

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “Go Tell it on the Mountain?” Obviously, we think “That Jesus Christ is Born.” But where is this Mountaintop that we tell the Good News from? Is it the Mountain of God referenced throughout the Old Testament, perhaps most famously by the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 11 where he tells us that the Messiah will rule an earthly kingdom where there will be no hurt or destruction on God’s “holy Mountain” because the entire earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh. Is this the world that we live in, or is it the world in our hearts? Where can the New Jerusalem be found? During God’s reign, natural enemies will no longer be at war – the wolf and lamb, the leopard and goat, and the lion and calf will no longer be predator and prey; in fact, these animals will be so docile that a little boy will lead them. Since this is not the earthly world we live in, is this mountain possible in the landscape of our hearts as Christians? Could it be the mountain Martin Luther King talks about in his final speech on April 3rd of 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee the night before he was shot when he says: **“I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land.”** What mountain do we ourselves, as God’s preachers shout the good news from?

Where do we find that mountain top in today’s deeply conflicted world? In the Peter, Paul and Mary arrangement as inspired by African-American civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer <https://youtu.be/ebyc93r0d7w?si=N7LdYvXRzOJ8Aoa5> the line “that Jesus Christ is Born” morphs into the Exodus reference of “Let my people go” thereby turning it into a civil rights song. The Mountain top of Civil Rights. In the Easter version of this song we hear “That Jesus lives again” where one normally hears “That Jesus Christ is Born.” And we are singing from the mountain top of resurrection. But for most of us, this is a Christmas Carol and for myself, I will think of particular musician’s renderings of this Carol. Very few of us will think of John Wesley Work, Jr (1871-1925) who is the “author” of the first published version of this very popular Christmas Carol even if we do think of that arrangement as it appears in so many hymnals. And although the original printed copy attributes the piece to an individual, it most probably comes from the African-American oral tradition. The Lead Me, Guide Me hymnal published by GIA in 2012 cites the piece as a “Negro Spiritual, adapt. By John W. Work.” But the power of this carol has compelled many Gospel, Folk, Country, and Jazz musicians spanning different ethnicities to come up with their own versions.

This year’s Lessons and Carols program will unpack four separate takes on the piece. The Gospel rendition was a must have given the carol’s roots and our model is the 2021 arrangement from Maverick City Gospel Choir with Melvin Crispell III

that we are having great fun with:

https://youtu.be/z1RpUV2AQ24?si=jSDZ_y_sHWmkK7Q4

My first rendering of the carol came from Simon and Garfunkel's first album:

<https://youtu.be/LitQp6-JARY?si=UNb7D27HnqZ6K6Rv>. As part of the folk music revival in the 60's, Randy Sparks started the New Christie Minstrels as a statement contradicting the polished folk and spiritual renditions that established "Choral" groups (like the Norman Luboff Choir) were performing. Here is their rendition from 1964 performance at Fordham Univ:

https://youtu.be/C4K8NgecsFE?si=cG_u4xaNd5bs-wR3

We will close the evening out with four guitars, banjo, bass and the whole congregation singing the traditional John W. Work arrangement. Other wonderful arrangements include Mahalia Jackson: <https://youtu.be/OMJ2UriVc40?si=dLYA6-dyGzInsok8> and Zach Williams's Country-Rock rendition:

https://youtu.be/mXBzrutelZA?si=Kp_0PwpugsXOgM1T.

Hope you enjoy these youtubes, and come to our "un-packing" party at Lessons and Carols next Sunday December 17th at 7PM in the main church.

John Uehlein