

A TALE OF TWO PRESBYTERIANS

Daniel 3

It was June 2017. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was meeting in Waterloo. One of the things we were very excited about was welcoming a special guest: Cindy Blackstock. Blackstock was to receive a major award and address our General Assembly. Blackstock is a member of the Gikskan First Nation and a professor of Social Work at McGill University. Blackstock was being honoured because she had been fighting for equal rights for indigenous children for a long time, and in 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that successive Canadian governments have racially discriminated against first nations children by providing less funding for child welfare services on reserves compared to the rest of Canada.

Since 2017, we have become even more aware of how indigenous children are disproportionately taken from their families and communities into foster care because there is inadequate funding for their care within their communities. We have also become aware of how mistreatment and neglect of indigenous children points to a larger systemic agenda of genocide as we have been uncovering mass graves of indigenous children at residential schools. Either you assimilate or you die off, has been the policy.

Orange Shirt Day is all about the children. The story of Orange Shirt Day is about how a young girl, Phyllis Webstad, was taken from her home and forced to attend a residential school. On her first day of school, she wore a bright orange shirt she had bought with her grandmother. The shirt was to remind her of who she was and where she belonged. As soon as she arrived at the school, though, she was forced to take it off, and she was given a plain shirt the school wanted her to wear. The intent was to strip her of her roots and her identity, making her forget where she came from.

When Cindy Blackstock addressed the General Assembly, she told us the story of two Presbyterians, two Presbyterians who lived 100 years ago. The first is: Duncan Campbell Scott. Scott was not only a Presbyterian, but a famous public figure. He was a celebrated poet and a government official. Scott was also the architect of the Indian Residential School system. The goal of Residential schools was explicit: to eliminate the Indian problem and to educate the Indian out of the child. And rather than this be something controversial for the Canadian public, Scott was seen as a great visionary and appointed to high office in the government. But wasn't anyone concerned about a

school system so blatantly racist and so blatantly damaging to indigenous children? Not only were the children forcibly removed from their families and communities, but their parents were threatened with legal action and imprisonment if they resisted. And even once it was revealed that the children were getting sick and dying in the schools, the public were not alarmed.

And what about the churches? Scott was a hero among the churches because he invited them to run the schools and make a profit at the same time. The government would give the churches a chunk of money to run the schools and the churches would manage them in a way where they could also make a profit for themselves. This often meant cutting corners on nutrition, sanitation, crowding and other things besides. And this doesn't even include the way the children were treated and abused.

But weren't church people alarmed by all this? Wasn't it a concern what was happening to the children? Well, but indigenous children were being saved from a life that was less civilized and unchristian. The schools would help them integrate into Canadian society and their compromised health only revealed how unhealthy their indigenous lifestyle had been, not how they were being treated. The intent was to build them up, toughen them up and educate them for a better life.

But were there no whistleblowers around to alert people of what was really going on? Was Duncan Campbell Scott's the only voice out there. No it was not. There was another Presbyterian, a doctor, by the name of Peter Henderson Bryce. Bryce was hired by the government to assess the conditions of the residential schools and the health of the children. What he found shocked and appalled him! By 1907, 1/4 of all students who had been registered in the schools had died and in one school the death rate was as high as 75%. Bryce confirmed what indigenous parents, church officials and teachers already knew: that these institutions and the people who worked in them were directly involved in the deaths of thousands of indigenous children. Colonial attempts to assimilate the children were in fact genocidal.

Bryce compiled his evidence in what came to be known as "The Bryce Report." It made a number of recommendations for immediate government action. The report was leaked to the media and debated in the House of Commons. But ultimately, it was rejected. The government wasn't prepared to change much of anything, and neither were the churches. Here was Duncan Campbell Scott's response to the report: "It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habituating so closely in these schools, and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in government policy, which is

being geared towards the final solution of our Indian problem.” “Final solution?” These are also the words used by Adolf Hitler to explain how the Nazis would deal with the Jews. Can you believe it?

So what happened to Bryce? Scott made sure Bryce was ignored and his career ruined. He was sidelined by the medical establishment. He was forced into early retirement. In 1922, however, he published an 18-page pamphlet, paid out of his own pocket, and he entitled it: “The Story of a National Crime.” It chronicled what was happening in the schools and the 15 years of government refusal to act. The pamphlet made a big splash in the newspapers, but soon, public attention waned and moved on to other things. Wow! Isn’t all this terrible? Especially as we are now, 100 years later, dealing with the consequences of such an atrocious racist and genocidal policy?

So how did the story all end, and how does Cindy Blackstock the indigenous child advocate fit into it?

Before I get to that, let’s bring in our scripture reading from the biblical book called Daniel. Daniel is the name of one of the main characters of the book. Daniel and his friends were children of the Hebrew nobility. They lived in an era of colonial powers and empires who ruled large parts of the world. The first great empire that assaulted the Hebrews was the Assyrian empire. Their policy was massive slaughter, destruction, rape and pillaging. It was brutal and awful and few Hebrews to the north survived. But the Assyrian empire was succeeded by the Babylonian one. The Babylonians realized that if you wanted to rule and enslave large parts of the world, you have to use a better strategy than brute force alone because brute force is costly and requires too many armed troops spread out too thin. The better approach is to take the leaders, the children and the youth, and leave everyone else behind. You then take the children and youth from their families and educate their culture and roots out of them, making them into faithful and patriotic Babylonians.

So it is with Daniel and his friends. Not only are they taken from their parents. Everything they think, learn and do is now engineered to changing their identity from Hebrew to Babylonian. They call it “education”. In the first chapter we’re told that they are taken from their families. They are given new names. Everything, from their free time to their diet is monitored and tailored to educate them for service in the Babylonian system. They are to learn the literature, language and customs of their new masters. And once they become so educated and indoctrinated, they will manage their own people on behalf of the Babylonians and ensure the Hebrews become faithful servants of their new rulers.

So what's the alternative? The stories of Daniel, like other stories in the bible, are all about how Hebrews find creative and courageous ways to resist the empire, to fight against becoming swallowed up by it, maintaining their Hebrew identity and traditions, even if it means death.

When I was a child and in Sunday school, I learned the stories of Daniel and his friends, stories about Daniel thrown into a lion's den and the story in our scripture reading about his friends thrown into a fiery furnace. I learned them as stories about me and my call to remain faithful to my faith in God even if people around me want to take it away from me. But I was never taught that, actually, the church and country I'm a part of are like the Babylonians, and it is those who are racialized and marginalized for being different – whether it's because of their sexual identity, gender identity or race, who are represented by Daniel and his friends. We, as colonizing settlers are the enemy of God here. The indigenous peoples are Daniel and his friends. That's a total reversal of the traditional interpretation of Daniel and not an easy story to tell our children. And yet, what a powerful story to tell our children today, no?

We know Daniel's friends as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. But these are their Babylonian-given names. In Chapter 1 we're told their real names are: Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah (Daniel 1:7). Why are they in trouble? They refuse to bow down to a statue, representing the king. The way the story is told is that this statue is not only created to honour the Babylonian king. It is also a way to root out all those who are not patriotic-enough Babylonians. Being faithful Hebrews, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah refuse to bow down before the statue. They will only bow before God and God alone. Even after they are threatened with torture and death, they refuse to bow down. The message: All you Hebrews who have been enslaved and beaten down. Have courage. Remain faithful and true to who you are. Do not lose yourself, even if it costs you your life! Sounds like a message for indigenous children, many of whom never survived their years at residential schools.

Daniel and his friends are heroes because they not only survive their various ordeals, but they thrive. They are able to maintain faithfulness to their Hebrew identity, but also succeed in their new home. There is no evidence of trauma or grief for never seeing their families again. These stories, somewhat mythical and idealized, are intended to give courage to other Hebrews who will also be taken from everything they know and love, forced either to assimilate or die. The colonial powers are described in sinister ways. They are godless bullies after power and control who want to take the land and its resources to amass their own wealth. But God is aligned with those who are taken,

abused and enslaved. Unless the colonial powers repent of their atrocities and support the Hebrews in returning to their land and rebuilding their lives, they will be damned before a God who is on the side of the oppressed.

So then, what's the message for us here and now, who represent a church and a nation aligned with power and conquest against a people like the Hebrews? How do we repent and atone and find our path to healing and reconciliation? What can that look like?

Here's what it looks like for Cindy Blackstock. Besides continuing to fight the Canadian government in court on behalf of the equal rights of indigenous children, she also approached the Bryce family. Bryce's grave, which is in Ottawa, had been neglected. People needed to know that there were whistleblowers as far back as 100 years ago. She bought a garden shovel and dug around the headstone to create a small flower bed. She planted red geraniums, a lavender bush, and healing plants like echinacea. An orange plaque amongst the flowers bears the words "Every Child Matters," a gift from a high school class. Blackstock turned the burial site into a place of learning and reflection. School groups visit often, as does Blackstock herself, bringing her own groups. Isn't this a beautiful story of healing love between an indigenous woman and an old Canadian Scot?

Healing and reconciliation is not just in big, sweeping actions, but in small acts that build bridges of listening, lamenting, learning and seeking healing through forgiveness. And most of all, it's about a refusal to change the channel or move on to the next news item. Our nation, our church, we ourselves will be defined by how meaningfully we will make this long journey of learning, lamenting, understanding and the search for a higher justice with our indigenous neighbours whose land we inhabit.

And so, I end by making a call out... I would like to establish a working group, a group who will begin to help our congregation, in person and online, to do some learning, some lamenting, some engaging with the indigenous community... We will aim to find ways we can build bridges so we can experience some healing and reconciliation through the grace that may be extended to us by our indigenous neighbours and by the God whose love we seek... Are you interested? Please speak to me over the next few weeks... We will do some amazing things together over the next few years... Amen.