

Dec. 16, 2018

Hebrews 2: 10-18

Prayer: O Lord, we come into your presence with humility in the face of the salvation you engineered by coming to earth as a human baby. Help us to understand its repercussions. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Go Tell It on the Mountain

We have saved "Go Tell It on the Mountain" for last. Because when our singers perform it, I want you to know where it comes from.

This song came out of the African-American slave experience in the South. We don't know who the slave was who wrote the song. We don't know where he worked, whose fields he tilled, what slave quarters he laid his head in.

What we do know is the simple power of his -- or her -- song.

Go tell it on the mountain,

Over the hills and everywhere.

Go tell it on the mountain,

Our Jesus Christ is born.

Of course, no one in music or publishing was paying any attention to what slaves were singing during the 1800s. It was only after the Civil War that a man named John Wesley Work saw the value of the old spirituals.

John Wesley Work was an African-American church choir director in Nashville, Tennessee. He was both a scholar and a musician, and he felt that the next generation of black Southerners might best understand the importance of their religion from the songs their forefathers sang while enslaved.

The lyrics in our hymnal tell about the shepherds and Jesus in the manger. But the original lyrics were very different, and told from the shepherd's point of view:

*When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day
I asked the Lord to help me
And he showed me the way.*

Or maybe, it wasn't about shepherds at all. Maybe it was about the slaves themselves.

*He made me a watchman
Upon a city wall,*

And if I am a Christian,

I am the least of all.

In the harsh days of human slavery, music, perhaps, was as great a salvation as anything. In their songs of suffering -- “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” “He Never Said a Mumbling Word,” “I Am a Poor Wayfaring Stranger” - - slaves identified with a Savior who suffered.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Hebrews 2: 10-18**, and we will see where this theology comes from.

10 It was fitting that God for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. 11 For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, 12 saying,

‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’

13 And again,

‘I will put my trust in him.’

And again,

‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.

16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

God made Jesus “perfect” or complete through suffering. That is how he knows so completely what his earthly brothers and sisters have endured.

This is the picture the writer of Hebrews draws. We worship a Savior who came to us as a baby in a manger, and who endured every kind of human suffering. A savior who got down and dirty so he could accompany us through the mud and the dirt.

Without benefit of formal education, without benefit of musical training, slaves on Southern plantations recognized this truth that Jesus became our brother through suffering. Or as another old spiritual puts it:

Nobody knows the trouble I seen,

Nobody knows but Jesus.

It's as if the writer of Hebrews knew the condition of enslaved people. And perhaps he did. There were as many slaves as free people in the ancient world. That's probably why he uses this example of Jesus sharing our flesh and blood to understand lives bounded by slavery.

To share that flesh and blood, to break the hold of enslavement, Jesus was born in a manger to a flesh-and-blood teen-aged mother, as flesh-and-blood shepherds looked on.

The slaves got that. "Go tell it on the mountain," they urged the shepherds. "Our Jesus Christ is born."

In the early days of the Salvation Army, a charismatic preacher traveled around England, proclaiming to be Jesus, returned to earth. He claimed to heal the sick, make the blind see, perform miracles. As these people always seem able to do, he actually attracted a following.

One night, he was speaking at a large hall in London. In the distance, the audience heard music, faint at first, but growing louder and closer. A Salvation Army band then burst into the hall, and marched right up to the speaker's podium.

The band stopped playing, and the captain addressed the speaker.

“Are you really the Christ?” he asked. “Tell us plainly.”

“Yes,” replied the speaker. “I am the Christ returned to earth.”

And the captain said, “Very well, then, show us your hands.”

And the band began to play “I shall know him, I shall know him, by the print of the nails in his hands!” (George Everett Ross, in Leonard Sweet, *Strong in the Broken Places*, pp. 39-40)

We do not have a Lord with clear hands. We have a Lord who suffered nail-scarred hands.

Now, please don't hear me say that suffering is OK because Jesus suffered. That line of thinking was used for too many centuries to keep oppressed people down, and it has no place in the church today.

This passage in Hebrews is NOT about the nobility of suffering. Not at all.

It is about the ability of our Savior to enter our suffering with us.

This is the message of Hebrews. And this is the message of the slave who wrote *Go Tell It on the Mountain*.

Our Triune tree tells a story of suffering, too.

The first few years I was at Triune, we had an old Chrismon tree with handmade ornaments. That's a tree where every ornament is a symbol for Christ, usually in white and gold.

Elizabeth League and Louise Grant had made most of the ornaments and carefully packed them away year after year, decade after decade.

They were well into their 80s and would meet me in here the week before Advent to decorate the tree. They kept climbing a ladder to put the ornaments on, so I spent most of my time screaming, "Don't do that! Please don't do that!"

Shortly thereafter, my associate pastor, Alfred Johnson and some of the men unearthed a string of oversized, multi-colored lights and hung them along the chair rail. I had a hard time concentrating because I felt like I was preaching in a bar.

I kept looking for the jukebox and whiskey shots.

And then in 2010 a woman came along who wanted to give Triune a new Christmas tree because her father worshiped with us. I said, “Yeah, OK, whatever.”

Not realizing that it was something like Pavarotti asking if he could stop by and sing for us.

So Daphne Brown created our official Triune Christmas tree. She calls it our Romans 8:28 tree.

And it is so special that I pause every year during Advent to tell what it means.

Here’s what Paul wrote to the Romans in 8:28: **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”**

You see, all the gift boxes on the tree started out as discarded cigar boxes. They were thrown away by a cigar store. Useless boxes, no longer wanted or needed.

But of course, cigar boxes carry a very strong smell of cigars. So inside each box is an inexpensive dryer sheet to absorb the smell.

The boxes then got a wrapping of fabric remnants – purchased for ten cents a pound because they weren't big enough to cover a sofa or a chair or even a pillow.

And then on top of the fabric are pieces of broken and discarded jewelry – broken watches, necklaces that couldn't be repaired, earrings that have lost a mate.

Do you sense a theme here? Empty, discarded vessels. Fabric pieces sold cheap because they weren't big enough to make something. Broken, discarded jewelry. But look at what they became!

The idea, Daphne said, is that “God takes us with all our stinking habits, poor choices, painful experiences and brokenness, and promises to ... make something good and beautiful and purposeful.”

“.... (A)ll things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

Our tree also contains the baby Jesus, though after eight years he's a little the worse for wear. When we unwrapped him this year, we found that most of his crown was broken off. So we took him to the art room and asked our artists to spruce him up. It's amazing what a little gold paint can do.

On his left is a garnet scarf, symbolizing the blood he would shed for us 33 years later. On his right is a green scarf, symbolizing everlasting life.

Two crosses flank him, representing the crosses on which two thieves were crucified alongside him. As they hung there, one sneered at him and one chose to follow him. All these centuries later, we are faced with that very same choice.

The tree also contains a vine which grew out of John 15: Jesus said, **“I am the true vine, and my father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”** (John 15: 1-2)

When we follow him, we bear fruit. When we follow him, people see our fruit. They see it through our words, our actions, our practice, our “doing.”

Do this in remembrance of me, Jesus said. *Bear fruit in remembrance of me.*

That’s what the vine in this tree is all about.

Our Romans 8: 28 tree is not just a pretty decoration for the holidays. It is another way in which we worship.

We talk about the written word, the spoken word, the sung word, the painted word. And now we have the salvaged word, a visual representation of

how God takes our lives, our mistakes, our brokenness, our suffering and re-creates them according to his purpose.

Our theology is reflected in every branch of this tree – even in the lights that don't work.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we proclaim a Christ who understands our earthly troubles because he went through them.

We proclaim a Savior who suffers our pain because he is our brother.

Suffering is neither right nor noble nor dignified. It is simply inevitable.

And we have a Savior who knows it.

Amen.