

No One Works Like Him!

Luke 1:46-55, Hebrews 4:14-16

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

December 9, 2018 (2 Advent)

Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/Sermon12-16-2018.mp3>



As we start our time together this morning I'd like to invite you to look at a couple of images. First, take a look at these magnificent shorebirds that were sketched recently. Can you see the detail in the beaks, especially? Can you believe it when I tell you that when I showed these birds to my wife, she said, "Wow. Those rabbits are extraordinary!"?



And how about this image of my uncle? Do you see him there? The man and the dog that he loved?

Actually, as you may know, each of these sketches is nearly a hundred years old – they are optical illusions – images that can present in at least two ways. What is interesting is that the scientists tell us that you can only see one image at a time – you see either a man or the dog, but you can't see both at the same time. The image can only be one thing or another at any given instant in your brain.

I'm bringing this up as we continue our discipline of considering the weight and meaning of African-American spirituals during Advent. As we've said before, Advent is a time of both lament and hope – a time when we name things that are not right, and yet claim that rightness is the intention and the direction in which the creation will ultimately head. As we experience the songs originally sung by those who arrived to these shores in chains, we need to hear echoes of lament *and* hope.



¹Consider the refrain of the tune we heard a few moments ago: “no one works like him.” Now I’m asking you to use your imagination here, but work with me on this: how would slaves working out in the field have heard that phrase? In a society where human beings are bought and sold, where one man’s life is the property of another, then can you see that “no one works like him” is a sales pitch, a bit of braggadocio? A “master” walks past a slave toiling away and points to him, saying, “Just look at him! No one works like him! This is how you should all be behaving.”

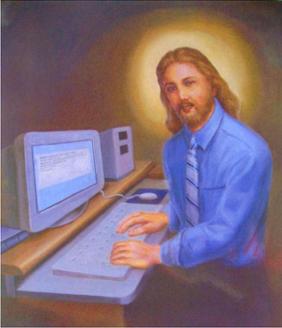
Could it be that this lyric is a way of reaffirming the existing structure and paradigm? Could this lyric be interpreted in a way that takes for granted a reality in which slavery is normative and hard work is expected?

If you see these lyrics in this way, then you can imagine a slaveowner out walking in the fields, hearing “his” slaves singing “No one works like him!” and being reassured – as if to say, “Yep, look at Jesus. He works so hard – you should, too!”

And if you can see the lyrics in this way as being interpreted like that a hundred and seventy years ago, then it’s easy to see similar images of Jesus’ work in our world now – the images of Jesus working hard on behalf of someone else (usually me). Here’s what I mean by that: think about your prayer life. “Lord, I really need a new car, or a new job...” and Jesus’ expected reply, “Yep! I’m on it, buddy!” “Oh, and Lord... you didn’t forget that Larry’s neighbor is having a heart catherization today, did you?... Oh, crap, there’s not a parking place to be found, and I’m already late...”

¹ *George Washington Overseeing His Slaves*, 1853 Lithograph

Jesus, can you help me out here?”



“Well, Dave, you know what they say! ‘No one works like him!’ I’ve *got* this, Dave. Don’t worry!”

You see? If you hold the Bible just right, you can see that image, can’t you?

But what if the spiritual we heard earlier is indeed an attempt to tell the whole truth – but to tell it from a different perspective?

tell all the truth
but
tell
it
slant

Years ago I heard one of my mentors, Eugene Peterson, introduce a study on Jesus by reading a work by Emily Dickenson:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With Explanation kind
The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind -- ²

Eugene was using this poem to talk about the ways in which the truth that Jesus spoke and the truth about Jesus was always present – but it nearly always was truth on a slant – or, to put it another way – Truth coming in the side door. When we talk about telling the truth, and telling it slant – we are saying that there are some truths that are not as obvious at first, but may be just as deep – or even deeper – than the ones on the surface.

² Emily Dickenson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1955), #1129



For instance, what is this? I know, I know, Tim and Gabe keep thinking that it's a fishing net. They can't understand that it is my personal collection of holes, held together with string.

Let's look at a "slant" interpretation of this hymn. "No one works like him." Well, what is the work of Jesus? When he was ready to get down to business, this is what he said of himself: "The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.'" (Luke 4:16-20, CEV)



³If we are to take Jesus at his word, he did not come in order to consolidate or affirm the existing power structure – he came to alter it, or more precisely, to subvert it. He came to restore what was broken and to right what was wrong.

Therefore, I suspect that when an enslaved people spends the day singing a song about a Jesus who works hard, that they are echoing another song – one that Campbell read a few moments ago. They sang about Jesus and they remembered the prophecy of his mother, who sang about a savior who has uses his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud; about one who drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power. They placed their hope in a God who gives the hungry good things to eat, and who sends the rich away with nothing.

The One to whom this song points did not come to reinforce oppressive structures such as slavery and he did not come seeking to bless my upwardly mobile lifestyle.

³ *Magnificat*, Daniel Erlander

The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus came to help us identify deep, dark places in this world and in our own lives that are at odds with the Creator's intent and then invite us to work together to redesign that world and these lives. Look, I'm not saying that Jesus *can't* help you find the perfect gift for the letter carrier or help you to remember Aunt Edna's sugar cookie recipe, but I am here to say that if those kinds of things were *all* he that did, we sure wouldn't be singing about him 2000 years later.

Let me put it this way. I want you to think of an artist whose work you really admire. And let's say that Henri Matisse, or Georgia O'Keefe, or Bob Ross showed up at your house with all their stuff and said, "Well howdy, neighbor! I'm here all week! What would you like me to paint?"

I'm here to say that you'd be a real knucklehead if the first thing you thought of was to say, "You know, I'm not really comfortable with the color of the trim in the upstairs bathroom. Would you mind....?"

Listen: the world in 2018 is a world beyond King Herod's wildest dreams. If Jesus' first arrival was in a world that was characterized by injustice and social inequality, I'm here to tell you that in many ways it's worse today. There are more slaves on the planet now – approximately 40 million of them - than there ever have been.⁴

We see every day that there are different systems of justice that are applied in different ways, depending on the race, culture, and financial status of the one who stands accused.

As we speak, nearly 70 million human beings have been forcibly displaced from their homes and are desperately

⁴ <https://www.freetheslaves.net/our-model-for-freedom/slavery-today/>

seeking shelter in camps for Internally Displaced People, or as refugees, or as asylum seekers.⁵

And every day, you and I meet a hundred people who, if they were to be asked about the prevalence of slavery, or the conditions that cause people to leave their entire lives behind them, or the fact that there is not a uniform system of justice in the nation, would say, “Wow, really? That’s too bad. But it’s not my problem.”

And yet the Jesus who features so prominently in the manger that they – and we – eagerly display this month is promising to upend a social order that perpetuates inequality and oppression. Jesus seems to think that those things *are* his problems.

Are we sure that the Gospel is good news? Not to everyone, it’s not. Do you remember what Herod did when he figured out who Jesus was? He murdered an entire village’s infant sons, hoping to extinguish this kind of thing.

And yet the work of Jesus is profoundly Good News – it is Gospel – to the marginalized and to those who love them.

So remember what I said about how brain researchers telling us that we can sometimes see the bird and sometimes see the rabbit, but we can’t see both of them at once? It’s the same way with Jesus and his work and the Kingdom he proclaims. You cannot see the work of the Christ as BOTH reinforcing the way things are AND heralding something new and liberating.

This Advent, can we stop acquiring and spending long enough to listen for the cries of those on the margins? Can we learn to not only lament with them in the pain of this world,

⁵ <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

but to join them in expectant hope and thanksgiving for the God who comes?

Beloved, let us plan our gifting, our eating and drinking, our shopping and sharing as if we are aware not only that “no one works like him”, but as if we actually have a clue as to what kind of work he does. And then, let us join him in it! Thanks be to God! Amen.