

Roving Reporters in Ketchikan: The Easter Totem

On a recent trip up the Inside Passage to Ketchikan we found ourselves intrigued by the display of totem poles found at two very well-known sites near town — Totem Bight, north of town; and Saxman, south town. This area is the ancient home to three tribes — the Haida, the Tlingit and the Tsimshian. Totems were carved to document family histories, major events, and “stories” that could be handed down through generations. The tribes had no written language, and the various images carved into the totem poles provided essentially an “outline” that facilitated re-telling the stories for generations.



Since we were there over a weekend, we planned to attend the local United Methodist Church, located on a hillside near the downtown area. As we approached the church location we saw a rather plain building, but with something quite extraordinary at the outside front corner of the building: yes, a totem pole. While totems are hardly foreign to this area, they're not typically found downtown. And certainly not adjacent to a church building. We had a few minutes to spare, and we were fascinated with what we discovered.

One of the two plaques next to the totem relates that the “author” of this carving was Rev. David Fison, who served as Pastor in Metlakatla, a nearby Indian community on Annette Island, before coming to the Ketchikan Methodist church in 1961. While in Metlakatla, he was encouraged by the Tsimshian elders to carve an Easter totem as he imagined a Native carver might have depicted the story of Easter in the early 1700s. Since there are parts of the biblical account that would not have been familiar to the ancient tribes of the rainforest, he “translated” the story in some parts so they could be seen as relevant to their culture. The Easter totem at the Ketchikan United Methodist church is a replica of the original carving, which now stands at the St. John UMC in Anchorage.

The plaque on the right, which is a bit too complex to set forth fully here [though its resolution will allow you to enlarge it on your screen], provided a detailed explanation of how to “read” the story from the carved totem. Some totems are read from the top down; while others “read” from the bottom up. The Easter totem was carved in a manner that reads from the bottom up.

Immediately after the church service we made our way back to the Easter totem to read about it more carefully. While the “Easter story” is something that



is very familiar to most Christians, we'd never imagined the challenges of telling that same story in a remote tribal area where no written language then existed; and where important "stories" needed to be memorialized through a series of carved images on a tall cedar pole. Things that we might assume would be meaningful in other cultures simply do not have relevance to the persons hearing the story. For instance, the notion of breaking bread assumes that the listener knows what bread actually is. And in a rainforest, grains do not grow — so even the concept of "bread" becomes unintelligible.

To cite another example, the Easter totem had to deal with the notion of Judas accepting 30 coins to betray Jesus. Here's another part of the story that has no meaningful counterpart in ancient tribal culture. The notion of coins, or money, simply didn't exist. While some items were known to represent instruments that served as a predecessor form of money, the closest analogue the carver could come up with was the use of shells. Thus that portion of the Easter story dealing with "30 pieces of silver" needed to be represented in a different way. The carver chose to depict Judas with a necklace containing 30 shells.



The Easter totem comes with a poem inscribed on an adjacent second plaque. The words are too small to read from the image we captured; but we've re-keyed the text below. Perhaps we should reflect on the benefit we have with a written language that helps us "read" how the carver intended his totem to be understood. Without it our only "book" is the totem itself.

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THE EASTER TOTEM POLE

BY DAVID K FISON

MY FRIEND, BEHOLD THE CARVING!
NOW OPEN UP YOUR SOUL
AND YOU WILL HEAR THE STORY
OF THE EASTER TOTEM POLE

NOW I'VE CARVED THIS SACRED STORY
AFTER THE ANCIENT TSIMSHIAN
USING ONLY WHAT THEY KNEW THEN,
IN TERMS THEY WOULD UNDERSTAND

SMOKED SALMON WAS THEIR BREAD;
FOR GRAINS IN A RAIN FOREST WILL
NOT GROW
AND LET IT BE THE HOWL OF WOLF
FOR THEY HAD NO COCK TO CROW

GREAT CHIEF OF THE HEAVENS
WAS THEIR CREATOR'S NAME
AND RAVEN WAS HIS MESSENGER,
NOW THE STORY I PROCLAIM!

AT A MEMORIAL POTLATCH
JESUS AND THE TWELVE DID MEET
TO TEACH THEM TO BE HUMBLE,
HE WASHES HIS FOLLOWERS' FEET

"TONIGHT, ONE OF YOU WILL BETRAY
ME."

THEN PETER VOWS HIS LOYALTY
"BEFORE WOLF HOWLS TONIGHT
YOU'LL DENY YOU EVEN KNOW ME."

HE BLESSES AND BREAKS SMOKED
SALMON;
"EAT! IT'S MY BODY GIVEN FOR YOU!"
BERRY JUICE IS BLESSED AND PASSED;
"DRINK OF THIS, ALL OF YOU!"

"IT'S MY BLOOD OF A NEW TREATY;
FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS, YOU
SEE!
AS OFT' AS YOU DO THIS,
DO IT TO REMEMBER ME!"

THEY SING AND DRUM A SACRED SONG,
AND INTO THE FOREST THEY WALK.
"STAY AWAKE AND WATCH WITH ME;
FOR WITH GREAT CHIEF I MUST TALK."

HE ACCEPTS THE CUP OF SUFFERING
AND IN SORROW HE DOES WEEK
HIS FRIENDS COULD NOT STAY AWAKE;
THEY ALL JUST FELL ASLEEP

JUDAS WEARING THIRTY SHELLS,
NOW GREETES HIM WITH A KISS
ARMED MEN THEN LAY HOLD OF HIM
"JUDAS, I KNEW YOU WOULD DO THIS."

THEN PETER BEGINS TO FIGHT
AND CUTS OFF ONE MAN'S EAR!
JESUS HEALS THE WOUNDED MAN;
"PETER GET AWAY FROM HERE!"

WHEN HIS FRIENDS ALL RUN AWAY
HE KNOWS HIS TIME IS NIGH
THEY TAKE HIM TO THEIR LEADERS,
TO BE CONDEMNED TO DIE.

PETER HAS FOLLOWED AT A DISTANCE;
THEN UP TO A FIRE HE RAN.
THREE TIMES ACCUSED "YOU'RE WITH
HIM!"
HE SAYS, "DON'T KNOW THE MAN."

THEN PETER HEARS THE HOWL OF
WOLF.
HE WEEPS AND RUNS AWAY.
JUDAS THROWS BACK THOSE THIRTY
SHELLS,
AND HANGED HIMSELF THAT DAY

THEY TAKE HIM TO THE CHIEF PILATE
BECAUSE THEY WANT HIM DEAD
THE CHIEF WANTS TO FREE HIM
THEY DEMAND HIS DEATH INSTEAD.

CHIEF WASHES HIS HANDS SAYING,
"I'M NOT TO BLAME TODAY;
THIS IS YOUR DOING, NOT MINE!"
AND LETS THEM HAVE THEIR WAY.

THEY MOCK HIM UP AND THEY WHIP HIM
AND A DEVEL'S CLUB HAT APPLY
THEY PEG HIM TO A CEDAR CROSS
AND HANG HIM TO DIE.

THEY GAMBLE FOR HIS BLANKET;
BEAVER TEETH-DICE THEY THREW,
HE SAYS, "FATHER, FORGIVE THEM,
THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."

HE SEES HIS MOTHER WEEPING
AND PLACES HER IN JOHN'S CARE.
ONE ON A CROSS BESIDE HIM,
HE COMFORTS AS WITH PRAYER

HE SUFFERS FOR THE LONGEST TIME
THEN FINALLY HE CRIES OUT
"MY WORK IS FINISHED, O GREAT
CHIEF!"
AND HE DIES WITH A SHOUT

FRIEND JOSEPH ASKS FOR HIS BODY;
A SPEAR MAKES SURE HE IS DEAD
HE'S WRAPPED IN A CEDAR BLANKET
A CAVE IS HIS BURIAL BED

WITH HUGE STONES, THE CAVE IS
SEALED
HIS FEARFUL ENEMIES SAY
"GUARDS MUST NOW BE PLACED THERE
TO KEEP HIS FRIENDS AWAY!"

GREAT CHIEFS OF THE HEAVENS,
SENDS RAVEN THAT THIRD DAY.
THE GROUND SHAKES VIOLENTLY;
STONES AND GUARDS BOTH FALL AWAY!

AT DAWN, TWO FEARFUL MARYS COME.

RAVEN SAYS, "DO NOT BE AFRAID!
I KNOW YOU'RE SEEKING JESUS
CAME AND SEE WHERE HE WAS LAID!"

"NOW GO AND TELL HIS FOLLOWERS
HE IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD!
THEY'LL SEE HIM WHEN THEY GATHER
AT THE MOUNTAIN WHERE HE SAID."

WHEN THEY GATHERED AT THE
MOUNTAIN,
THE RISEN SAVIOR THEY SEE,
SURROUNDED BY THE SHINING SUN
"LIGHT OF THE WORLD" IS HE!

HIS ARMS REACH OUT TOWARD THEM,
A TRINITY OF HEAVENLY HELPING
HANDS,
HIS FOLLOWERS FALL DOWN IN
WORSHIP,
AWAITING HIS COMMANDS.

JESUS TELLS OF A PROMISE,
"ALL POWER IS GIVEN TO ME!
SOON, YOU'LL HAVE THE HOLY SPIRIT,
AND MY WITNESSES YOU'LL BE."

"MAKE FOLLOWERS OF ALL TRIBES;
GO THEN AND BAPTIZE, TOO.
TEACH THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING
THAT I HAVE ASKED OF YOU."

"AND I WILL BE WITH YOU ALWAYS
TO THE END OF ALL THINGS!"
HE LIFTS HIS HANDS AND BLESSES
THEM
AND IS TAKEN AS WITH WINGS.

NOW THERE WERE OTHER
APPEARANCES
OF OUR RISEN SAVIOR, YOU KNOW;
ON THE LAKESHORE AND OTHER
PLACES,
THEY ARE NOT CARVED ON THIS POLE

BUT THIS IS CARVED THAT YOU MAY
KNOW,
OUR RISEN SAVIOR DOES REMAIN,
AND BELIEVING IN HIM WE HAVE

ETERNAL LIFE IN HIS NAME

SO KEEP HIM AS YOUR CHIEF MY
FRIEND
AND HE SHALL KEEP YOU WHOLE.
THIS FULFILLS THE PURPOSE OF
THE EASTER TOTEM POLE