

“The **True** North Strong and Free”

By Cathy Russell, Based on Isaiah 42:5-9

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It's summer movie season, and that got me thinking about one of the phenomena of modern movies- the trilogy. A series of three movies with the same characters within the same world. A friend of mine has observed that there is a pattern to the movie trilogy in terms of the quality of the movies. The first one is good, the second one is the best and the third one- well the third one you watch because it's part of the series. This rule holds true for some of the greatest movie trilogies including the Godfather series, the First Three Star Wars movies, and the Toy Story movies.

The book of Isaiah according to biblical scholars is something of a trilogy as well.

First Isaiah 1-39

Second Isaiah 40-55

Third Isaiah 55-61

Our reading today comes from the beginning of Second Isaiah. I'm not suggesting that Second Isaiah is the “best” part of the book, but it probably contains some of the most familiar and best beloved passages for Christians. The verses we read forms the second part of a song about a figure known as the Suffering Servant- The one who will be bruised but not beaten, the one who will usher in God's reign of justice. There are four of these suffering servant songs in the second part of Isaiah, and possibly one in the third. Christians of the early church soon began to interpret these passages as prophecies about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

ISRAEL'S UNIQUE IDENTITY

The verses we just heard however could also be addressed to the people of God- the covenant people as a Light to the Nations. The “you” Isaiah refers to here are the children of Israel, the Jews, the Covenant People. It's a common trait for nations or tribes or clans, or even clubs to assume that they are unique, special in some way. The

children of Israel trace their specialness to God's call of the patriarch Abraham- the promise that he and Sara would be given a new land, and become the parents of a great nation. The Jews were the people who received through Moses the divine gifts of the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah. They also received the gift of the Sabbath, one full day during which they, and all in their household were to refrain from work- a gift that certainly made them unique among the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean World.

CANADA'S UNIQUE IDENTITY

Canadians are a unique people in our own way. Years ago I remember seeing actor and Second City alumnus Martin Short talking about the Canadian Football League on an American talk show. His affectionate comment was "Only in Canada could you have a professional sports league made up of only eight teams- and *two* of them are called the Rough Riders. " When Canadian icon Leonard Cohen won a Juno award for his 1991 album, he said with a mixture of gratitude, amazement and humour- "Only in Canada could a guy like me win male vocalist of the year". And more recently, this story from a young woman who remembers reading about our televised election debates a few elections ago, while she was living for a time in Mexico. She said-" I thought to myself- what other country besides Canada would include in its national election debates, the leader of one party whose sole purpose is to separate from the country? And you know, sitting far away in another country, I actually found that kind of endearing." Self-deprecating humour- definitely part of what makes the Canadian identity special and unique.

ISRAEL'S CHOSENNESS CARRIES RESPONSIBILITY

For Israel, being special, being chosen by God brings with it a responsibility- a responsibility that has worldwide implications- a responsibility as Isaiah puts it, to be a light to the nations. What does that mean? Well, the 1988 Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism has this to say about what it means for Jews to be People of the Covenant.- "It obligates us to build a just and compassionate society throughout the world and especially in the land of Israel where we may teach by example what it means to be a "covenant people, a light unto the nations." So to be chosen by God as a unique people means that those who are chosen are *obligated* to build justice and compassion

at home and around the world. It's the *light of justice and compassion* that is to shine forth from God's people to all the nations of the Earth- shining *that* light is supposed to be *part of who you are*. It's not the kind of responsibility to be taken lightly.

It's kind of like when you take CPR training. I took this training once in my life, and when I got my certificate, I thought "Yikes! this piece of paper means that I now have a responsibility to respond if a heart attack emergency in my presence." I did not WANT that responsibility, and I did not want to FEEL this responsibility, but- it came with the certification. Knowledge and responsibility go hand in hand, just like chosenness and responsibility go hand in hand.

CANADA'S IDENTITY CARRIES RESPONSIBILITIES

I was reminded, in no uncertain terms, that knowledge and responsibility go hand in hand as I prepared for, and attend, with John the Kairos event in Ottawa which called on Canada to live up to its endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. You may have heard me promoting an educational event around this UN declaration which Canada signed in 2010 three years after it was adopted by the General Assembly. The Declaration recognizes that Indigenous People have the same rights to education, health care, religious freedom and justice as any of us, and it calls on governments to implement and protect these rights. It also declares that Indigenous People have the right to seek legal redress if these rights are not ensured.

I learned some new things, preparing for that event and was reminded of others. Most of these were difficult things. Difficult things that part of me would rather not know. Things like 39 First Nations Communities across the country have to boil their drinking water, things like More Aboriginal Children are in Foster Care today than were forced to attend Residential Schools in the past, things like Young Aboriginal Males have the highest suicide rate in the world- John and I know that awful statistic first hand. Things like the 10 yr. wait of the children of Attiwapiskat, a Cree community in Northern Ontario for a decent and safe school building for their children. Difficult things- but now that I do know them, I have a responsibility, as a Canadian, and even more importantly,

as a Christian as a follower of Jesus Christ, to say something, to do something for God's purposes of justice and compassion in the world. These painful and shameful facts are a part of our Canadian history, and we live with them and their socially devastating consequences today, whether we acknowledge them or not.

THE TRUTH IS THE BEGINNING OF HEALING

But here's the thing- acknowledging these facts, acknowledging all of our history, shining a light on the painful and the shameful as well as the positive and the proud, is the beginning of healing, the first step in setting things right and moving forward. And although it is surely a weighty and even daunting responsibility it is also a marvelous opportunity. I had a teacher in seminary who died suddenly this year, the Rev. Dr. Gary Redcliffe. Before he became a teacher at Emmanuel College, he had been in ministry with First Nations People in Saskatchewan, and so the concerns of Aboriginal People always remained close to his heart. I will never forget what he said to a group of us after presenting a video on the legacy of Residential Schools. "You know I think Native People are really giving us a tremendous gift." And I thought "A **GIFT**. It sure doesn't feel like a gift- it feels more like a punch in the gut, or a knife in the heart." But then he went on to say "Native People are giving us the chance to re-invent and re-imagine Canada. To tell more of the truth about how we got here, and to let that truth be a new beginning for all of us."

Surely that's what signing this UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People is- it's an opportunity to tell the truth about our history together, to be the True North Strong and Free, and to move forward into a more just and compassionate future. It's an opportunity for Canada to be a light unto the Nations, to be a world leader in the cause of justice and compassion to which God calls us. To set an example of how the truth can set us free, of how we can move beyond shame and regret and towards reconciliation nation to Nations. Isaiah says "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. In Luke's gospel as he is beginning his ministry,

Jesus will read words very similar to these from another part of Isaiah, and he will declare that his mission, which is our mission, is to do just that.

As you're celebrating Canada Week, why not Google the UN Declaration on Indigenous People, or tell me if you want a copy of the booklet and I'll order it for you. Find out about Kairos Canada and the way its activities support Aboriginal issues. Check into the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as it tours the country. Pray for this great and wonderful country and for reconciliation with our First Nations brothers and sisters. At the end of our passage from Isaiah, God announces "See, the former things have now come to pass, and new things I now declare." Meegsha! Meegwetch Jezus. Amen and Thanks be to God.