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New year - new vision?  
Martin Grove United Church  
December 30, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Colossians 3:12-17

Show of hands - how many people enjoyed singing “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” a moment ago? It’s a great song, right? It has some haunting tones, it evokes an earlier, simpler time. The song - which is based on the traditional French tune, “A Young Maid” and whose (French) lyrics are attributed to Jean de Brébeuf in 1641, is usually considered the first Canadian Christmas carol.

The song is clearly an attempt to retell the Christian nativity story using words and concepts intended to have been meaningful to Indigenous people in North America. Jesus is born in a lodge instead of a stable. Jesus is wrapped in rabbit skin instead of cloths. Jesus is visited by hunters instead of shepherds. Instead of being visited by the magi who offered gold, frankincense and myrrh, Jesus has visitors who are called “chiefs from far” who offered Jesus fox and beaver pelts. And in place of where you might expect the word “God” we have “Gitchi Manitou”. Sounds simple enough, right?

At the same time, I assume that all of us here - even with our own perhaps fairly modest understanding of Indigenous spirituality - find the song at least somewhat offensive to our modern ears. Some churches refuse to sing this song these days. One of the funniest news stories I read recently was about a church that refused to sing this song because of “cultural appropriation”, which I found very humorous, because to me the only “culture” represented in the song is a very degrading European view of Indigenous people. This is not a song taken from Indigenous culture - it is a steam-rolling of Indigenous culture using a religious story. So nothing new there.

Blogging team Wing and Nguyen put it this way, “One can argue that the ‘essence’ of the Christian Christmas story [] is not lost. However, I think that the Christmas story simply did not happen this way. I think it is offensive to both ends and it compromises the cultural and theological meanings that both Indigenous cultures and Christian doctrines uphold.”<sup>1</sup> Well, that’s a great quote to start off with - that the song is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wingnguyensituation.wordpress.com/2016/12/04/sitting-out-on-church-today/>

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offensive to both cultures that are represented! And clearly church leaders have found the song a bit of an embarrassment - in the United Church was have renamed the hymn “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” instead of the more traditional name, “Huron Carol”, the later being seen as inappropriate because “Huron” was the French name for the people who called themselves “Wendat”.

In any case, Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit priest, came to the Wendat people around 1626, and the people found him very strange indeed. He wore black robes, which for the people represented death, even though he spoke about life. He was French, but was not interested in trading. And he had a beard which, to the people, meant that he was someone of limited intelligence. And yet, in spite of making such a strange appearance, he is credited for many successes and did establish a Jesuit outpost we now call “St. Marie Among the Hurons”, near Midland.

The Wendat positioned themselves as middlemen, being a conduit between European traders and local hunters. The primary trading was in beaver pelts. There were perhaps 30,000 Wendat at the beginning of the story of the relationship between the Wendat people and European people. Many of them died from smallpox and other diseases, and because the Dutch gave guns to the Iroquois to squeeze the French via the Wendat, with no regard for the lives that were to be lost.

I have to confess that I struggle to understand this colonial story myself, mainly because in the 1600’s, people were very superstitious by today’s standards, not having an understanding of modern knowledge. The Christianity that the Roman Catholic Church was teaching to the Wendat may in fact have been an expression of faith that I would reject myself today. One story says that there was an extended drought which threatened the food stocks. A Wendat shaman said it was caused by the Jesuit putting up a wooden cross that was painted red, red being considered a colour of bad luck. Brébeuf painted the cross white and the rains did not come as the shaman had said would happen. So Brébeuf re-painted the cross red and it rained the next day. That drama won many converts to Catholicism. Perhaps more importantly to the story, the Wendat shaman’s status went down, and people started to see that the Christian God was more powerful than their ancient spirits, and that perhaps even that Indigenous spirits were just a

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delusion. That was actually depicted in another Wendat/Christian Christmas carol whose words included:

*Have courage, you who are humans, Jesus, he is born  
Behold, the spirit who had us as prisoners, domestic animals, has fled  
Do not listen to it, as it corrupts our minds, the spirit of thoughts  
They are spirits, coming with a message for us, the sky people  
They are coming to say, "Be on top of life, rejoice!"  
Mary has just given birth, come one, rejoice"*<sup>2</sup>

which was clearly a call to the people to abandon their Indigenous spirituality in favour of Christianity. Our more modern version of the "Huron Carol" is at least less offensive than that! As to whether or not we should still be singing the "Huron Carol", Dana Lynn writes:

"The English lyrics were written by an Anglo-Canadian in 1926 to the tune of the French folk song, 'A Young Maid.' As a Métis woman who has lived in territory named for the Wendat, and studied traditional Wendat culture and history, I find those lyrics, written almost a hundred years ago, to be typical of their time in their contempt for, and appropriation of, Indigenous culture. These English lyrics were written during a time when Indigenous people were viewed with what today would be called condescending, paternalistic racism.

The 1926 lyrics reference 'Mighty Gitchi Manitou' and 'sons of Manitou.' Gitchi Manitou is often translated, 'Great Spirit,' but it's less 'God-the-Father' and more, 'Universal Energy.' Having said that, the main problem with this lyric is that it's the wrong language, and the wrong language family. The Wendat speak an Iroquoian language; Gitchi Manitou is Cree, which is part of the Algonquian language group. Evidently the lyricist didn't understand that there are various First Nations in Canada, with different languages and cultures.

The lyric 'kneel before the radiant Boy who brings you beauty, peace and joy' seems simply ironic. Not long after the Jesuits came among them, the Wendat lost half of

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<sup>2</sup> <http://anishinabeknews.ca/?s=huron+carol&x=0&y=0>

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their people to smallpox. The survivors were attacked by the neighbouring Iroquois, and many more died. A number of the Wendat who remained sought refuge with the Jesuits, who, in exchange for shelter, required that they profess Christianity. The few surviving Wendat were then forcibly removed from their lands, and relocated hundreds of miles away.

I believe that learning about, and respecting, each other's culture (Settlers and Indigenous Canadians) is the first step to reconciliation

Niw\_Hk\_M\_Kanak All My Relations, D L Seaborn<sup>3</sup>

And Dana has also taken a step forward in helping us understand Wendat culture. On her own web site she has this to offer:

“As an Indigenous person, in the spirit of Reconciliation, I respectfully offer lyrics reflective of Wendat (Huron) culture.

#### A Huron (Wendat) Carol

*We gather at midwinter dark to share this hallowed night.  
Within our longhouse, warm and dry, the fire glows with light.  
Our Elders sing a teaching song;  
it fills the night that seems so long:  
This is our sacred home, 'neath heaven's dome,  
shining stars proclaim the dawn.*

*Sky Woman came down from above, but found no place to stand,  
till Toad put mud on Turtle's back, and that became the land.*

*Sky Woman died in giving birth;  
her holy body fed the earth.*

*This is our sacred home, 'neath heaven's dome,*

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/unwrapping-huron-carol?utm\\_source=E-Newsletters&utm\\_campaign=d9dcf4b7cd-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2018\\_10\\_25\\_01\\_40\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_53a49c9e28-d9dcf4b7cd-188639601](https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/unwrapping-huron-carol?utm_source=E-Newsletters&utm_campaign=d9dcf4b7cd-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_10_25_01_40_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_53a49c9e28-d9dcf4b7cd-188639601)

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*shining stars proclaim the dawn.*

*A valiant Little Turtle rode a cloud up to the sky;  
she used the light 'ning to make fire, and made our Sun to shine.*

*He journeys 'neath the world we see,  
returns to make the shadows flee.*

*This is our sacred home, 'neath heaven's dome,  
shining stars proclaim the dawn.*

*The Black Robes came from lands a'far, and told us of a day  
Judea had been colonized, and Rome must be obeyed.*

*A mother bore a child of light;  
rejoicing filled the starlit night:*

*This is our sacred home, 'neath heaven's dome,  
shining stars proclaim the dawn.*

*Rejoice! Have courage one and all! The stars shine overhead,  
the same stars that shone down upon a baby's humble bed.*

*The infant grew to be a man;  
his words, like stars, light many lands.*

*This is our sacred home, 'neath heaven's dome,  
shining stars proclaim the dawn.*

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Well - in my opinion that is certainly an improvement. And it's sort of funny how we probably all recognize that even without knowing much about Wendat culture - yet.

And please forgive me, but I'm still a bit stuck back at Christmas Eve. All this fighting about how to appropriately express a story - and the story under scrutiny is the story - well, a collection of disconnected stories - about the birth of Jesus. And I'm still

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<sup>4</sup> <http://seabornsong.com/the-huron-carol/>

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stuck on the fact that the birth-of-Jesus stories are really not that important to Christianity anyway. As I said on Christmas Eve, Christianity is (or should be) about healing and wholeness, finding ways to become better people. Christianity is not about believing unbelievable stories. St. Paul expressed it well in Colossians as we read this morning actually, instructing the people to “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, and patience [] forgive each other [] clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together.”

This is the last Sunday in 2018. A new year awaits us. What does that mean to you? Does it just mean that even colder weather is on its way? Or can we all imagine that the new year may come with a new vision for us as a people. A vision of deep listening to the other in our midst. A vision of inclusion, not by ignoring differences but by deep understanding, humility, and a real desire to see love expressed in our own lives, living into the vision that St. Paul is inviting us into.

And if you don't know where to start, start by engaging with local Indigenous people. They are here you know, even though we sometimes think they are hiding. In 2019 the United Church will be calling on all congregations to do just that. What will you find? You might find a new friend. You will definitely find a new vision.

*Amen.*