

The Circle of Life
 John 21:1-19
 Revelation 5:11-14, 7:1-3
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 April 18, 2010
 Native American Awareness Sunday

The Native American people are storytellers. Different stories and rituals make up each tribe's traditional spirituality.

One story comes from the Cheyenne Nation. The tribes of this nation have inhabited the Great Plains, from Southern Colorado to the Black Hills of South Dakota. This story was told by Mary Little Bear Inkanish ("To Feed My People: The Coming of Corn," in Marriott and Rachlin, *American Indian Mythology*, pp.100-104).

The Cheyenne storyteller talks from the west side of the tipi; all the listeners form a circle along the curved tipi walls. A visiting storyteller would have been served a feast, often of dried fruit or intestines stuffed with pounded meat—like sausages, roasted over the fire. And everyone was expected to listen and stay awake! If anyone fell asleep, the storyteller would pack up and go home.

Once long, long ago men would go away from the main camp to hunt. If a man would be gone a long time, he took his family along with him with their tipi. One day a man took his wife and little boy on a hunting trip close by Rose Creek in Montana. The Cheyenne called the creek Tomato Creek, because what they called "wild tomatoes" grew there; but really they were rose hips, not "tomatoes." The story is called "Tomato Creek Story."

The father went out to hunt, and the wife and son waited and waited, but the father didn't return. They waited for days and days. They stayed in their tipi, and the mother went out to pick rose hips—she called them "tomatoes," and she made soup from them.

One day when she was out gathering the "tomatoes," a stranger came to the tipi door, and looked in and asked the little boy, "Are you all by yourself?" He said he was. The stranger asked if he could come in and play. And the little boy said, yes, he could come in.

When the stranger went into the tipi all the way, the little boy could see that he was a young boy too. But the stranger was a fat boy, with big round cheeks and stomach, whereas he was a thin and pitiful boy. The two boys played together in the tipi. After a while the stranger stood up and said he was ready to go. But before he left, he danced and sang a song:

"Little child is alone, Little child is alone, They might eat me! They might eat me! Heyehh!"
 Then he ran out of the tipi and was gone.

That night the mother came home with only a handful of wild tomatoes. She had walked all day and found so little to eat. Her little boy was happy and excited and told her that he had

had a visitor that day. He told her how the visitor boy was round and fat, and he told her that the fat boy wanted to come back the next day. She said he could, to help her son pass the time when she would be out gathering food.

The next day the fat boy came again. The little boy told him how his mother was out gathering tomatoes, for that was all they had to eat. And that she would be gone a long time. So the fat boy came into the tipi and they played, and he sang and danced: "Little child is alone, Little child is alone, They might eat me! They might eat me! Heyehh!"

And again that evening the mother came home with only a few rose hips, and the little boy told her about his visitor. She asked him to find out more about the strange, fat boy. And the next day the same thing happened, and then that night the little boy told his mother the song the fat boy sang: "Little child is alone, Little child is alone, They might eat me! They might eat me! Heyehh!"

And the mother took her knife from its sheath at her belt and whetted it against a flat stone until it was as sharp as sharp. "Now," she said, "tomorrow when the fat boy comes, let him begin to sing and dance, and then take this knife and put it right through his stomach."

And so the fat boy came again the next day, and when he wanted the little boy to sing and dance with him, the little boy said he was too weak—for he hadn't eaten enough—and he could not dance. "If I were fat like you, I could dance and play! But I'm poor and thin, and I'm too tired to play." "It isn't any fun to dance alone," the fat boy said. But he danced one more time and sang his song, and the little boy reached for his knife and jabbed it right in the middle of the fat boy's stomach.

Grain of corn began streaming out of his stomach like a river of blood, and the fat boy turned and ran out of the tipi and away as fast as he could run. Corn fell to the ground in a trail behind him. The little boy ran out of the tipi, shouting, "Mother! Mother!" And the mother came out of the brush by the creek where she was hiding, "What is it, my son?"

"Look," he said, picking up the grain, "maybe it's good to eat!" "I have never seen this before," his mother said. They followed the trail of corn along the creek and came to a buffalo calfskin lying on the ground, filled with more corn. The mother raised her hands and gave thanks for the grain, and they gathered up the sack of grain and picked up every kernel on the ground all the way back to the tipi, and saved it. The mother and the little boy had all they could eat for the rest of the winter. In the spring, the band of hunters came back and found the mother and child. The hunters divided and shared the meat from the hunt, and the woman divided and shared the grain, and from then on, the Cheyenne people ate well. This story had a second name, "The Coming of Corn."

Before life on the reservation, the Cheyenne people had phases of being an agricultural people, and then a people of nomadic bison hunters. The story explains to the children of the tribe how corn came about. And it also shares the values of the people: that people help one another and that they can have hope. It is a story of scarcity and abundance, being alone and then celebrating being together.

The story at the Sea of Galilee was also a story of first being alone, then being together; first having little to eat, then having plenty. This story was probably added on to the Gospel of John well after the rest of the Gospel was written. I think it was an ending added on to show that the people who were abandoned after Jesus' death would, in fact, never be alone again. They would be together, and Jesus would be mysteriously present, and there would always be enough food for abundant living.

The story at the seaside began with Peter saying, "I'm going fishing." Like, "We can't sit around just because Jesus died." There were 7 of them all together, and the 6 said to Peter, "We'll go with you." And all night long they fished and caught nothing. At dawn, as the sun was rising in the East, they saw a man on the beach as they returned to shore. And he called out to them, "You didn't catch anything, did you? Why don't you cast the net to the other side of the boat?" And they did—for some reason they listened to him—, and they hauled in a tremendous catch! *Then* Peter recognized Jesus! And here's the funny part, Peter was naked, but put on his clothes, before jumping into the water to go meet Jesus! (I guess he didn't want Jesus to see him naked.) The others just rowed on in, and dragged their net onto the shore—it must have taken all six of them because there were 153 fish! (How in the heck did they know there were 153?) And then Jesus invited them to have breakfast with him—*they* were the ones who had the fish, but Jesus invited *them* to brunch. And there was bread already toasting on the fire, and they ate together.

And the story isn't over until Jesus tells Peter in this little tête-à-tête, that he still had work to do: "Feed my sheep"—"Tend my sheep"—"Feed my sheep"—and finally, "Follow me!" This wasn't just about a one-time picnic on the beach. This was about a whole life change.

This is about building trust that you are never alone, and having hope that life will be good, and sharing all of that trust and all of that hope, in fact, sharing all that you have.

This is about a vision of wholeness, the circle of life. That mysterious number of 153—scholars say 153 is the sum of the numbers 1-17, a symbolic number that represents wholeness and perfection, like the number 7, —7 disciples in the boat. When the disciples went about aimlessly, separately day to day, after Jesus died, they were not whole, until they came together and recognized that Jesus was present with them, and then, life resumed, and life was complete.

The Book of Revelation gives us a vision revealed to John of Patmos. We'll be studying this book in the weeks to come. The vision is of all creation: with angels, and creatures—in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea—, and people singing. There were four corners of the earth and four winds, and the rising sun in the East—and the living God warned the people: "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees."

Visions and stories remind us that God has a plan for us in the circle of life. Thanks be to God, the Great Spirit.