



INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS

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# DREAMING OF AN INDIGENOUS CHRISTMAS

A Journey through Advent with the  
Indigenous Pathways Family



# **INDIGENOUS PATHWAYS**

## **THANK YOU FOR JOINING US ON THIS JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS**

Indigenous Pathways envisions a better future for Indigenous peoples around the globe. Our family of nonprofit organizations is bringing that dream to life through the work of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community and iEmergence. Rooted in Indigenous values and framed by our faith as followers of the Jesus Way, we offer our own stories as a way for others to find their paths as well.

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We see land and sea not as resources to use, but as relationships to honour. In the same way, Advent calls us to revere our relationships with God and those around us.

-  
Raisera McCulloch

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# CHAPTER

## INTRODUCTION

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## **CRYSTAL PORTER**

Crystal Porter, who is mixed Euro-Canadian and Mi'kmaw, is chair of the board of Indigenous Pathways.

Crystal grew up on the ocean in a little fishing community in Ktaqukuk (Newfoundland). Since then, her work as a pastor with the Salvation Army has brought her to Labrador and Winnipeg. She graduated from NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community with a Master of Theological Studies degree in 2020 and has attended iEmergence's Kids Culture Camp in Saskatchewan with her family.

# INTRODUCTION CRYSTAL PORTER

Beyond the beautiful decorations, the delicious food and the family gatherings, there is something extraordinary about the Advent season. There is space to sit and listen to the ancient dreams and visions throughout Scripture. There is room to hope, to experience joy, to settle into peace and to be enveloped into love. Advent reminds us that there is hope for renewal — that the story doesn't end.

In this Advent season, we invite you into the circle. Sit with us, learn with us and reflect on the Christmas story through the writings of our Indigenous Pathways community.

Several reflections draw inspiration from the theme of this year's NAIITS symposium, "Dreaming our World Home: The Roots and Role of Visions in Creating Indigenous Futures/ an Indigenous Future." In describing the symposium, it was shared that "dreams and visions have always been a conduit for our renewal. Through dreams, we return to our origins as we

journey into the future. Visions are creative doorways that help answer in community, 'What does it look like to live at our best?'

Throughout the Christmas story, dreams and visions are a central theme. At the heart of Advent is a vision for a renewed creation and a restoration of relationships — with Creator, ourselves and all of creation.

Scripture shares in John 1:

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD. HE WAS IN THE BEGINNING WITH GOD. ALL THINGS WERE MADE THROUGH HIM, AND WITHOUT HIM WAS NOT ANYTHING MADE THAT WAS MADE. IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THE LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF MEN. THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS HAS NOT OVERCOME IT. — JOHN 1:1-5 ESV

When Creator spoke the world into existence, it was good. The creeks spoke of his abundant love. The trees revealed her mighty strength. The sounds of creation shouted the Creator's praise. It was good.

Thousands of years later, we can see the brokenness and disconnect in relationships.

And yet in a world in need of healing, Jesus enters.

Advent is a season of hope, joy, peace and love. A time when we gather, celebrating with friends and family, focusing on the one who restores the goodness in the world.

Jesus enters the story at a crucial moment — darkness, pain, sorrow were all around — and he offered light. The same light that was at the beginning. These new teachings, these amazing moments were not creating some new world — it was redeeming Creator's already formed masterpiece. A restoration to goodness and completion of the circle.

Of course, we envision a Christmas season of family gatherings, delicious food and perhaps even dreams of dancing sugarplums, and yet the real dream of this season remains the renewal of creation and a hope of restored relationships.



# CHAPTER 2

## FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

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## **MACKENZIE GRIFFIN**

Mackenzie Griffin, Cree and Saulteaux from Treaty Six Territory, currently resides on Syilx territory in Kelowna, British Columbia. A Master of Theological Studies student at NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, she explores Indigenous perspectives on storying and community-healing. She serves as a Global Social Media Storyteller with the Peace and Reconciliation Network, sharing heart-centered narratives of peace amidst conflict. A poet, theologian and fantasy writer, her work is published with Love is Moving, Faith Today and UBCO.

# THE FIRST SONGS OF PROMISE MACKENZIE GRIFFIN

THEN TO ENCOURAGE HER, GABRIEL SAID, “YOUR COUSIN CREATOR IS MY PROMISE (ELIZABETH), WHO WAS CALLED BARREN ONE, IS SIX MOONS WITH CHILD. SEE! THERE IS NOTHING TOO HARD FOR THE GREAT SPIRIT.” — LUKE 1:36 FNV

Freshly invigorated, Mary trusts the angel Gabriel and sets off to see her cousin. She carries the wisdom and hope of an ancestral promise in her heart and makes the journey to the neighbouring village of her relatives. Upon meeting, Elizabeth’s child leaps for joy, and she blesses Mary for her belief — a contrast to her husband, Zechariah, who is silenced for his doubt. Mary and Elizabeth were matriarchs who carried the first songs of promise, honouring a faith that transcends generations.

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, two songs close the story: Mary’s, a

blessing of God’s faithfulness to her and her ancestors, and Zechariah’s, a prophetic word for his child, declaring, “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him... to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace” (Luke 1:76-79 NIV).

This interwoven promise is both ancestral and relational. The birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of a generational promise extending back to Abraham and Sarah and connected to the royal line of David. Mary’s gift as life-carrier to the Most High is an unfathomable blessing and evidence of the value of the matriarchs who carried the first songs of promise. In Mary’s courage, we see the power of the matriarchs who carry these songs of hope amidst uncertainty, lies and unbelief.

Indigenous matriarchs carry the wisdom of the sacred role of life-carriers. Grounded in their connection to the land, ceremony and the spirit that binds all things, matriarchs understand the blessing and hope of life. Although Mary could be shunned by her entire community and divorced by her husband-to-be, Mary remains Creator's servant. She holds hope that all things will be made right, even without knowing how. Amidst uncertainty and Mystery, hope prevails.

Don't get me wrong. It is hard to hope when all we see are reasons not to believe. I am writing this very reflection in the days after the results of the U.S presidential election,

and I work in global storytelling, where I am consistently weighed down by the lack of response and support for those who are suffering. Thankfully, hope is not a feeling or a wish. The hope of Jesus is his very life. Jesus' humble beginning starts with the silence of disbelief and a song of hope in the promise of God. Jesus Christ is the Giver of Life, the Hope for All Generations past, present and future.

*What promises of hope have been passed down to you?*

*How are you being called to carry them forward for those who come after you?*



# CHAPTER

3

## SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

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## **RAISERA MCCULLOCH**

Raisera McCulloch graduated this summer with a Graduate Certificate in Theology from NAIITS College.

NAIITS College is NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community in Australia and a member institution of Sydney College of Divinity.

# PEACE IN ALL OUR CONNECTIONS

## RAISERA MCCULLOCH

As Advent begins, I find myself reflecting on the Pacific concept of *va*, the sacred relational space we share with others, creation and Creator.

In Tuvaluan culture, while the term *va* isn't explicitly used, the deep respect for relationships — with family, community, *fenua* (land) and *moana* (ocean) — embodies this concept beautifully. The Tuvaluan way of life shows that every person and element of creation is connected, each with a responsibility to nurture these bonds.

For me, *va* is a reminder to care for the inner spaces I carry, which need tending as I prepare my heart this season.

Advent, after all, is a time of preparation and expectation, a pause to make room for peace and for prophetic imagination. It invites me to consider how I might create space in my heart and relationships to honour what's sacred. This season isn't just

about waiting for Christmas or for reflection only, it's a call to nurture peace in all my connections and to prepare the way for Christ, who is the Prince of Peace.

The prophet Isaiah offers words that echo the spirit of *va*:

PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD; MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD. — ISAIAH 40:3 NIV

Prophets like Isaiah are reminders of our call to seek peace and justice — not only in the world, but also within ourselves. This is a call from my Tuvaluan family as we face the injustice of climate change and rising sea levels. To speak with hope in the "in-between space" requires of us to be prepared with the peace that passes all worldly understanding. Calling out global political imbalance

and greed is no small feat for one of the smallest nations on earth. Speaking life amid a crisis is void without hope.

But just as Tuvaluans actively respect their relationships with one another and all of creation, the prophet's message urges us to clear out what stands in the way of peace — bitterness, indifference and division.

We see land and sea not as resources to use, but as relationships to honour. In the same way, Advent calls us to revere our relationships with God and those around us. When we create space for peace in our lives, we embody the prophet's message, honouring Christ by nurturing our connections and making room for divine love.

This Advent, may we learn from the wisdom of *va*, choosing to honour each relationship with care. May we prepare our hearts as sacred spaces, welcoming Christ not only into the season, but also into every interaction we tend. As the prophets remind us, peace begins within, and just as our people hold their connections as sacred, we are invited to create a space where God's love and peace can reign.

*What is one thing you can do during this season to nurture peace in your relationships...*

- *With others?*
- *With all of creation?*
- *And with Creator?*



# CHAPTER

The word "CHAPTER" is written in red capital letters, positioned within a large, dark gray, three-dimensional block that resembles a stylized '4'. The block is oriented diagonally, with the letters "CHAPTER" visible on its front face.

## THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

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## **SHERELLE COTECSON**

Sherelle Cotecson hails from Mindanao, an island in the southern Philippines. A member of the faculty of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, Sherelle holds a Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies degree, has more than two decades of experience in grassroots community work and is involved in training and mentoring community members in transformational development work.

# GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE

## SHERELLE COTECSON

BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, "DO NOT BE AFRAID. I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS THAT WILL CAUSE GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE. TODAY IN THE TOWN OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN TO YOU; HE IS THE MESSIAH, THE LORD. THIS WILL BE A SIGN TO YOU: YOU WILL FIND A BABY WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER." — LUKE 2:10-12 NIV

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It seemed like any other ordinary night — especially for those shepherds who were out tending to their sheep. The conversation around the fire as they kept themselves warm was probably almost as dark as the time of night. They were on the lookout for threat and danger when something unexpected happened.

This week's Advent theme of joy hearkens back to that time when something only the unseen world was privy to

was about to happen, and it could not contain itself. This seemingly unlikely encounter between shepherds with their flocks and heavenly beings with their exuberant message of joy pierced the veil of darkness. After the shepherds' instinctive fears were calmed, the message of good news of great joy for all people was fully declared and received, at least by those who heard it at that time.

It could also be because some — if not all — of them remembered the stories of the ancestors about this possibility.

Or it could be both.

The experience was so compelling that the shepherds could not help but see for themselves this good news. It did not matter that the details of this news (baby, swaddling clothes and manger) seemed incongruent to the majestic manner of the announcement. That is what joy does. It makes sense, but not in a commonsense or

logical way. Even when the celestial spectacle was over and the darkness of night had returned, there was no room for doubt. They had to go and somehow trust that the sheep would be fine because what they had received was something that could not be contained.

Joy is the evidence that every gift of vision, every promise fulfilled and every hope rekindled is a visitation by Creator in a myriad of ways. On that extraordinary night long ago, it was a visitation to invite creation (shepherds and sheep alike) to take part in the good news of great joy for all people that Creator will always choose to be with creation, even — and maybe especially — when they feel vulnerable and hopeless.

The story goes on with the shepherds continuing to share this joy with everyone who would listen, and this joy expressed in worship proved to be contagious. The invisible reached out through their words to indelibly touch everyone who heard them, who in turn continued to tell because this good news of great joy is meant for all people.

In whatever language this good news is announced, the visitation is the same, and it is no less needed and effectual now than it was during that first night.

*How can you create space for joy in this season, even when it doesn't make sense?*

*What is bringing you joy right now? Share a joy on social media — tag Indigenous Pathways on Facebook or @naiitscommunity on Instagram — to encourage others.*



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CHAPTER

## FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

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## **RENEE BEGAY**

Renee Kylestewa Begay is from the Pueblo of Zuni in Southwest New Mexico. Renee is a mother to three daughters and is married to her high school sweetheart, Donnie Begay. She founded the Nations movement — a national ministry that seeks to build relationships between the church and Native American communities — and now works with iEmergence in New Mexico.

# SEED SONGS

## RENEE BEGAY

AND MARY SAID:

"MY SOUL GLORIFIES THE LORD  
AND MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY SAVIOR,

FOR HE HAS BEEN MINDFUL OF THE HUMBLE STATE OF HIS SERVANT.

FROM NOW ON ALL GENERATIONS WILL CALL ME BLESSED,  
FOR THE MIGHTY ONE HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR ME — HOLY IS HIS NAME.

HIS MERCY EXTENDS TO THOSE WHO FEAR HIM, FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION.

HE HAS PERFORMED MIGHTY DEEDS WITH HIS ARM;  
HE HAS SCATTERED THOSE WHO ARE PROUD IN THEIR INMOST THOUGHTS.

HE HAS BROUGHT DOWN RULERS FROM THEIR THRONES  
BUT HAS LIFTED UP THE HUMBLE.

HE HAS FILLED THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS BUT HAS SENT THE RICH AWAY EMPTY.

HE HAS HELPED HIS SERVANT ISRAEL, REMEMBERING TO BE MERCIFUL

TO ABRAHAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS FOREVER, JUST AS HE PROMISED OUR ANCESTORS." — LUKE 1:46-55 NIV

As a child, when I would sit at the dinner table with my family, my ears would absorb the adult conversations about our traditional ways, the preservation of our ways and the grief over what has been lost. The comments were usually brought on as a result of the local, national and global highlights in the nightly news. My developing brain could not fully comprehend the implications of what the newscaster said, but my young mind could sense the urgent weight in their tone.

While my ears caught every third word and tried to figure out its meaning, my eyes would always gaze up at the metal pendant light hanging over the kitchen table. On the bottom curve of the metal was a miniature stuffed koala with a baby koala on its back — a trinket that my grandpa attached to the pendant to remind me that I was the baby koala on his back. It gave me comfort to know that even if I didn't fully understand the urgency of those conversations, I could look up and be reminded of the loving mercy available to me.

"We must take care of the seeds that were entrusted to us," my uncle urged me a couple of years ago. Now, as an adult, I know what he meant; the metaphorical, the symbolic, the literal... all of it. As a child, the story of the seeds was present fully, only understood to me in parts. Yet, even carrying the story of the seeds in parts was an attempt toward the whole. I had not yet known the whole story and purpose of the seeds, and I am still learning. Attached to these seed songs are reminders of who we are as a people and our values.

I imagine that Mary would hear adults talk in the same way. I imagine that she grew up catching parts of the seeds of her tradition's faith. The song that Mary sang in Luke 1 spoke about her deep faith. In her song, she was able to recite back who she was and where she came from. She gave remembrance to the seeds that were given to her people, and she gave honor to God for how he interacted with her people, scattering the proud, bringing down the rulers from their thrones, exalting the lowly and satisfying the hungry with good things. Her song of exaltation was so resolved even in her physical and social state of complexity. Her gaze was fixed on the loving promise.

This song that she sang was later repeated in essence by the beloved son she gave birth to. Jesus fulfilled the parts to the whole song and began, "Blessed are the..." (Matthew 5:1-12). Mary took all the parts of her experiences with Jesus and "treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:19). I recognize her devotion to preserve and remember all that she saw.

It is pretty easy to concentrate on and grieve over what has been lost. The seed songs given to my people remind me of who I am and remind me of the centuries-long line of people that I come from so that I know how to live in the present. It is between these stories of the “whole” and “part” that I sense those good stories transcend the moment. And when I tie these seed stories together with others, we give each other insight and depth about the seed songs we were gifted.

The tying of information may get lost in translation, but the attempt lives on and gets passed to others so that they too can be reminded what makes us who we are.

*What are the seed songs that remind you of who you are and of your values?*

*How do those seed songs show you how to live in this present moment?*

*What is one thing you can do during this season to preserve and remember what you have seen?*



# 6

CHAPTER

## CHRISTMAS

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## **TERRY LEBLANC**

Terry LeBlanc has been active in full-time vocational ministry with the Native North American community since 1978. Terry is director emeritus of NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community, which he co-founded in 2000. He and his wife, Bev, also are Elders in residence with NAIITS and serve in a teaching capacity at the Healing Centre in the Abegweit First Nation Mi'kmaw community. Terry completed his PhD at Asbury Theological Seminary and was awarded honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees by Acadia University in 2015 and by Knox College in 2019.

# EVENT... UALLY TERRY LEBLANC

NOW FAITH IS CONFIDENCE IN WHAT WE HOPE FOR AND ASSURANCE ABOUT WHAT WE DO NOT SEE. THIS IS WHAT THE ANCIENTS WERE COMMENDED FOR. — HEBREWS 11:1-2 NIV

In what has often been referred to as the “faith chapter,” the writer of the book of Hebrews asserts that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” The chapter goes on to describe the journeys of people throughout time who, one after another, exercised faith. They looked forward to seeing something happen, felt assured that it would and ultimately never saw it come.

Does that mean God was not acting in good faith with humanity while simultaneously expecting human beings to “keep the faith?” Was God engaged in some sort of divine bait and switch, toying with human beings and their emotions? How, when nothing actually came

to pass after such a long period of time, could they say God was even interested in the affairs of his creation? God promised. Prophets proclaimed. The message was consistent through the ages. But nothing seemed to happen. The Saviour did not come — at least not when or as expected.

Even the sincerest, most faithful seekers after God got the timing, features and place wrong. The mathematical calculations of Zoroastrian seers did sort it out with some level of precision — but even that was after the fact. For those who even considered the coming of the Messiah to be a real event, the best they could do was grasp at the straws of prophecy, inserting unique twists of interpretation along the way to the actual unfolding. By the time the Messiah had come, his arrival was completely different than imagined. And that, my friends, is part of the mystery of faith. The answer given is not always to the question asked.

I like to reference the Advent event as the Christ Mass (Christ celebration) since “Christmas” over time has conflated the commercial and the historical/spiritual meanings so they become all but unrecognizable as the celebration of the Chosen One. That is, after all, what our storied ancestors in the faith chapter were looking for — the Christ event.

Looking back from our comfortable perch in the 21st century, we can say with certainty it did come. There were, after all, many witnesses. Yet we must still embrace the Christ event by faith, albeit in a retrospective way. As we listen to the stories of those for whom the future was never realized, and those for whom it became real, we finally get the picture of what, how, when, where and who the participants were in the story.

In 2024, our retrospective of the Christ Mass is more profoundly and compellingly clear; not because we have a better biblical understanding, nor better skills at deciphering prophecy; neither is it because we are more cozily connected and “in the know” as Creator’s confidants. We wait in faith and assurance

today not for some unrealized promise to manifest, wringing our hands and feigning anxiety; we wait precisely because those who went before us, whose profound faith was ultimately unrewarded, showed us the way. Each year during Advent we really do feign hope and faith, we imitate not only those chronicled in the faith chapter, but people of other lands and cultures who waited for an event whose meaning they could neither fully understand, nor fully appreciate, and whose realization they were not even aware of for many years hence.

*Skmaqn* in Mi’kmaw means “waiting,” or “waiting place.” That’s where we sit on this final day of Advent — in the place of a hoped-for appearance, waiting to celebrate the Christ event once more and yet also for the very first time. The Christ has come!

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised” (Hebrews 11:39)... since that hope and faith were first and finally realized in the birth, the incarnation, the taking on of flesh.

*Wli Nipi Alasutmamk!*  
Christmas blessings, all!



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# WISHING YOU A MERRY CHRISTMAS

If you have found these reflections meaningful, please consider supporting our work at Indigenous Pathways with a donation at [indigenouspathways.com/donate](https://indigenouspathways.com/donate).

