

Pastor Elizabeth asked me to speak about Wounded Knee. I'm kind of at a loss as to what to say about it as it's such a complicated story with both past history of the 1800's, the 1970's and what's happening out there right now with the possible sale of part of the site to a person who wants to make it a tourist stop. The Lakota do NOT want to see that happen but they might not have a choice-as they have not had choices in so many things. Like I said, it's complicated and I will try to be brief.

For those of you who don't know, Wounded Knee Creek is the site of a massacre which occurred on December 29th, 1890. Somewhere between 200 to 290 Sioux Indians, mostly members of a Tribe of Lakota being led by a medicine man named Bigfoot, however Cheyenne River Sioux, Bules, Hunkpapa and other tribes were involved. Numbers vary because of people who did actually escape the massacre to die later were not counted and also due to the fact that Military records contradict each other.

Some written history is also incorrect in that most Native American Tribes or Council Branches did not have Chiefs. Rule was mostly by Council with the majority vote ruling towards what was good for the entire group. Elder men and Warriors made up the councils and usually the only time a person was put in charge was when there was a hunt or battle of some sort as someone had to coordinate things. This was also something that was voted on and considered an honor. After the battle or hunt, that person was no longer in charge. Society is also Matriarchal with reverence to Mother Earth being the main force behind all other beliefs. The word "Chief" was designated by the whites and often the whites would pick the person for various reasons including the ability to communicate.

The events leading up to this tragic event have a lot to do with something called the "Ghost Dance". Much has been written incorrectly about this dance and one of the most incorrect was that the Native Americans thought they were invincible and the white man's bullets could not touch them after they did the dance. The only people to believe this of all the Plains Indians were a small band of Lakota, and this of course led to some hysteria on the part of the whites who wanted, for the most part, the savages to be taken care of so they could settle in the Black Hills where gold had been discovered. (Elaine Goodale was one of the first whites to write about this stated that the belief that the shirts were bullet proof also never surfaced until after the whites and the army had arrived.)

The Ghost Dance actually originated in western Nevada by a Paiute Shaman named Wovoka. In January of 1889, Wovoka had a vision (again according to Elain Goodale) that told of a very strange tale of the second coming of Christ. Wovoka said that in the middle of a council, which Christ appeared from nowhere and announced himself as the Savior who came upon the earth once and was killed by white men. He had been grieved by the crying of parents for their children and would let the sky down on the earth and destroy the disobedient. (Visions among Natives are very powerful medicine). In September, Father Aemilius Perrig reported that a Dakota medicine man said that a man crowned with thorns had appeared to an Arapaho Hunting party and later that same month, a group of Utes also reported seeing Jesus. In the fall of 1889, a small group from Pine Ridge Reservation slipped away and went to investigate the stories. They returned with the news that the Son of God was truly on earth and this was for the benefit of the Indians and not the whites. Another delegation, consisting of Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River and Rosebud reservation Elder Medicine Men, was sent to visit Wovoka in the spring of 1889 and returned convinced

and talking about this new belief or religion as the whites called it. Kicking Bear, an elder brought back the news that Native ancestors being led by the Messiah would be marching back to join them and that they along with Jesus would be making the Native Americans the chosen people who would inhabit the earth and the white would be no more. The natives would live in peace again with many buffalo and ponies.

The Ghost Dance, as outlined by Kicking Bear offered a solution to the Lakota's most pressing problems and the religion was quickly embraced by many. The Bureau of Indian Affairs could see the Ghost Dance only as barbaric and set out to abolish it. One of the primary duties at the time, the BIA was to eradicate the native religious beliefs in favor of Christian teachings; it was kind of ironic as far as I'm concerned. With the spread of the Ghost Dance increasing numbers of Indians professed a belief in the Christian God. There was a lot of dancing going on and whites near the reservations were convinced it was a precursor to war. They demanded help from the army.

During the summer and fall of 1889 the new religion spread across the Lakota reservation, there are no reliable figures on the number of converts but it's estimated that at least one third of the Lakota participated. Other Sioux including the Hunkpapas were converts but after Sitting Bull was murdered by agency police, their numbers diminished greatly.

Anyway, the Sioux were doing the Ghost Dance, the BIA couldn't get them to stop, and the army was called in. It was a powder keg. BIA agent recommended the arrest of Big Foot, Hump, Kicking Bear and other Ghost Dance leaders by the army and on November 18th, the War Department sent troops to begin the military occupation of the

reservation. By the end of the month nearly one third of the western US Army was alerted for duty on the Lakota reservation.

Around November 20th the first army units arrived and the Lakota Ghost Dance leaders advised those who did not belong in the dance and would not join in it to stay home or go to the agency. By November 24th there were about 150 lodges, or family groups, camped at the Pine Ridge Agency and by the 30th the number swelled to around 3,500 total people, with the addition of Brule from the Rosebud reservation. Bigfoot was a firm believer in the religion and did not move to the agency. (And I'm simplifying this whole thing, believe me it's a lot more complicated) One band of Indians was adamant in the fact that they swore their interpreter lied (which was not unheard of in those days) and said that the Ghost Dance was a war dance. But tensions were high and a lot of rumor fed the unrest.

Whites who had commercial interest in the area help fuel the fires with other false statements that were signed and sworn to, only later to be found out as false.

On December 8th, the army met with Big Foot and others in the area and found them to be "peaceable disposed and inclined to obey orders." At this same time, Hump met with Captain Ezra Ewers who convinced him to abandon the dance. Bigfoot then became the sole leader of the Ghost Dancers on the Cheyenne River Reservation. On December 16th, Col. Sumner received orders to arrest him. Big Foot's band left their log cabin village to go to their agency. They reached Hump's village and learned that Sitting Bull had been murdered at Standing Rock on December 15th. Many of Sitting Bulls people had fled Standing Rock and sought refuge with Hump. Big Foot offered to care for them but Hump refused and told Big Foot to leave. But it is estimated that 30-40 of Sitting Bulls people did go with him. There were about two weeks of

confusion at this point and Big Foot's band returned to their village only to be told at one point to travel to Pine Ridge if they wanted to save their lives. On the night of December 23rd, Big Foot's band slipped away from the army and began their journey to Pine Ridge. They eluded the army until December 28th when the band was discovered on Porcupine Butte and the band was ordered to a site on Wounded Knee Creek. Outnumbered, out of food and needing medicine as many were ill, Big Foot agreed. There was a great uneasiness among the natives all night. The next morning, and there are conflicting stories on what exactly happened but general consensus is that the Natives were ordered to give up their weapons. Many did but most were old and the army believed that the Indians were not complying with the order and Col. James Forsyth ordered a search of the camp. Many misunderstandings were occurring at this point and at one of the council circles, an Indian began singing Ghost Dance songs and at one point "stopped down, took some dirt and rose up facing the west and cast the dirt down in a circle" (a sign in the dance calling for the messiah) the army took this as a sign the Indians were going to attack and opened fire-although not all army present believed this to be true. Within seconds of this act occurring, Black Coyote, who had refused to surrender his weapon, was engulfed in a struggle and the weapon went off. Almost immediately fighting broke out on both sides and chaos ensued. The army had four Gatling guns poised on ridges surrounding the encampment. The natives were outnumbered and out gunned. Thirty one soldiers also died there (25 that day and 6 more later succumbed to their wounds).

On January 3rd, 1891 the army returned to Wounded Knee and buried 146 frozen, dead, Indians in a mass grave, stacking the bodies like cordwood. Buried there among the others is Big Foot and his family and eleven young Sioux boys in their Boarding school uniforms-they had been traveling back to Pine Ridge and school after spending time with

relatives in Sitting Bull's camp. Seven more Natives died at the Pine Ridge Episcopalian Church. But the total number of casualties is undoubtedly higher. Joseph Horn Cloud listed at least 186 dead and it's known that survivors and their friends removed some of the dead and dying before the burial party arrived. In later interviews with survivors who claimed that casualties were overlooked by Horn Cloud and a total of over 250 Native Americans is almost certain.

Before the events of Wounded Knee, the Ghost Dance believers wanted only to be allowed to practice their religion without interference. After Wounded Knee some of them took the offensive, firing on the Pine Ridge Agency and fought the army near the Holy Rosary Catholic Mission and attacked an army supply train near the mouth of Wounded Knee Creek. But it was futile. On January 13th, Kicking Bear surrendered.

Accounts were taken after the event from soldiers, officials and other whites. Some, in later years, were recanted and retold by those same people who agreed with the Indian versions of what happened.

It was an honor to be able to stand on the hallowed ground there. The Wounded Knee site is sacred to the Lakota and many other Native Americans. I was also fortunate and amazed to be able to speak with a woman who was beading in her car. She was telling me stories of the occupation in 1973. She was 7 at the time but had vivid descriptions of buildings, people and events that happened. But that siege is a whole other story.....

I am forever grateful for the experience I had on this trip. I have always been interested in this area of our world and the research that I did before we left helped more in my understanding of the way things are, the reason they got that way and the hope there is for the future out there as well as the amazing culture. Native American Nations are to be admired for who they are and the perseverance they have in

maintaining their traditions despite horrible odds. Pastor Elizabeth, Thank you for opening our eyes to the friendship, culture and work of Pine Ridge.

Our group worked hard, we were able to worship together in many places, and enjoy the beauty of the country. We were introduced to new thinking, new ways of looking at things and new ways of thinking about things. I was blessed in meeting new people, sharing with the children of the SuAnne Center and I plan to continue the work started there in my personal life. Thank you-and I'm sure you didn't think I was going to talk this long.