

## Ghost Dancing a New Temple: A De-colonizing Riff on John 2:13-19

By Steve Heinrichs (January, 2014)

Wovoka is an old man. A wrinkly 158 years old. Originally from the Nevada desert, he moved to Winnipeg a few years ago for his retirement. He likes the small city life in the urban plains. And so there he lives, on Langside, just off Broadway, not far from here. He spends summer days in the garden – harvesting sacred medicines and admiring tulips – and winters with the neighborhood kids, telling them jokes over hot chocolate and baloney.

Not many know, maybe no one knows, but this old man – Wovoka – was the founder of **Idle No More**. No, no. Not the recent incarnation of Idle No More. That was a bunch of women in Saskatchewan – 3 native, 1 white – who did that. No, we're talking *the original movement*.

Back in the 1880s Wovoka's people, the Paiute, were being hammered to the heavens by settler society. Their land was taken to make space for white waves of immigrants. Their land was ripped up for gold and coal. Food resources were plundered and living waters poisoned. And don't forget the disease – most of the people got smallpox, measles and TB... 60 percent of them died. And in that state of weakness, that's when the missionaries of white God came, seeking to eradicate Native religion in the name of Christ and the gospel of civilization...and backed by government forces, they were largely successful.

Wovoka couldn't stand to see his people in such pain. So one day he went up into the mountains – the Paiute Holy of Holies – to pray. He needed to meet with Sky Father and his son Jesus.

Yeah, Wovoka knew Jesus. Wovoka had embraced the Jesus story that his adopted white Father had passed on to him. But he didn't let go of his traditional way. Wovoka had a two-eyed vision of the Creator...and it was there, up on the mountain, that he met the Great Métis Mystery.

God came to the young Indian in the form of a giant thunderbird and scooped him up into the third heaven,  
...and there Wovoka saw a new creation  
...and there Wovoka saw Jesus – with a coyote smile – dancing and dancing and dancing

- and as Jesus danced, the new earth began to tremble, and swallowed up the greedy ones
- and as Jesus danced, dead buffalo came bursting through the soil and shrieked for joy
- and as Jesus danced, the ghosts of the old and of the young, of grandpas and aunties and all who had been taken too soon, were resurrected and clothed with beautiful brown flesh
- and as Jesus danced, everyone gathered in a circle, joined hands and started dancing with him...never to let go... never to let go...

Thunderbird then took Wovoka back to the mountain. And there he stood, like a Moses on Sinai, like a Moses with ten divine revelations. Gifted by Yahweh, Wakonda,

Kitche Manitou, whatever you want to call the Holy One...Wovoka had a message to share with his people. And thus was born the Ghost Dance.

*True story* - Wovoka called out to the four corners of Turtle Island, calling all Indians to dance before the Lord their cry for liberation. He knew the Ghost Dance could bring hope to those despairing... that it could revitalize cultures that were being shot down...that it was a way to nonviolently resist – in Christ’s name – the dominating ways of settlers. Christian settlers.

And the people responded. Thousands and thousands got word through old time twitter circles...they got in canoes, got on horses, got on trains, and made their way to Wovoka’s ghost dance. And they danced for weeks – literally –weeks on end; in the blazing sun, in freezing weather.

Settler society tried to stop it. They outlawed it. They flashed their teeth and their guns. They wrote stories in the press,

*“The Idle No More movement has lost its focus,”*

**and**

*“Who speaks for Idle No More when  
it’s leadership is divided,”*

**and**

*“Lazy Indians should stop dancing and start working.”*

But that didn’t stop the people. They kept dancing. And as they Ghost Danced, the Spirit took this good news and

spread it like a prairie fire all over the land...up to the Dakotas, over to Saskatchewan and even into the land of the Spirit – Manitoba.

And as the indigenous gathered, Creator met with them...as they danced, signs and wonders came. When Wovoka prayed for rain, the heavens fed dry lands; when Wovoka shouted “Silence” to the storms, the winds stopped; and rumor had it, that Wovoka could heal people.

Most amazing of all, was that there was always enough food for everyone who joined the Ghost Dance, for everyone shared everything, no one claiming any property for themselves. It was so awesome that some thought Wovoka was Jesus, the great trickster returned. And maybe...just maybe...he had.

But then, in December of 1890, this grassroots spiritual movement was forced to **Idle** and **Dance** No More. Government troops bombed a gathering at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. 153 women and children were massacred. Some settlers were outraged – that’s a fact. But some were proud. They remembered the great Elijah, chopping down the Native prophets of Baal. And they praised white God.

The indigenous gave up the ghost...they stopped dancing (at least, publicly)... and who could blame them with the threat of such violence.

What happened to Wovoka? Some say he went into hiding, some say he joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and travelled to England...but others of us know that he eventually made his way to Winnipeg... he needed space and thought Manitoba might afford some rest.

And that's where Wovoka is to this day. He's here.

### **Sunday morning, February 2<sup>nd</sup>.**

Wovoka's up early, enjoying a coffee in his kitchen, rolling a fresh cigarette. The Bible is open. He always starts with Scripture. But today's daily bread is one that Wovoka wants to skip over – John 2...a word that brings back old memories, a word that forces him to deal with the present. For you see, John 2 is Jesus doing the Ghost Dance...*Jesus protesting* what the dominant are doing to "the people," *Jesus stirring* a nonviolent prayer to the heavens, *Jesus dancing* – chaotically for sure – but dancing no less a song of resistance in the Holy of Holies.

**Jesus was Idle No More.** *Can you see it?*

It's near the time of Passover, the narrow streets of the city are jam-packed; usually Jerusalem has about 50 000 people, but during this religious feast – a feast celebrating Israel's freedom from Pharaoh – there's almost 200 000 folks in this hilltop town. Jews from all over Palestine have come to pray, to party, and to pay their religious taxes. And so has Jesus and his pack of disciples.

As soon as Jesus arrives at the temple his eyes hone in on two things: merchants and money-changers. Merchants

are selling sheep and pigeons for temple worship. The money-changers sit in the outer court of the temple, and they convert Roman currency into Tyrian cash so that all the worshippers can pay their taxes with coins that don't have nasty pictures of Caesar or Andrew Jackson or Stephen Harper on them. It's a necessary service, so it seems.

But when Jesus looks at these money-changers and merchants, that backwoods, prophetic spirit starts to flow thru his veins; he gets sad...he gets angry... real angry... and there he goes, dancing a macabre dance, tossing tables to the heavens and whipping moneychangers (*lovingly of course*) into gehenna.

The temple-church board is beside themselves. They flash teeth and guns; want to shoot this young ghost dancer down! "**Why,**" they yell, "**Why are you acting so outrageously?!!!**"

And we know why...don't we?...we've heard it a billion times. It's because the temple, the Church... is ignoring, neglecting, *charity-izing* the poor. The denominational elite aren't giving "the people" good news. Jesus is ticked off **NOT** because there are economic activities going on in the temple...that's always been the case. It's because they've got bad economics...where some get rich, and others get poor. The church had

- ⇒ forgotten the law of Moses (*that enough is enough*),
- ⇒ they'd suppressed the Jubilee of Jeremiah (*that if you know the poor you know God!*)

⇒ they'd outlawed the freedom of Black Elk (*that true community shares everything in the circle*)

Jesus couldn't stand to see that temple amass wealth and neglect his clan – and he certainly wasn't going to write a petition, or put together a Sunday school group to talk about the issues. No, he's compelled to do something; risky, audacious, and utterly foolish. Tossing all wisdom aside – Jesus puts on his dancing shoes and cuts a rug, and when he's done, he dusts off his feet and damns the whole religious system – verse 19 – *"Shut it down, close the doors, board up the windows...this house of worship is so corrupt it's got to go. But don't worry... a new temple will come...a temple where the dispossessed can find real life."*

**Wovoka is sitting in his kitchen.** Scratching his head, he wonders what he should do with this text. Grabbing a pinch of loose tobacco, he says a prayer, and tosses it in the fireplace. And as he closes his eyes, an angel, a shining Coyote comes to him and takes him to the place of dreaming.

Wovoka sees himself. He's walking with a bunch of youth down Portage to Smith St. They're on their way to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. They are sad; they are angry. And within a minute, there they are, breaking into the boardroom, meeting in full swing. The young men start turning tables, the young women are dancing, and Wovoka shouts, "You hypocrites...too many fat wallets, too many big salaries. *You're almost as bad as Canadian*

*MP's!* If you really care about the poor Indian, you'd share what you have. That's what the elders did, that's what they do! Sacrifice and eat last. Creator says, "Change! Or to hell with you."

But just like that angel-Coyote whisks Wovoka away...and he finds himself with some Idle No More lefties...a few Mennonites too... back on the street, on their way to 1284 Portage. That's the Petro-Canada station. It's owned by Sun Cor – the big energy corp that's putting billions into the Alberta Tar Sands, making trillions more in demonic profit as they crucify the creation. Wovoka and company, inspired by Jesus, have bulrushes in hand...they're going to whip up a frenzy. But they also have more. A bomb. They want to sabotage this fossil-fuel sword and beat it into a ploughshare... or something like that.

Running into the gas station, they herd all the attendants out...they block traffic, look both ways, and then...**KABOOM!**

The Petro-Can temple is up in flames, preparing a way for a new Temple...and the Jesus-criminals, they don't run off, they gather round the sacred fire ...and ghost dance...and ghost dance.

But then Coyote whisks Wovoka away again, and whispers in his ear – "What about the church...don't forget the church...what is Jesus going to do there?"

Yeah, what about the church...what would he do there? Would he crash sanctuary doors, blow-up pulpits, storm the people in the pews and rip the fossil-fuel pensions out of their pockets?

Suddenly the kitchen chimney is filled with fluttering. And as Wovoka opens his eyes a raven swoops out of the fireplace, and up to the ceiling. It hovers high...and Wovoka's sights grow large. He nods, he knows. And like that, the ceiling tears apart as this bird comes down softly on the old man's bald head.

"**Hallelujah!**" shouts Wovoka. He gets up and goes to his bedroom, changes out of PJ's, grabs a ribbon shirt and puts his drum in his back pocket. And out the door he goes, walking slowly but steadily, cane in one hand, a feather in the other...down to Furby Street....down to Hope Mennonite Church. Wovoka is on a mission.

It's 10:05. Service half over. People worshipping. Wovoka walks confidently inside... quietly sits in the back. He looks around. He prays. He tries to sing along with the hymns...his harmony isn't good. He watches and waits. Finally, the moment has come. Wovoka feels the Spirit move him. He starts to shake.

*"It's now time for our Congregational announcements and prayer concerns," says the worship leader. "If you have something to share, please come to the front so all can hear."*

Wovoka swiftly gets up, and everyone notices. Heads turn as he makes his way to the mike. Some look surprised – *Who is this Indian?* Many smile, trying hard to welcome the stranger.

"Ani...Beau-zhoo...hello friends. My name is Wovoka. Most people call me Jack. I believe the Creator sent me here this morning to offer a few words. A couple days ago, some kids in the neighborhood popped by. They told me that they'd seen some Mennonites at the Idle No More gathering over at Thunderbird House, on Tuesday; said there were a bunch of you listening to Treaty teachings, expressing your solidarity. They even said that you were dancing to the sound of the drum –not very good, but still - moving hand in hand with hundreds of Natives.

I was surprised. *Mennonites? Really?* So I went on Google, and discovered that you guys are doing stuff – supporting native struggles in Ontario through Christian Peacemaker Teams; helping the Young Chip Cree in Saskatchewan get some of their stolen land back; doing good work in Alberta around the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Of course, not all Mennonites are involved... but a surprising number are."

"Friends, I want to thank you and your church for what you've done. I can't tell you how much it's encouraged me to hear this."

Overcome with emotion, Wovoka starts to cry...he's so grateful. He knows how alone his people often feel in this

journey. How depressing it can get when you feel like you're up against the world. But how miraculous it is when others recognize the struggle, and actually **act**.

And as he struggles to control his emotions, tears pour forth...pooling around his feet... covering his ankles.

"Back in 1871," Wovoka says, "the elders of Manitowapaw entered into a treaty with the newcomers at Fort Garry. Over sacred pipes, covenants with Creator and one another were made to live in harmony. We were to be cousins, and this land was to be one bowl with one spoon. Five years later, the Indian Act came in to control us. We tried to respond through prayer – but our religion was made illegal. We tried to respond through your courts – but that was prohibited. Some of our peoples were kicked off their land and relocated. Others were given small chunks of land not suitable for farming. Then our children were taken away to residential and day schools. They came home not knowing who they were, not liking their own people. We were devastated.

But it didn't end there. Blow after blow kept coming. More children were taken in the 60s scoop. In the 70s, many of our women were forcibly sterilized. And in the 80s, despite the Canadian Constitution (which recognizes our treaty rights)...the government refused to deal honestly with land claims; and it continues today."

Tears keep on flowing down Wovoka's face, and the pool by his feet, is now a stream, flowing gently down the aisle

of the sanctuary. Blades of grass are popping up near the edges of the pews, and a young girl tugs her grandpa's arm - "Opa look!" – as a catfish pokes its head out of the water.

"We aren't living the covenant Creator gave us," cries Wovoka. "But we can. And you can help bring that about. We Indians need genuine friends who can walk with us. Friends who know they don't have all the solutions, but are willing to take risks. Friends who won't try to make the current system work for Indians...but join us in the struggle **against the system**... the "civilizing colonialism" that's destroying, not just Indians, but all lifeforms."

"People sometimes tell me, *"Wovoka...It took seven generations to muck things up between us natives and the non-natives...it'll take seven more to fix it."* I get that. This is a struggle for the long haul. But things are also so urgent...that we need to be like Jesus – impatient and angry. Jesus saw the suffering, he lived it, and so he risked everything to shake the death-dealing temples in his world. ***I see the suffering in my world:*** 70% of the people in Manitoba jails are my people. 80% of the kids in the CFS are my kids. This isn't because Natives are culturally backward. It's because the covenant has been broken. I feel the pain. I want change. And I know that you Mennonites can help. We can shake the temple and make something better!"

Wovoka tries to hold back, but he can't help himself now. Weeping uncontrollably, tears flood forth and that

sanctuary stream now becomes like a mighty river. The floorboards burst open as birch trees spring up; walleye and burbot join hundreds of catfish... and that little girl in the back, she sees what's happening; she sees the prophet Ezekiel dancing around a New Temple, celebrating a new Earth.

Old man Wovoka grabs a chair near the pulpit, and flips it over into the water. Using his cane, he confidently steps into his makeshift canoe.

"Thank you, cousins, for all that you've done. Keep on this good path. You have made a difference; and you have the heart and humility *and the power* to make an even bigger difference... to help make the promises of our covenant come true."

And with that, Wovoka shoots his canoe out of the sanctuary, out of the foyer, down to a flooded *Furby Street*, where he zips right past a few anglers who've gathered for some prime-time fishing.

**"Jesus Christ!"** they yell. "Watch where you're going!"

Wovoka turns his head and smiles.