

Stories from Sabbatical

On June 1st, I embarked on a 12-week extended study leave, commonly called a sabbatical. This was the first sabbatical I'd taken in 13 years of ordained ministry, 9 years as a full time priest in the Diocese of New Westminster, 5 of those 9 years **joyfully employed as the Rector of St. Clement's Church in North Vancouver**. I set out with three areas of study: prayer, the gospels, and Indigenous learning as a non-Indigenous learner.

Andi and I packed up our 2013 Hyundai Tuscon and hit the road. We travelled throughout northwestern British Columbia visiting First Nations historical and cultural sites. The Indigenous Tourism BC app was our guide, Deacon Jenn Ashton, Indigenous Ministry Leader at St. Clement's my reader for the journals I would write during this period of my leave. Thank you, Jenn.

Our first stop was the **Yale Historical Site**. I was eager to see St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church, but we arrived to an empty parking lot and a closed museum. Nevermind, I thought, I'll just go into the church myself and have a look around. You couldn't get into the church, though. It was **fenced off** with the rest of the exhibits. I felt put out, angry even. I'm an Anglican and a priest! As if I have to pay for a ticket and wait for museum opening hours to see one of our own churches! (I tried to jump the fence. I was not successful).

On many occasions, I wondered what it felt like for Indigenous people to find their own history kept behind a paywall or within the confines of a museum? That said, there were instances where museums were either run and curated directly by the First Nation or **working with local Indigenous folk** to repatriate and exhibit pieces belonging to the Nation. (We did in fact wait for the museum at Yale to open so we could have a look around). The sign reads:

Discovering The Cultural Legacy Of Yale. A New Exploration of First Nations Stories and Artifacts. We are excited to announce that we are developing an exhibit showcasing the First Nations heritage in collaboration with the Yale First Nation, Boston Bar First Nation, Spuzzum First Nation, and Chawathill First Nation. We aim to authentically capture the essence and aspirations of the First Nations of this territory. Achieving this requires building solid, trusting relationships with the original inhabitants of Fraser Canyon. And this collaborative process naturally takes time.

We saw the basket weaving exhibit. No photography was permitted, but I can tell you it was incredible.

Once the museum had opened, **we made our way to St. John's Anglican Church**. The curator talked us through something called "craftivism," a new term for me. Craftivism is using arts and crafts as a form of creative nonviolent resistance. The example at St. John's was the vestments and altar hangings made in the late 1800s. **Yale was one of the only places where Indigenous and settler girls** were permitted to go to the same boarding school. Together the girls learned embroidery to make them women fit for modern society. The embroidery and textiles from the Indigenous girls' communities was, of course, being systematically erased by the settlement of the English, but one story that is told at the museum is that **within these hangings and vestments** at St. John's are cleverly hidden stitches, images and designs unique to the First Nation.

I was really touched by this story and I wanted to find a way to commit it to memory, so later in June **I took up embroidery for the first time**. I've been watching YouTube videos and listening to podcasts about craftivism in First Nations cultures as well as in other places around the world (Tatreez embroidery in Palestine is another example).

We visited numerous First Nations sites, the land and architecture distinct in each place. Some have **long houses, others have pit houses**: underground gathering spaces that are invisible from above until you notice **a small door built** into the side of a raised grassy area. What is called potlatch in one place is called feast in another. **Totem poles exist** in some nations, but not all.

On Haida Gwaii, I had my first experience visiting a First Nation in BC that has reclaimed land title. Road signage is in Haida and English. **Maps from BC Parks are side by side with storyboards** which tell the history of the Haida People. We ate fresh dried seaweed in Old Masset, prepared by local carver Cooper Wilson. At \$100 a bag it was out of our price range, but we were grateful for the chat and the opportunity to try something new. We met a descendent of Chief Edenshaw. Her name was Carol. She struck up a conversation while we were walking the grounds at St. Mark's Anglican Church in Port Clements. (Pause for 30 seconds with me while I show you a video of one of the **spectacular views at Port Clements**).

Carol Edenshaw, the lady we met, was conducting the Canadian census for the town of Port Clements. She showed us the salmonberry bushes behind St. Mark's, berries which I recognized from our own Creekside Commons at St. Clement's. Quite by accident, at St. Mark's we stumbled upon a cutting from the **golden spruce tree** made popular by John Vaillant's book by the same name. It's growing in the back garden there. It's not listed on any tourist map. Its planting was a collaboration between the Haida Nation, the Ministry of Forests, and St. Mark's.

There were many other notable stops on our tour through northwestern coastal British Columbia, a tour that really became a pilgrimage. Standing on what felt like holy ground in **Alert Bay** in the empty space where **St. Michael's residential school** used to be, the demolition a joint reconciliation effort between the Anglican Church of Canada and the survivors of the school and

their families. Meeting the three Tsimshian matriarchs who form the lay leadership of the predominantly Indigenous congregation of **St. Andrew's Cathedral** in Prince Rupert, and wondering if one day the Spirit might raise up a Tsimshian priest for the congregation.

After one month on sabbatical, I had put **2882 kilometres on our tired Tuscon** and about 500 nautical miles on various ferries. I should clarify: of the 2882 kilometres we drove, Andi drove 2880. **Thank you, Andi.** Here is a **map of our trip**.

In July, as you may recall, I was supposed to be in residence at St. George's College in Jerusalem. Air Canada cancelled my flights citing "the ongoing conflict in the Middle East." As a Plan B I took two courses at the **Vancouver School of Theology's Indigenous Summer Program**, which gathers Indigenous students locally and from around the world. The program permits 10% enrollment from non-Indigenous students. I felt fortunate to be among that 10% this year.

I spent my mornings in a **Synoptic Gospels class** reflecting on the oral tradition undergirding the Gospels. We're so used to thinking about the Gospels as something written down. In the first century, the Gospels were mostly received aurally, hearing them recited by a leader of a house church, or a leader who was literate and read a copy of Matthew, Mark, or Luke to the gathered community. We wondered aloud as a class: how might Christianity have evolved differently if the Gospels like many First Nations traditions had remained an oral tradition?

In the afternoons at VST, **I learned the history of the Holy Land for the first time from a Palestinian Christian**. The instructor, Shadia Qubti, opened my eyes to the Holy Land as a place that exists today, not just in biblical times or in nativity scenes on Christmas cards. Maori classmates from **Aotearoa New Zealand** spoke to the parallels they saw between their experience as Indigenous Peoples and the experience of Palestinians. My studies informed a series of education days that I'm now helping to plan for clergy of the Diocese of New Westminster. The series is in response to the Resolution on Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation in the Holy Land passed at the 2025 Diocesan Synod.

July was also **World Cup**. I watched all of the England, South Africa and Canada games, sometimes from the **fan zone at Lonsdale Quay**, sometimes from home on the phone with my dad. For the particularly tense semi-final between England and Argentina **a classmate at VST found a way to cast the game**. Three of us snuck out of Chapel to watch the game. We each thought we were sneaking out alone to find an empty classroom to watch the game. When we walked in and found each other we laughed realizing we'd all had the same idea!

I made many connections during my studies at the Vancouver School of Theology. **I met Alexis Kellum-Creer**, a Vancouver-based actor and a Jew who spent three months this year in the West Bank documenting the human right violations committed by Israeli settlers and the Israeli Occupation Forces against Palestinians. Alexis invited me to **Shabbat** with her worshipping community. They are a group of what I would call prophetic Jewish voices. They meet in a local

church in Vancouver, Trinity Grace United. There is a great interview on YouTube where Alexis recounts her trip to the West Bank. I'd be happy to share that link with you.

August brought with it a **new friendship** with a Ugandan newcomer. Hans is an activist with Sexual Minorities Uganda. He arrived in Canada three months ago on an emergency visa after the president of Uganda put a hit on his head for his LGBTQ advocacy. I am grateful for the Canadian government's intervention and I am seeing for the first time up close how little refugees come with when they land in this country. Church communities play a huge role in settling newcomers, as I know you know. Even though Hans is half my age, we have become fast friends and we attended many of this summer's **Pride** marches **together**.

For the final two weeks of my sabbatical, I took time for self and God on retreat at Penny Lou Writer's Cottage on Bowen Island. I cannot express how blessed I felt to be given this time and space to write. (This was **my view for 11 precious days**). I spent my time preparing this presentation as well as a bible study on the Gospel of John informed by Palestinian theology and Indigenous readings of the Gospels. Although John isn't one of the synoptic gospels we studied in my course, it is the Gospel said by some to be Antisemitic or Anti-Jewish. Given my learning in Palestinian Theology, I'm hoping to explore this claim in a bible study this fall with whoever might be keen to attend. **I also continued my translation of the Gospel of Luke** from biblical Greek to English, a project I've been working on with St. Clement's resident New Testament scholar Jenny Read-Heimerdinger.

I had expected to develop a study on prayer during my sabbatical. This didn't happen, at least not in the traditional sense. Some of you will know that before I left, the St. Clement's Parish Council had been discussing the value of clergy investing time in social media ministry, developing short videos on Christianity and Anglicanism. TikTok sermons were even discussed. I was surprised to find the energy to do just this while on leave. In August, I created an Instagram account called **What Reverend Helen Said** and have been filming and posting content. It's my attempt to connect progressive Christian theology with current events. I'm no Gen Z social media influencer, that's for sure. I'm learning though that we need more leaders, especially faith leaders, to step into online spaces, however imperfectly. So far I have addressed topics such as Why Jesus?; The Doctrine of Discovery; What Jesus Has to Do with Low-Income Public Transit; and the Kairos II Palestine work produced by Palestinian Christians living in the Holy Land. In the days to come, What Reverend Helen Said will be the place where I hope to develop that series on prayer, albeit in a different format than I'd initially imagined.

To conclude, you might be wondering how much a 3-month sabbatical costs. All said and done, it came to about **\$15,000**. I was awarded a \$5000 grant from the Anglican Church of Canada's continuing education plan and a \$3000 grant from the Diocese of New Westminster's Murrin Fund. St. Clement's very generously covered the cost of clergy supply at about \$3000. The rest was my own personal share, which I was happy to contribute.

Those are the dollar amounts. **There were of course many people at St. Clement's** who pitched in time and skill to help make my sabbatical possible. Thank you Deacons Peggy, Jenn, and Elizabeth; thank you Beth and Lynley; thank you wardens Lucy and Donna and the Parish Council; thank you Emilie and Claude.

I welcome your comments, questions, and reflections.