of things: we celebrate a very special day in America, a holiday, and HOLY-day which we have named Indigenous People's Day. In our case, from our Episcopal diocesan actions, we have renamed the day from the mainstream-American holiday called Columbus Day to this new name. The reasons for this change are many, but let us focus today on what the change means in our effort to acknowledge and praise the valiant efforts of survival on the part of our American Indian brothers and sisters. If we had to pick one figure who would represent all the bad feelings generated by white-America's treatment of Indians, I don't think we could find any better single character than Christopher Columbus. To honor him as a hero and with a holiday has always been highly insulting to American Indians. For this is the man who responded to the welcome of local people by killing hundreds of them, sending others to Europe as slaves, allowing his sailors to infect the local tribes with deadly diseases. Beyond all this, he was a terrible navigator: he thought he was in India! What an irony, that the name of Indian has been acknowledged by our own indigenous peoples as the best English term to describe them collectively.

The best way that I, or we, can express respect and regret for the great sins perpetuated on our Indian fellows is to use their own words to hear and appreciate their realities. So, if I greet you this morning in the way of the Lakota Sioux, I will say: "Hello to my relatives. I am Bangor-Anglo, from the sacred land of the Penobscot River, in the valley of the Appalachian hills. My mother is from the Catawba and Mecklenburg clan of North Carolina; my father is from Orange-trader clan of the Jersey plains." This is the correct and traditional greeting of the Lakota people; to greet you in any other way would be in insult, to you and to me. And notice that we never say our name; it is the way of honoring where I am from and my family.

II > I will begin this morning in sharing the words of a great chief of the northwest Indians. His name translated is Seattle, and he was the last chief of the united Squamish peoples of what we now call Washington State. He addressed these words to the president of the United States in 1854.

"**There was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea cover its shell-paved floor, but that time long since passed away with the greatness of tribes that are now but a mournful memory. I will not dwell on, nor mourn over, our untimely decay, nor**

**reproach my paleface brothers with hastening it, as we too may have been somewhat to blame.**

But let us hope that the hostilities between us may never return. We would have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Revenge by young men is considered gain, even at the cost of their own lives, but old men who stay at home in times of war, and mothers who have sons to lose, **know better**.

Your God makes your people wax stronger every day. Soon they will fill all the land. Our people are ebbing away like a rapidly receding tide that will never return. The white man's God cannot love our people or He would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. **How then can we be brothers? No; we are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies.** There is little in common between us.

**To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and seemingly without regret. Your religion was written upon tablets of stone by the iron finger of your God so that you could not forget. The Red Man could never comprehend or remember it. Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors — the dreams of our old men, given them in solemn hours of the night by the Great Spirit.**

Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander away beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. **Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being.** They still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender fond affection over the lonely hearted living, and often return from the happy hunting ground to visit, guide, console, and comfort them.

**A few more moons, a few more winters, and not one of the descendants of the mighty hosts that once moved over this broad land or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to mourn over the graves of a people once more powerful and hopeful than yours. But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. <u>We may be brothers after all. We will see.</u>**

**And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe**, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. **At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land.** The White Man will never be alone.

Let (your great chief, [ie, your President]) be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."

III > I first heard part of this speech as a college student in the 1960's. Now, I hear them with a great deal more clarity and understanding, as I have learned so much more of the detail and deadliness of our country's treatment of people of color. Chief Seattle's words are haunting, in expressing the pain of what was to be the prediction of the end of his own tribe and clans. He anticipated the genocide of Indian people which was to come, but he also expressed the hope and belief that we could "deal kindly with my people, and be JUST to them." And that is where we are today. It all started with Columbus, but we hold the responsibility and the keys as to what happens from here. In 1900, according to estimates of scholars, there were 250,000 Indians left in the continental US and Alaska. Of those, 99% were living in traditional Indian cultures. By the 1990's, the same studies indicated that there were only 30,000 living as traditional Indian peoples. As Russell Means, founder of the American Indian Movement put it: "The genocide is almost complete." "Our home," Means also said, "is where we come from. It is the land that makes up my skin. If we move, say because of marriage, that is where we LIVE; it is not our home. Our roots go very deep. And today, the sacred colors of the human race are no longer deep; they are LATERAL, shallow, parallel to the surface."

What happens from here? What do we do with the great prayer of Jesus that we heard again today: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, **that they may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." How can we possibly be completely one with each other and with God? UNLESS we take to heart all

that he has taught us, about justice, about reconciling our faults, about standing in that great spirit of truth and love?

In the recent film *Dawnland,* we see the evidence of many Indian women in Maine who have stood up against the barbaric injustices of the treatment of Indian children and families. One of those women, in a separate interview, said this regarding the recent demonstrations against violence to black men and women: " What group of Americans do you think has the highest rate of brutal beatings and killings by police? It is the Indians, by far. But do you think I am resistant to the black-lives demonstrations? Not in the least. I support them fully. I need ALL my relatives!"

Out of the council of truth and reconciliation that began during the filming of *Dawnland*, an important piece has remained. It is called Maine-Wabanaki REACH, and it is an organization dedicated to the ongoing correction of injustices, and especially violence, in Maine. On a wider scale, since the year 2000, a group called the World Christian Gathering of Indigenous Peoples has met in sharing and support of their faith and efforts of reconciliation. As Christians, we can reach beyond our own circles to support such efforts. And here in Maine, our own Episcopal (and American Friends allies) Committee on Indian Relations works to deepen respect and response for all our local Indian peoples. There are numerous acts and legislation correcting large and small injustices waiting to be heard by our state lawmakers: there is much we can do in education and raising support for these efforts.

I will leave you this morning with the words of an Indian Christian leader, Richard Twiss: "My prayer is that awakened awareness will lead to healing, reconciliation, and wholeness for the entire body of Christ. If we are to accomplish all of God's purposes in these final days of harvest, we must recognize and embrace all the different parts of his body as necessary and valuable. The greatest moments of native history may lie ahead of us if a great spiritual renewal, if an awakening should take place. The Native American has been a sleeping giant. Now he is awakening; the original Americans could become the leaders who will help us to win all of America to the ways of Christ. Remember the forgotten people." (*One Church Many Tribes,* Regal Books, 2000: page 24)

So that they may be one, as you and I, Father, are one; I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one. (John 17)

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**Additional note from Russell Means quotes:** "It is because of Columbus that I am a born-again primitive; and proud of it! It is because of him that my people are denied a place at the international table. It is unacceptable."