

Go Tell it On the Mountain is a favorite Christmas carol for many. It was originally an African American spiritual sung by enslaved people as they worked on the plantations. Like most spirituals, it wasn't written down but was passed on orally. A leader would sing the verses and then the others would join in on the chorus.

The words to the verses might change based on what was going on with the group or what was on the leader's heart to sing. We're most familiar with the Christmas version that tells the story of Jesus' birth. Another set of lyrics goes like this:

When I was a seeker

I sought both night and day.

I ask de Lord to help me,

An' He show me de way. [Refrain]

He made me a watchman

Upon the city wall,

An' if I am a Christian

I am the least of all. [Refrain]

Like many spirituals, there's speculation that the words were sometimes used as a sort of code for people tracking movements on the Underground Railroad. And like most spirituals, the origins are largely unknown. But always they were songs of faith and resilience and liberation...songs of joy in a dark time.

Go Tell it on the Mountain was made famous by a man named John Wesley Work and the Fisk Jubilee singers. Fisk University was a college for freed Black Americans founded in 1866. Work was a teacher at Fisk University following the Civil War. He was the director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Financial support for the college was limited and the University was threatened with bankruptcy. The Fisk Jubilee Singers went on tour to raise money for the college in the early 1870's.

At first they resisted using spirituals. Spirituals reflected the dark, ugly history of slavery. But the spirituals were also cherished by their formerly enslaved parents and used extensively in worship. The Fisk Jubilee Singers added spirituals to their repertoire, including a version of Go Tell It on the Mountain. The version we know best was written and composed by Work.

The spirituals helped catapult the group to fame and their tour raised enough money they were able to save the University.

At its heart, Go Tell it on the Mountain is about witness. It's about shouting from the mountaintop that Jesus Christ is born. Mountains were associated in the souls of enslaved people as a place of freedom.

Moses was a key heroic figure for those longing for freedom, just like the Hebrews longed for freedom from Egypt. Moses on the mountaintop is a key symbol in the narrative.

It makes it a good carol to sing on this Sunday where we hear about John the Baptist and had we gathered in person we would have.

In John's gospel, less emphasis is placed on John's work baptizing...he doesn't even say that he baptized Jesus, but rather was a witness to it. He saw the Spirit descend as a dove on Jesus.

That is John's main role in the Gospel of John...he is a witness...a witness to Jesus. Who he is...and what he does. John sees Jesus approach and says, here is The Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world.

That reference is to the Passover Lamb. But if you remember from the Exodus story, the Passover lamb wasn't about forgiveness of sin. Instead it was about freedom...salvation. It was the blood of the lamb which kept death from the homes of the Israelites the night they escaped Egypt.

Sin in John's gospel...well really all the Bible...is a more complex thing than the individual moral failings we have reduced it to. The sin of the world is all the complex failings that have the world bound...enslaved...to those things which do not bring life.

In the end, what John is a witness to is the freedom Jesus brings...freedom from sin...freedom from all that which enslaves us and binds us up.

John wants to make clear he is not the Messiah. He describes himself as the voice crying in the wilderness. This takes us back to the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah wrote this:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

Isaiah's words take us back to the exile. They were a promise that God would lead Israel home to freedom. A straight level highway was to be prepared for God to lead the people home. Again, there's that theme of liberation.

Now, John the Baptist is the one preparing a way for Jesus to come and lead people to freedom...to lead them home to a restored relationship with God.

The priests and Levites were sent to learn more about John...who he was and what he was about.

There were lots of voices speaking into the wilderness of life under Roman occupation. There had been the voices of false Messiahs. There were the voices of the Roman rulers who spoke of the Pax

Romana...the Roman peace. There were voices extolling the Roman prosperity...at least for those at the top.

There were voices crying for the violent overthrow of Rome. There were would-be Messiahs who believed that rebellion against Rome was the answer.

The voices of the Jewish religious authorities tried to keep the peace...to appease the Roman overlords. Some of them had their own agendas. Others were sincerely trying to keep the people of Israel faithful to their God without angering their Roman oppressors.

They went to John to find out if he was just another voice of many, or if something truly new was happening.

Many of the voices of both Romans and Jewish authorities were arrogant...sure that they were the ones who had the answers. In love with their own power. Willing to put the lives of others on the line to maintain their power.

John's voice was different. I am not the Messiah...I am not the focus here. But there is one who is now here...he's the real deal. John points not to himself, but to Jesus. John is preparing the way for Jesus...for God really, just as in the words Isaiah spoke hundreds of years before.

John witnessed to the one who would set people free.

John was a witness...but for John to witness, he needed people to be able to hear his voice among the other voices clamoring to be heard.

In many ways, we find ourselves in a similar position. There are lots of loud voices with very different ideas of what it means to follow Jesus. While many of them claim to point to Jesus, the Jesus they point to does not actually seem to be the Jesus of the gospels.

It's not the Jesus John the Baptist witnesses to. It's not the Jesus John the gospel writer wants us to see.

We don't get all the answers from today's reading. The whole purpose of John's gospel is so that we too come to see Jesus. And then we too are invited to witness to Jesus. We're called to witness to the Jesus who brings freedom from all that has us bound. We're called to witness to the Lamb of God whose death will free us from the bondage of sin.

We are called to Go Tell it on the Mountain.