

March 13, 2022
The Second Sunday in Lent, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 15:1-12,17-18
Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:31-35

I was called to the principal's office exactly one time in my life. It was the fall semester of sixth grade, so I was eleven years old, and it was 1973. A call to the office was *never* good. Mr. Weeks had been principal of my elementary school for decades, and he was old-school mean. Remember, I grew up in Louisiana; you might imagine him rather like movie depictions of that era's arrogant-southern-white-man-in-charge. The students loathed him, particularly the boys, who shared tales of the paddlings he had administered.

I was in Ms. Cherry's class when the call came. I couldn't imagine what I had done; I was always too frightened to even *bend* the rules. With great trepidation, I proceeded to the reception area, where I was told to sit and wait. After what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few minutes, Mr. Weeks called me in, and I discovered my offense. At home I had written a petition in support of Native American rights. I brought it to school that day and during recess had tried to collect signatures from the other kids.

I don't remember exactly what spurred me to write and circulate that petition. But this was the fall of 1973, and America was in turmoil. To name a few highlights from that year: in January, the Supreme Court issued its Roe v. Wade decision; in March, the last U.S. military unit left Vietnam; in April, Haldeman and Erlichman resigned over Watergate; and in May, Native American activists ended their 71-day occupation of the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

I don't remember what Mr. Weeks said to me that day. I remember feeling completely humiliated. In effect, he told me to stop, and I did. It would be a long time before the activist in me regained her voice. And the truth is, I never really returned to Native American advocacy, and that's literally a shame.

Let's shift gears and talk about today's reading from the Hebrew scriptures. It concludes with this: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.'"¹ A *covenant* is a contract; in the Bible, it's generally an agreement between God and people. For obvious reasons, this particular covenant between God and people is generally referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant.

I wish I could read about it and feel warm and fuzzy about this new committed relationship. But it's just not that simple. In this covenant, God promises Abram an inheritance consisting of two things: people and land. What's challenging is the *land* portion of the agreement. If we keep reading past where we stopped, the next verses would be these: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.'"²

In other words, God promises Abram a large swath of land, upon which more than a few people already live. Even today, this has consequences in Palestine-Israel. But there's more, in how it has played out in Christianity. Christianity has held that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. If Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant, then Christians are the new Israel. Therefore any land not occupied by Christians is available for Christians to take. Some have even said that any land not occupied by the *right* Christians is available for the *right* Christians to take. Last week that's how Kirill I, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, justified Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In his view, *real* Christians don't tolerate gay pride marches.³

But that's not my focus today. My focus today is the Doctrine of Discovery. There is a dotted line from the Abrahamic Covenant to the Doctrine of Discovery. The Doctrine of Discovery empowered Christian nations to colonize large portions of the globe. It came to America first with the settlement of the eastern seaboard, and then spread through Manifest Destiny and westward expansion. This, too, ends up being about people and land, what we now recognize as the stealing of the land and the genocide of the people.

Let me back up. Maybe you're wondering, *What is the Doctrine of Discovery?* One resource defines it briefly this way:

The Doctrine of Discovery established a spiritual, political, and legal justification for colonization and seizure of land not inhabited by Christians. Foundational elements of the Doctrine of Discovery can be found in a series of papal bulls, or decrees, beginning in the 1100s, which included sanctions, enforcements, authorizations, expulsions, admonishments, excommunications, denunciations, and expressions of territorial sovereignty for Christian monarchs supported by the Catholic Church.⁴

Many Christian denominations are beginning to wrestle with the Doctrine of Discovery and its effects. I want to read a longer description of this from the Christian Reformed Church in North America. In 2016 its Doctrine of Discovery Task Force culminated four years of work with a thorough 69-page report. That report uses the term "Doctrine of *Christian* Discovery [emphasis added]" as "a recognition of its theological and Christian roots."⁵ The report says this:

In 1452, Pope Nicolas V, in the papal bull *Dum Diversas*, established the dominion of Christian nations over non-Christian by authorizing Portugal to conquer and enslave "Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ." Three years later, in *Romanus Pontifex*, he extended this dominion to specific lands and reaffirmed the enslavement of non-Christians. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued the *Inter Caetera*, which delineated ownership of newly discovered lands in the Americas and established the sovereignty of Christian nations over those continents and peoples.

Together, these papal bulls ushered in the Age of Imperialism by authorizing the taking of land and labor by Christian nations from non-Christians. By building a theological justification of dominance over "the other," Westerners easily rationalized the oppression of non-European peoples in the Americas. Ironically, those who developed the doctrine knew so little at that time about the peoples it victimized that they are in no way accurately reflected in the papal bulls.

Defining the Indigenous peoples of North America was one of the most important intellectual projects underlying colonization. Before substantive encounters with Natives, Europeans could follow the ancient Greek tradition, encoded in mythology, of imagining the “other” as a monstrous, nonhuman being (e.g., cyclops, minotaurs, gorgons, sirens). (This derisive othering contrasts with the way many Indigenous peoples tended to view those who were different from themselves: as deities.) Encountering instead very unmonstrous humans raised difficulties for the Europeans: if settlers accepted that the Indigenous peoples were fully human, the logic of discovery would have fallen apart, since all the land in question had already been discovered by Natives.

Europeans relied instead on the Doctrine of Christian Discovery (DOCD) and the principle of *terra nullius* (Latin for “unused or empty land”), a legal construct that assumed Indigenous peoples occupied the land not in a European sense (ownership) but rather in a way like fish occupy water or birds occupy air. European lawyers, philosophers, and theologians expanded the notion of *terra nullius* to apply to lands not farmed or land ownership not governed according to European standards. This notion ignored the fact that Native cultures comprised complex social, political, and economic structures based on collective ownership of land. Europeans asserted that “pagan” Aboriginals could not hold rights to the land in the same manner as Europeans. This assertion became the origin of the term “Aboriginal Title,” which invariably included fewer rights than the rights of dominion asserted by Western powers.⁶

Until I started researching this sermon, I didn’t realize that the Doctrine of Discovery is still considered legal precedent in courts around the world. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of all people, cited it in a 2005 opinion denying a land claim by the Oneida Indian Nation in New York. She wrote: “under the ‘doctrine of discovery’ ... fee title to the lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States.”⁷ Here’s the thing: if the Doctrine of Discovery doesn’t hold water, then most of the land in this nation slips through its owners’ hands.

The Episcopal Church is also finally starting to take a hard look the Doctrine of Discovery. In the last two editions of the Enews, I included a link to the website of the Episcopal Church’s Office of Indigenous Ministries. It says this:

As an institution, The Episcopal Church recognizes and repents of its harmful treatment of Native Americans. In 1997, the church signed a new covenant of faith and reconciliation almost 400 years after Jamestown colonization, apologizing for its past actions and launching a decade of “remembrance, recognition and reconciliation.” In 2009, the church’s General Convention passed a resolution repudiating the 15th century-based Doctrine of Discovery, which “held that Christian sovereigns and their representative explorers could assert dominion and title over non-Christian lands with the full blessing and sanction of the Church.”⁸

This Episcopal Church website includes a pretty good video about the Doctrine of Discovery and a great video called “Native Voices Speaking to the Church and the World.” One of those Native Episcopalians voices is that of the Rev. Canon Debbie Royals, who is Pascua Yaqui. She happens to have been a seminary colleague of mine. In the film Debbie, referring to the ongoing pain of the Doctrine of Discovery for Native people, says this:

It is painful for us to talk about and hear the history of the Doctrine of Discovery, but it’s even more so in my mind painful because it seems to be referred to as a past problem. And I venture to say that even though for us the Episcopal Church repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery, I think it was seen as one-and-done issue, and it certainly didn’t have any ground that needed to be worked on, to listen to what were the reasons for us to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.⁹

Immediately following is the Rev. Bude Van Dyke, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee, who adds this:

Every time I get into a conversation about the Doctrine of Discovery, it hurts my heart because the church I love not only historically participated in it, but in its own ways, known and maybe unknown, it still does.¹⁰

Other speakers talk about how genocide caused intergenerational trauma that still plagues their communities. Several mentioned the “Kill the Indian, save the man” approach of Indian boarding schools. In other words, not only was genocide literally enacted on their ancestors’ human bodies, it was figuratively imposed on indigenous cultures.

For many indigenous people of the United States and Canada, old wounds were reopened by last summer’s revelations about Indian boarding schools. At the time, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings issued a statement. It included this acknowledgment:

In Genesis, God conferred dignity on all people by creating them in God’s own image—a belief that is shared by all Abrahamic faiths. We are grieved by recent discoveries of mass graves of Indigenous children on the grounds of former boarding schools, where Indigenous children experienced forced removal from their homes, assimilation and abuse. These acts of cultural genocide sought to erase these children’s identities as God’s beloved children.

We condemn these practices and we mourn the intergenerational trauma that cascades from them. We have heard with sorrow stories of how this history has harmed the families of many Indigenous Episcopalians.

While complete records are unavailable, we know that The Episcopal Church was associated with Indigenous schools during the 19th and 20th centuries. We must come to a full understanding of the legacies of these schools.¹¹

Abrahamic Covenant to Doctrine of Discovery to genocide and Manifest Destiny and intergenerational trauma and Christian nationalism: in *all* this the church has been complicit. My preaching this Lent has so far focused on the sins of the church. Clearly the church has some repenting to do. But the point is not for us to forgive the church. Rather it's to resolve the continuing effects upon those who have been sinned against. Well, it's about that, and it's quite possibly about the survival of the planet. It seems pretty clear to me that, in this era of dire global warming, indigenous traditions carry wisdom that creation desperately needs.

There are still voices out there like that of Mr. Weeks, the elementary school principal who shut down any kid who dared step into the light. But you don't have to listen to them. There are other voices just clamoring to be heard. Listen to the voices of those who have been silenced. Listen to the voice of your inner activist. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. You will know them as truth when you experience them as healing. God, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, heals us, so that we may be healers of creation.

Notes

¹ Genesis 15:18a NRSV

² Genesis 15:18-20 NRSV.

³ This was heavily covered in the news. See, for example, Della Gallagher, "Russian Orthodox Church alleges gay pride parades were part of the reason for Ukraine war," *CNN*, March 8, 2022, available online at https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-08-22/h_de0516e0f59ac2214af21bbb0aaf152e (accessed March 13, 2022).

⁴ "Doctrine of Discovery," Upstander Project, available online at <https://upstanderproject.org/firstlight/doctrine> (accessed March 13, 2022).

⁵ Christian Reformed Church in North America, "Creating a New Family: A Circle of Conversation on the Doctrine of Christian Discovery," 4. The report is available online at https://www.crcna.org/sites/default/files/doctrine_of_discovery.pdf (accessed March 13, 2022).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷ From the "Law" page of the *Doctrine of Discovery* Project website, available online at <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/law/> (accessed March 13, 2022).

⁸ From the "Indigenous Ministries" page of The Episcopal Church website, available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/indigenous-ministries/> (accessed March 13, 2022).

⁹ Debbie Royals, in *Native Voices: Speaking to the Church and the World*, produced by The Episcopal Church Office of Indigenous Ministries, 2022. As of this writing, the film was available on that office website (<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/indigenous-ministries/>) as well as on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEvcyMvlv0I>).

¹⁰ Bude Van Dyke, in *Native Voices: Speaking to the Church and the World*.

¹¹ "Statement on Indigenous boarding schools by Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings," issue by The Episcopal Church Office of Public Affairs, July 12, 2021, available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-on-indigenous-boarding-schools-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry-and-president-of-the-house-of-deputies-gay-clark-jennings/> (accessed March 13, 2022).