The Slave is our Brother

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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December 19, 2021/Fourth Sunday of Advent

This morning, for my last sermon before Christmas and my last sermon of 2021, I want to talk about beauty. I want to talk about the role that beauty plays in shaping our vision of God and our approach to faith.

There is a character in the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *The Idiot* called Prince Myshkin.

Myshkin is naïve and simple and good. He has an unshakeable belief in the centrality of love above all things. He doesn't fit among his peers, the upper crust of the St. Petersburg elites scrambling for status and power.

At one point in the story, Myshkin is at a party and one of these elites, a nihilist named Terentyev, mocks Prince Myshkin, asking, "'Is it true, Prince, that you once said 'beauty' would save the world? Gentlemen,' he cried loudly to them all, 'the prince insists that beauty will save the world!... What beauty will save the world?'"

This line became one of the most famous quotes from Dostoevsky's book. It grabbed attention of philosophers and theologians and writers around the world. It did the nineteenth century equivalent of "going viral." A century later, this line was quoted in an acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize by fellow Russian Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Beauty will save the world.

It sounds well, *beautiful*. What might it mean?

Well, it undoubtedly means many things. But at the very least, I think it means that beauty has the capacity to move us, to transform us, to inspire and embolden us like nothing else.

Beautiful songs move people in ways that technical and precise lectures do not. A beautiful painting can communicate more deeply to the human soul than any theological treatise.

Standing on the top of a mountain inspires a reverence that even the best sermons cannot (painful as this is to admit!).

Very few people enter the kingdom of God because they won or lost an argument. Many people come because they are captivated by the beauty of Jesus Christ.

We are drawn to beauty. I was reminded of this truth this week. I was listening to a Christmas playlist while writing my sermon on Friday and O Holy Night came on.

This has always been one of my favourite Christmas songs. I love the music—it has a range that just soars. And I love the words. It has some beautiful poetry and some powerful theology.

I've obviously heard the words many times, but I paused on this line from the third verse:

> *Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother. And in his name, all oppression shall cease.*

I couldn't stop thinking about his line. I sat with it for a long time. Eventually, it rerouted my whole sermon. I even decided to change the name of my sermon (sorry Helen!). The Slave is Our Brother.

And then, the rational part of my brain started spinning.

Who, I wondered, is the slave?

Is the song saying that Jesus will break all chains, and in the *process* remind us that "the slave"—the poor, the oppressed, the victimized—is our brother? Is it a line where Jesus' actions are a call to solidarity with and commitment to the broad category of "the enslaved" of our world?

In the tiny little book of Philemon, Paul urges Philemon to accept his slave Onesimus back as an expression of his faith. He says.

> Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother.

Is this what the line in the song is pointing to?

Or is it saying that Jesus *is* the slave who is our brother? That it is Jesus who reveals God to be the Divine Slave who is our brother?

Here, I thought of the famous Christ hymn of Philippians 2, one of the earliest Christian liturgies. It proclaims that Jesus,

> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,
>
> but emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave…

Christians have always taken great comfort and hope from the truth that God not only became one of us but descended into the darkest and most painful parts of our humanity.

Because of this, there has always been this profound hope that Jesus knows who we are and what afflicts us. There is no part of human experience that is foreign to Jesus. He is not some remote God high up in the clouds. He is our Brother.

The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in a sermon preached December 2, 1928, put it like this:

> Lord Jesus, come yourself, and dwell with us, be human as we are, and overcome what overwhelms us. Come into the midst of my evil, come close to my unfaithfulness. Share my sin, which I hate and which I cannot leave. **Be my brother, Thou Holy God.**

So, who is the slave that is our brother in O Holy Night? Well of course after thinking on these things for a while it became very obvious that this was probably not an "either/or" situation but "both/and."

Both can be and I think *are* true.

The Slave who is our Brother directs us out toward the slaves who are our brothers. This beautiful truth about who God is inspires and motivates us outward to spread beauty in the world.

This is in fact what happened, I discovered. I fell down a bit of a rabbit hole as I dug around in the origins of O Holy Night.

The story I'm going to share comes from a book called *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas*.

In 1847, Placide Cappeau was the commissionaire of wines in a small French town. Known more for his poetry than his church attendance, it probably shocked Placide when his parish priest asked [him] to pen a poem for Christmas mass. Nevertheless, the poet was honored to share his talents with the church.

In a dusty coach traveling down a bumpy road to France's capital city, Placide Cappeau considered the priest's request. Using the gospel of Luke as his guide, Cappeau imagined witnessing the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Thoughts of being present on the blessed night inspired him. By the time he arrived in Paris, "Cantique de Noel" had been completed.

Moved by his own work, Cappeau decided that his "Cantique de Noel" was not just a poem, but a song in need of a master musician's hand. Not musically inclined himself, the poet turned to one of his friends, Adolphe Charles Adams, for help.

The son of a well-known classical musician, Adolphe had studied in the Paris conservatoire. His talent and fame brought requests to write works for orchestras and ballets all over the world. Yet the lyrics that his friend Cappeau gave him must have challenged the composer in a fashion unlike anything he received from London, Berlin, or St. Petersburg.

As a man of Jewish ancestry, for Adolphe the words of "Cantique de Noel" represented a day he didn't celebrate and a man he did not view as the son of God. Nevertheless, Adams quickly went to work, attempting to marry an original score to Cappeau's beautiful words. Adams' finished work pleased both poet and priest. The song was performed just three weeks later at a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Initially, "Cantique de Noel" was wholeheartedly accepted by the church in France and the song quickly found its way into various Catholic Christmas services.

But when Placide Cappeau walked away from the church and became a part of the socialist movement, and church leaders discovered that Adolphe Adams was a Jew, the song—which had quickly grown to be one of the most beloved Christmas songs in France—was suddenly and uniformly denounced by the church.

The heads of the French Catholic church of the time deemed "Cantique de Noel" as unfit for church services because of its lack of musical taste and "total absence of the spirit of religion."

> Yet even as the church tried to bury the Christmas song, the French people continued to sing it, and a decade later a reclusive American writer brought it to a whole new audience halfway around the world.
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> Not only did this American writer—John Sullivan Dwight—feel that this wonderful Christmas song needed to be introduced to America, he saw something else in the song that moved him beyond the story of the birth of Christ.
>
> An ardent abolitionist, Dwight strongly identified with the lines of the third verse: "Truly he taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother; and in his name all oppression shall cease."
>
> The text supported Dwight's own view of slavery in the South. Published in his magazine, Dwight's English translation of "O Holy Night" quickly found favor in America, especially in the North during the Civil War.
>
> Back in France, even though the song had been banned from the church for almost two decades, many commoners still sang "Cantique de Noel" at home.
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> Legend has it that on Christmas Eve 1871, in the midst of fierce fighting between the armies of Germany and France, during the Franco-Prussian War, a French soldier suddenly jumped out of his muddy trench.
>
> Both sides stared at the seemingly crazed man. Boldly standing with no weapon in his hand or at his side, he lifted his eyes to the heavens and sang… the beginning of "Cantique de Noel."
>
> After completing all three verses, a German infantryman climbed out his hiding place and answered with… the beginning of Martin Luther's robust "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come."
>
> The story goes that the fighting stopped for the next twenty-four hours while the men on both sides observed a temporary peace in honor of Christmas day.[1]

I don't know if that last part is literally true or not. It sounds like a similar story often told about Silent Night in World War 1. Part of me is always a *little* suspicious of stories that seem engineered for a Hallmark card.

[1] https://www.beliefnet.com/entertainment/movies/the-nativity-story/the-amazing-story-of-o-holy-night.aspx

But then part of me also thinks that some stories are too beautiful not to be true.

A song put together by a secular Frenchman and a British Jew has made its way around the world and portrayed a vision of God that is simply beautiful.

A God who descends. A God who acts in solidarity with the suffering. A God who promises the end of oppression. A God who breaks chains. A God who is sovereign over all that is and yet somehow is also our brother.

And it's a song that made its way out into the world to embolden, inspire, and play a role, however small and however partial, in the breaking of actual chains and the ending of actual oppression, in the creation, however temporary, of peace.

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Our Scripture texts this morning are a poem (Micah) and a song (Mary's *Magnificat*). And, as I hope we've seen with O Holy Night, songs and poems work on our hearts, not our heads.

They evoke more than they describe. They operate on our imaginations and our longings more than the explanatory parts of our brains.

Micah speaks of one who will come from humble origins, one who will shepherd his people in the strength of the Lord, one who will be great to the ends of the earth (even if this greatness will be achieved in ways Micah could never predict!).

He speaks of one who will bring peace.

Mary's song declares deep truths that have always inspired songs like O Holy Night. *In his name all oppression shall cease*.

The proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, the lowly lifted up. The hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty.

It's interesting that Mary's song gets the timing all wrong. Did you notice that it's written in the present tense? The Lord *has* done these things.

But Jesus hasn't done anything when Mary sings these words. He hasn't preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn't overthrown any rulers. There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich! The oppressive Roman Empire marches on.

Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been born!!

Yet somehow Mary knows that her child will change things. She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story. She knows that his kingdom, strange though it is, and gradual though its appearance might be, will have no end.

She knows that her unborn baby is the object of her people's longing, that he is the object of all of creation's longing.

The Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor puts it like this:

> Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it — not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as an eternally unfolding mystery.[2]

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So here we are at the doorstep of Christmas 2021.

These last few years, of all years, we have been reminded of how fragile and limited we are. Physically, socially, relationally.

How desperately we need God to come, to be strong among us, to rescue us and to strengthen our hands, to break chains and to loosen bonds.

How desperately we need to be captured once again by the beauty of Christ, a beauty that has sustained and inspired the church during good times and bad for two thousand years.

I've talked a lot about beauty and poetry and song this morning. I want to end with the words from another song. This is much more recent song, "Welcome to Our World" by Chris Rice:

> Tears are falling, hearts are breaking
> How we need to hear from God
> You've been promised, we've been waiting
> Welcome Holy Child…
>
> Fragile finger sent to heal us
> Tender brow prepared for thorn

[2] https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3260

Tiny heart whose blood will save us
Unto us is born…

So wrap our injured flesh around You
Breathe our air and walk our sod
Rob our sins and make us holy
Perfect Son of God. Perfect Son of God.

This is the beauty that will save the world.

As we head out into the Christmas season, may the Slave who is our Brother bring us comfort and peace, as well as discomfort for the sake of all the slaves with no one to treat them as brothers.

May Mary's song be our song. May we rejoice and live as those who can never get their verb tenses right—who believe that God has already done all that needs to be done to restore and reclaim our groaning world.

May we see the world as God sees it. May we tell of the beauty of Christ in the year ahead.

Amen.