



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were open to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

As many of you know, I like art. I use art in almost every sermon, and I do that not just because it's an excellent way to teach. Because people not only need to see something and hear something, but they often need to do something. And art is a kind of complement to the text I'm preaching about. It hits differently. It opens avenues. It stimulates the brain. It opens pathways for creativity. Art is useful.

But I also use art because when I am captured by a piece of art, when an art particularly represents the voice of an outsider, to me, the voice of someone who is often pushed to the side, but somehow has found their way into the conversation through art, when I find a piece of art that fills me with wonder and awe and changes everything, then art becomes not just useful to me. It becomes a kind of revelation. It speaks to me and it brings me to prayer.

And I say this to you today because the art I have for you today has been a piece that I saw in person in 2022, and it's an art piece that has captured my attention for a long time. And it makes a point today that we ignore at our peril when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. The art piece before you is known by the title, "I'll Cut a Hole." It was done in 2022 by Andrea Carlson. Carlson is based in Chicago and she is a member of the Grand Portage Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa. And she, as a native artist, was commissioned to do a piece about the Burt Lake Band of the Chippewa Nation. And she did this piece that represented the history of the Burt Lake Band.

The Burt Lake Band of the Chippewa were in that land for generations – for at least seven generations, which is how indigenous people tend to count. And in 1855, they had learned to assimilate to Western practices, and they had accumulated for themselves 355 acres of their ancestral property. It was theirs through purchase. They had 20 homes. They had a church. They were Christians. And they had a cemetery. And then over about 50 years until 1900, their land was taken away by local authorities. Some of that land was given to the University of

Michigan to establish a school for native children. And instead of establishing a school for native children, the University of Michigan set up a science center to study native peoples.

And then finally in 1900, the sheriff of the local area evicted them. Burned down their houses, burned down the church, and evicted them from their property. And they spent generations trying to win their land back. They worked to get recognized as native people because they had assimilated so successfully that they lost their status. And status is a complex legal recognition that the United States does for indigenous people. And they were successful in 1985 to get recognition by the State of Michigan, but they're still waiting for recognition by the federal government.

Now into that complex layering of colonialism, into that complex discourse about land, into that horrible history about people who had been robbed of their person and property and place, into that incredible difficult area, that terrain, the artist, Andrea Carlson did the painting that I've put on your bulletin. And in it, it's framed by native patterns that you would find on the material culture that you would find in any of the native peoples, but in particularly this reflects the Burt Lake Band's own identity as members of the Chippewa Nation and the Anishinaabe peoples.

And there is a hole that has been cut in that fabric. And the title of the painting, "I'll Cut a Hole," is actually from Wallace Willis, who was a formerly enslaved man who was liberated during the Civil War and actually was taken in by the Choctaw people. He is the author of that beautiful spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." And Willis has in the second line of that spiritual, "And if I get there before you do, I'll cut a hole in the sky and bring you through." So the outside of the painting that you see is meant to represent not only native identity and traditions and material culture, but the belief that where they were was a place in which the ancestors who were with God were able to cut a hole in the sky and reach forward and grab them and pull them through.

And so on the outside of the painting, you have this beautiful moment in which you are given the impression that you are entering a kind of portal. And through that portal, you see that the path to Heaven goes through the cemetery that is still the last piece of property that the Burt Lake Band owns. That cemetery, St. Mary's Cemetery, is rendered with three crosses. And for those of us who are Christians, we know that when we see three crosses, there is an image of Christ's own crucifixion with a robber on His left and His right. And it is through that cemetery that you can see Burt Lake itself, the Promised Land, as it were, the inheritance of the people.

And it is through that portal that has been opened up, there is a journey that is being invited by the Burt Lake Band and all of the viewers to move through that history, through that life that was before, and to find at the end the life everlasting, to have that moment when they are pulled through because that portal has been opened up, the sky has been opened up, a way has been formed. And then at the center of the painting, there is a saying that is powerful and real, and it was a proverb that was written in the original St. Mary's Cemetery of the Burt Lake Band. And the proverb states: Give me knowledge so that I may have kindness for all.

I found this message incredibly moving. Give me knowledge so that I may have kindness for all. All that is going on in this painting is so powerful and real. All of it I have seen in one way or another, and I've been studying native art for more than 15 years, since I was active with the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I have never seen that proverb before, and I've never seen quite what this artist is doing. Because when she repeats that proverb, "Give me knowledge so that I may have kindness for all," she is establishing and remembering in one moment a kind of covenant of grace. No matter what happened to the Burt Lake Band, no matter what happened to their land, no matter the injustices they had felt, no matter the challenges they were experiencing, no matter the opposition they were facing, they were truly their own people brought by God into this world. That journey from Heaven that the ancestors were making to them was still happening, and that possibility of connection and covenant with God was still there. They still had that covenant of grace. And they claim that covenant by living by that proverb of getting knowledge so that they might be kind.

Anton Chekhov said that the measure of great art is not so much the answer that it gives you, but it's the fact that it correctly states the question. In today's painting that I'm sharing with you, you have a correct statement of the question: what do you and I do when we are surrounded by conflicts over land, by conflicts over nations, by conflicts over race, by conflicts over ethnicity, by conflicts over our common life? What do we do? We cannot run away from them. We cannot ignore their presence. We cannot pretend like things are not happening that upset us, but we are called to live into that covenant of grace, to seek knowledge so that we might be kind.

And we know this because Jesus Christ in His baptism represents a moment when God has cut a hole in the sky and sent God's own very self, God's son, into the mire and the muck, and the contradictions, and the conflicts, and the opposition, and the struggle and the suffering of this world. Jesus Christ came into our midst, fragile and vulnerable, able to be whipped and stabbed and crucified. Jesus Christ came into our midst so that we would know God's grace. So that a portal

would be opened so that there would be a connection between Heaven and Earth, and you and I can live with that grace.

I've been thinking a great deal about Renee Goode, who was tragically and violently killed earlier this week. And I found myself reading her poetry. She won an award, a major award as a poet before she became known as an accidental activist and as an incredibly courageous person who was killed in a miscarriage of justice. She wrote in one of her poems that she was struggling to keep her faith, but when she returned to her traditions, to the scriptures and to what she had been taught, it was as if God was brushing the hair back from her ears and saying into her ear, remember to wonder.

You and I cannot make our way through this life without that grace to somehow be able to acknowledge all of the conflicts around us, and yet somehow to find our way as Christians, to speak the truth in love, and also to remember that the way forward through the portal is through grace and kindness. Give me knowledge so that I may have grace for all.

The baptism of Jesus, as I said at the beginning of this service, it is a reminder to us of God's covenant with us, God's determination that God would never leave without us, that God loves us, that God sees us. It does not matter the struggles you have. It does not matter what you are dealing with in your daily life. It does not matter whether your community has lifted you up or tried to hide you in plain sight. It does not matter if you are experiencing oppression. God remembers you in Christ, God loves you in Christ, and God is with you in Christ. That is what it means to have a baptism where Jesus joins us in baptism. We are joined with Jesus in His death so that we might experience His resurrection because Jesus is with us in our death and resurrection. We have been bound to Christ and the promise of that grace comes to us, not merely as a proverb, but by the whole title that we get to share with God's beloved Son. Beloved. We are – *agapetos* is the Greek. We are the beloved of God. When God looks upon us, He sees Jesus and he loves us completely.

So whatever you are facing on this day, whatever injustices that we are discussing, the work that we have to do, because there's no one here but you and me. The work that we do together, let that grace of God that comes to us in the person of Jesus, let that presence of God lead us and fill us and be with us always.

Amen.