

**THREE STREAMS, flowing together, formed a meaningful confluence in my life this past week and helped to shape the message I share this morning.**

**THE FIRST was the Columbia River Conference: ONE RIVER – ETHICS MATTER, a virtual gathering hosted by the Okanagan Nation Alliance and the University of British Columbia.<sup>1</sup>**

The conference focused on the ethical, spiritual, and cultural relationship that Tribal communities spread out along the length and breadth of the Columbia River and its tributaries have had and continue to have with that great river system.

**Two things I heard that day stand out.**

**The first came from Okanagan Grand Chief Stewart Philip.**

He spoke of the precious nature of these river waters and how the salmon, which have plied them for thousands of years, are deeply connected to the life and health of his people and to their ethical understanding of how to live in the world.

He lamented over the 60 dams and structures that have been built on the Columbia and its tributaries and how those structures inhibit the sacred relationship between the salmon and his people.

He noted the changes and losses he'd witnessed in his lifetime and his fear that the worst was yet to come. **But he also left us an image of hope.**

**Chief Philip recalled a trip he'd taken 30 years ago to Dry Falls, in the heart of the Grand Coulee of Eastern Washington.**

**The Dry Falls cataract**, as some may know, was formed over the course of millennia as each Ice Age in a series of Ice Ages came to a close, and the melting ice sheets produced great floods which swept through the region, reshaping the landscape.<sup>2</sup>

**It's estimated that at the height of those floods, the flow of water over that 3½-mile-wide chasm we call DRY FALLS was ten times the current flow of all the rivers in the world combined—the greatest known waterfall ever to exist on Earth.**

**Recalling himself surveying this scene, Chief Philip said,  
IN SPITE OF FACT THERE IS NO WATER—YOU CAN HEAR THE WATER.**

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<sup>1</sup> A recording of the webinar here can be found here:

<sup>2</sup> For more information about these serial Ice Age floods, check out the Ice Age Floods Institute website: <https://iafi.org/about-the-ice-age-floods/introduction/> and the Washington State Park at Dry Falls <https://parks.state.wa.us/251/Dry-Falls-Visitor-Center>

**What I took him to mean was – the memory of what was continues to animate the land.** The sacred relationship between the people, the river, and the salmon still serves as the ethical and spiritual foundation of the tribes; it is remembered and must be restored.

**The second moment from the conference that's stuck with me was related by John Sirois, a leader of the Colville Confederated Tribes.**

John retold the ancient story of how, when the first humans were created, the animals gathered around to look at these scrawny, two-legged creatures, and they asked: HOW WILL THESE PITIFUL PEOPLE SURVIVE?

**It was SALMON, the story goes, who spoke up first:  
WE ARE WILLING TO SHARE, salmon said. THEY CAN TAKE FROM OUR BODIES.**

The fruit of that conference, then, was the first stream that flowed through my week.

**THE SECOND STREAM** in my week was another virtual event: an online worship service marking of the closing of the CHAPEL OF THE CROSS at Luther Seminary.

**Like the river conference, this event also took place on the Wednesday the 17<sup>th</sup>, which would have been my mother Shirley's 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday.**

My first two years of seminary happened to correspond with my mother's final two years of seminary. And when our schedules found us on campus together, we often made a point of connecting.

One of those points of connection was the daily chapel service, and CHAPEL OF THE CROSS was one of the places where those services was held. I remember being there with her in worship—her soprano voice joining in harmony with my baritone.

**Participating in the final service held in that sacred space, on my mother's birthday, added an especially poignant layer of meaning to my day.**

**THE THIRD STREAM** flowing through my week was not virtual but rather literal: **Fauntleroy Creek.**

On Wednesday I got a text from a friend announcing that COHO SALMON HAD RETURNED TO FAUNTLEROY CREEK.

I didn't make it down to the creek that day, but late afternoon on Thursday I did—and it was quite a sight.

The rain was coming down heavily as I parked my car and headed down the street to the wooden stairs that lead into the forest. It was high tide, and soon after arriving I was rewarded with the view of a red-sided Coho male biding his time in a shallow pool, gathering energy for where the next phase of his journey would take him.<sup>3</sup>

**Further on down**, where the creek does a loop-de-loop before disappearing into the culvert under Fauntleroy Way, I saw two other large males staking out their territory and occasionally getting into turf battles as they awaited the arrival of an egg bearing female and the opportunity to fertilize her eggs.

**It wouldn't be long, I knew, before these COHO, now very much alive, would be lying in the stream bed, their life energy spent, their purpose of seeding a future generation accomplished.**

**They had come**, as David Duncan once wrote, to nail "their shining bodies to lonely beds of gravel, not for anything they stand to gain, but that tiny silver offspring and 300 salmon-eating species of flora and fauna may live and thrive."<sup>4</sup>

**And so, on Thursday last week, those three streams that had been flowing through my life came together in a confluence of sorts—one that, I think, has deep connections to our gospel on this CHRIST REIGNS SUNDAY.**

Now some of you are saying, I THOUGHT IT WAS CALLED CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY? and you're right. But an alternative title for this final Sunday of the church year has emerged in recent decades – CHRIST REIGNS. That's R-E-I-G-N-S.

(Though given the theme of this sermon the alternate spelling might work just as well!)

You see Jesus steadfastly refused to claim the title KING, though there were plenty who wanted him to take that mantle—and even PILATE seems to do so in today's gospel.

**After all, it would make things easier for him – PILATE that is – if Jesus did.**

Then the whole affair would be cut and dried and the murkiness of this trial would resolve into crystal clarity. If Jesus claimed kingship, he would be guilty under Roman law of setting himself against Caesar.

So Pilate asks him: ARE YOU THE KING OF THE JEWS?

Whereupon Jesus answers: MY KINGDOM IS NOT FROM THIS WORLD.

**Which is to say, the reign I represent is not authorized by the worldly powers in which you operate, Pilate.**

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<sup>3</sup> See West Seattle Blog article about the return of COHO to the creek: <https://westseattleblog.com/2021/11/followup-more-salmon-show-up-in-fauntleroy-creek-and-another-chance-to-try-to-see-them/>

<sup>4</sup> David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays*. P. 167

SO YOU ARE A KING? Pilate asks again, seeking to pin him down.

And Jesus answers:

YOU SAY THAT I AM A KING. FOR THIS I WAS BORN AND FOR THIS I CAME INTO THE WORLD, TO TESTIFY TO THE TRUTH. EVERYONE WHO BELONGS TO THE TRUTH LISTENS TO MY VOICE.

It isn't long after this courtroom scene before Jesus' body, shining with the blood that flows from his wounds, is nailed to the lonely planks of a wooden cross. Not for anything he stood to gain, but that you and I and all this inhabited world might live and thrive—both in this life and in the life of the world to come.

The Salmon spoke: We are willing to share with these pitiful human beings. They can take from our bodies.

Christ spoke: Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Do this to remember me.

The Chapel of the Cross on the seminary campus gets its name from a three dimensional sculpture by Paul Granlund that rises up from the floor in the midst of the congregation.

It is Christ, reigning from the cross, his head fallen forward, his body spent, his mission accomplished.

There is but ONE whose reign is trustworthy and true.

Who stakes his claim on us NOT by assertions of power or privilege NOR through claims on entitlement, but by giving himself away completely—forsaking heaven for earth to share his lot with us pitiful creatures; to tear down any structure that would inhibit love's flow, and restore the way to abundant life.

Susan Cherwien says it so powerfully in our hymn of the day:

Now in the latter days you call, O Christ, and plead the premise clear,  
that power grasped is none at all, and serving shows your Spirit near.  
As nations clash and wisdom wanes, as glories tempt and greed sustains,  
you bid us choose in every hour the power of love, the greatest power,  
that love may herald God's domain, and you, at last, may come to reign.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *Before the Ancient One, Christ Stands*. Susan Palo Cherwien © 1997, admin. Augsburg Fortress. This hymn, to a setting by Robert Buckley Farlee, appears as hymn #953 in the All Creation Sings hymnal, an *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* Supplement published by Augsburg Fortress Press in 2020.