Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, an itty-bitty kingdom was knitted together from twelve tribes. Now, this tiny, insignificant dot of a nation was ruled by a mighty empire.

Let me tell you a thing or two about empires. Empires always think they are right. Since they are right, it is obvious and acceptable that they use might and violence to enforce the right of the empire. If you are an empire, it is right for you to steal land. It is right for you to impose your language and your culture. It is right for you to believe that you are more intelligent, stronger, better than everyone else. If anyone disagrees, it is right to use violence against them, torture them, kill them. For example, if someone stole from the empire, they cut off your hand. If you ran from the empire, they cut off your foot. If you looked for power of your own, the empire cut out your eyes.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, an empire was doing what empires have done for thousands of years. This was happening in a land called Judah.

The people of the 12 tribes were sad, and they were angry. They did not like the mighty empire. They did not like how much power the empire had. They longed for the day when they would wrestle control away from the empire. Return all the power to the people of the 12 tribes.

Once upon a time, 12 people walked the dusty roads of this small place and dreamed about life after the mighty empire. The 12 long for the power they do not have. The 12 dream of the control they might take from the mighty empire. And in their dreams, they come to argue, as we heard in our reading last week. They argue about who would be first. Who would be the most powerful if only there was a new power and the evil empire was thrown down?

Now the 12 had a leader. A teacher who imagined a different kind of life. A life where thousands of years of empire is interrupted. Life in a world that stopped bouncing from one evil empire to another. A world that empowered all. Where small children, even the children of an occupied nation, might be cared for and respected. No childhood ended in an unmarked grave far from a family home. A life where thousands of years of empire is interrupted.

This was a dream, a vision, an invitation to another kind of power. Not the power of empire, but imagine it like the kingdom of God.

"But," said the 12 who walked the way following the leader. They asked, "who will be first among us." And teacher thumped his palm to his forehead and said no. No. stop imaging power in the system of empire. We are not making a new empire. We will not be a place where the empire cuts off people's hands for stealing back what was once theirs.

And the teacher invited the community to imagine the power of the least and the last.

The 12, with dusty feet and hearts to follow -could not imagine.

So the 12 tried again. They said, "Master, there was this other guy who tried to take our power to drive out demons. But we told them to stop. Look, look how we took our power back. We made him stop." And teacher thumped his palm to his forehead and said no. No. Stop imaging power in the system of empire. We are not making a new empire that cuts off feet for stumbling against the rules and restrictions.

The teacher looked at the 12. 12 who had only ever known of power in the system of empire. The teacher looked at the 12, and he knew that if the 12 looked for another kind of power -the empire that was -could and would cut out their eyes for seeing a vision outside the empire's boundaries. This was a terrifying invitation, and even still...

The teacher looked at the 12 that he loved, and the teacher asked them to imagine power upside down. Imagine if you caused the littlest child from the local tribe to stumble: you are so full of remorse that you take your own hand, your own foot, your own eye, and cast it away. You take your own power to grasp, your power to move, your power to see and know and cast it away because you have caused another, powerless one to stumble.

This was an upside-down, unsettling invitation, and even still. Life everlasting is at stake. Misusing power against another, less powerful than yourself, is the remaking of empire and a new cycle in the circle of evil. Hellfires burn fueled by the misuse of power.

Once upon a time, a man walked the ways and wilds told this to 12 people who had ears to hear.

And these 12 men saw things and did things, and each of the 12 died at the hands of the empire. Each of the 12 was taken by the powerful people of their place when their lives stumbled against the laws of the empire.

Once upon a time, one man walked the ways and wilds of a tiny place. Once upon a time, those who walk in his ways were invited to imagine power differently.

Once upon a time.

What about this time.

There is no question the cycle of empire fueled by the misuse of power and control continues.

This story happened once upon a time in occupied Israel

This story happened in Canada as settlers occupied this land

This story plays out across the earth as we occupy creation

This story is now

And can you just about see Jesus press his palm to his forehead and say,

"so, people. You who choose to walk in my ways and see my wilds. I gotta say. I see some stumbling."

Here's the thing. Power is tempting. Looking for control gets in the way of seeing the kingdom of God, tempts us away from life everlasting.

Those places where we think we can grasp, grab, hold. Throw that power aside. Those places where we believe we can move, we have the right to go. Throw that power aside. Those places where we think we know best. We see the truth. Throw that power aside.

Repent. Turn from the vision of power that the empire tells us is the only way. Repent. Turn, turn to let go of power and control so that we do not stumble into another empire, fuel another cycle of evil, in this time and in this place.

And finally, notice that Jesus did not, in this story, talk to the empire. He doesn't knock politely on the palace door and let the king know that he was stumbling into evil with his misuse of power. Nope. Jesus was talking to the disciples. Jesus was talking to people a lot like us. Jesus invites us to cast aside those places where we grasp power and control and turn instead to look for the kingdom of God.