

## SLAVING AWAY

“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.” The words of this Negro spiritual, as the soloist sang so beautifully for us, are the cry of all those who are oppressed, exploited and enslaved. The tune to “Nobody Knows” was written using the pentatonic scale. Unlike the heptatonic scale that we’re used to that has seven notes per octave, the pentatonic scale has five notes per octave. Songs using this scale can be written using only the black keys. The pentatonic scale was used by many Indigenous cultures, including African cultures. They were songs written by black people, using black keys. In addition to “Nobody Knows,” songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Go down, Moses,” and “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore” use the pentatonic scale.

Perhaps the best-known song to use this scale is “Amazing Grace.” The words were written by John Newton who lived in the 1700s. As a young man, he was the captain of a slave ship, transporting people from Africa to England. During a storm in 1748, Newton feared that the ship would sink, and so he prayed to God to save all on board. Newton prayed to save the slaves on board his ship, the very people whom he was dooming to a life of unimaginable suffering. In that moment, he came to see his hypocrisy and realize the horror of the slave trade. He left the navy, became an Anglican priest and an out-spoken abolitionist. He helped to put forward legislation in the British Parliament to abolish slavery in 1807. “Amazing Grace” may not have been written by slaves, but it was written by a one-time slave trader who fought to abolish the horrific practice of slavery.

The words of these Negro spirituals, with their raw emotion, grip us like few songs can. “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.” These are the cries of all those, throughout the world and throughout time, who have been exploited, oppressed or enslaved.

The prophet Amos was all too familiar with the stories of these people. He lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. He lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, but prophesied to the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos wasn’t a professional prophet; he had a day-job as a shepherd. Amos says of his early life: “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and the Lord took me from following the flock and said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” (Amos 7:14-15)

Under the reign of Jeroboam, Israel experienced a time of peace and prosperity. Its neighbours, Assyria and Egypt, were relatively weak and didn’t pose a threat to Israel and Judah. In fact, Israel expanded its territory during this time. Israel’s prosperity, though, was built on the backs of the poor, and Amos could not abide their practices: “Because you trample the poor and take from them their grain, you have built houses of stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.” As a prophet, Amos laid bare the greed and corruption of the people.

He called out the wealthy who profited from immoral practices. They asked, “When will the Sabbath be over that we may offer wheat for sale?” The Sabbath was intended for rest and worship, but it also symbolized a way of living every day of the week. Simply observing the Sabbath was not enough if the people ignored the spirit of the Sabbath. The wealthy were to be honest and fair in their dealings, caring for the poor and weak. Instead, they exploited the poor and took advantage of the weak. They sold them into slavery if they owed a debt worth even a pair of sandals. Human lives held no value – they were just commodities to be traded.

Israel’s prosperity made them blind not just to the suffering of others, but to the suffering that they themselves caused. To the wealthy, the poor were invisible. To the strong, the weak did not exist. We may be inclined to criticize or even condemn the Israelites, the way Amos did. But if we’re honest with ourselves, are we really any different? We live in a time of relative peace and prosperity in Canada. Do we see the suffering of the poor and weak, the exploited and enslaved?

It may surprise you to know that there are now more slaves than at any time in history. Thirteen million people were sold as slaves between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, there are over 40 million people who are living in some form of slavery. That’s one out of every 200 people. Considering the current world population, the percentage of slaves may be smaller than at other times in history, but slavery is now more widespread, involving virtually every country in the world.

Today, a person is considered a slave if they are forced to work against their will, are owned or controlled by an exploiter or “employer,” have limited freedom of movement, or are dehumanized, treated as a commodity, or bought and sold as property.

The vast majority of the people who are living in slavery are invisible to us. They live in places like China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Africa. Some of these people suffer forms of slavery that don’t involve us. But many of them are caught in slavery that does involve us. They produce the foods we eat, they make the clothes we wear, they dig for the minerals used in our smartphones, makeup and electric cars.

There are too many companies and industries that exploit the poor to talk about them all, so I will only mention some of the food industries. Coffee companies have been notorious for involving slave labour. Despite efforts to end slavery on coffee plantations, some still exploit their workers. The same is true for chocolate. West Africa produces over half of the world’s cocoa, and relies on the slave labour of children to do it.

Most of the beef that is consumed in this country is raised in Canada, but it is also imported from the US and New Zealand, as well as Brazil. Sixty percent of the Amazon rainforest is in Brazil, which is

being deforested at an alarming rate, in large part to make way for cattle ranching. Along with logging and mining, ranching is not only destroying the rainforest, but displacing the Indigenous people who live in it. They are being displaced, or forced to work for the industries that have stolen their lands.

Another company that practices both degradation of natural resources and exploitation of humans is Coca-Cola. In Mexico, India and South Africa, the company siphons off vast supplies of groundwater for its production of Coke. They extract the water literally from under the feet of local farmers, leaving them unable to grow crops, or even have enough water to drink.

There are other food industries that profit from slave labour, including the shrimp industry. Men are forced onto ships and women into processing factories in countries like Thailand and India. The shrimp that they process ends up on our dinner plates.

Other foods that are produced through slave labour include rice, sugar, salt, pepper, bananas, pineapple, peanuts, and coconut oil, to name a few.

There is a popular blessing for meals that goes like this, “Bless this food and the hands that have prepared it.” These words now make me shudder. The Israelites of Amos’ day were only concerned with ending the Sabbath so that they could get back to business, even if that business was exploiting those from whom they purchased the wheat. Do we offer a glib prayer for our food, anxious to get on with eating it, even if that food was obtained through exploitation?

The children forced to pick cocoa beans cry, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.” The women who have frost-bitten fingers from cleaning shrimp cry, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.” The men forced to cut down trees in the rainforest to make way for cattle ranches cry, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.” Human trafficking is a major form of modern slavery, and includes those who are exploited for labour or for sex. As we have seen in the food industry alone, trafficking for labour is widespread. But trafficking for sex is also rampant. Women and girls make up almost all of those who are forced into sex trafficking, and it occurs in virtually every country in the world. Asia and Africa rank as the areas highest in sex trafficking, but North America is not far behind. We need look no further than the current media frenzy around Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell to see the devastating effects of sex-trafficking in the US. This case exposes not only its pervasive nature, but also collusion at the highest levels of political, social, economic, and religious institutions.

And don’t think for a minute that sex trafficking is limited to inside American borders. In Canada, it is just as pervasive. Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary and Halifax are all centres of trafficking, but it is not limited to these cities. Sex trafficking corridors have been set up across the country to increase

profits, and make it easier for traffickers to evade detection. Girls and women are either groomed or abducted into sex trafficking, and are often tattooed to identify who owns them. Whether it is in a shanty in Thailand or Cambodia, or a condo in downtown Toronto, these girls and women cry, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.”

No discussion of slavery in Canada would be complete without considering the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. From the first contact with European settlers, Indigenous people of Turtle Island have been oppressed and enslaved. Expropriation of traditional lands, the erasure of cultures and languages, residential schools, the Sixties’ scoop – these are all examples of the systematic exploitation of this land’s First Nations.

There has been a rise in Canadian nationalism following the tariffs imposed by Trump, and his talk of Canada becoming the 51<sup>st</sup> state. But this nationalism, this renewed desire for sovereignty, has a troubling undercurrent. While settler Canadians may fear overreach by the US, Indigenous Peoples in Canada have lived through centuries of assault on their sovereignty. The glaring irony is that, while Canadians may want to protect “their land,” it has never been fully ceded. Indigenous lands are treated as commodities to be protected, even though Canada doesn’t own them.

This nationalist sentiment is reflected in the renewed fervour with which the national anthem is sung. “O Canada! Our home and native land!” Canada is home to settlers only because they committed genocide and displaced those who survived. It is not *our* native land; it was taken by force. “God keep our land glorious and free! O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.”

It is glorious and free only to those who stole it. For those of us with settler ancestry, we were the invaders. We were the ones for whom First Nations “stood on guard.” It seems it was all right for *us* to invade this land, but it’s not OK for others. Now that it’s “*our* land,” we need to guard against others who would threaten it. We may have enslaved the First Nations of this land, but we don’t want to be enslaved ourselves! I wonder, can we hear the hypocrisy in our thinking? Can we stop our cries of injustice long enough to hear the cries of others? For centuries, even to this day, Indigenous people of this land cry, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow.”

Amos criticized the wealthy of his day for exploiting the poor. In the parable of the Shrewd Manager, Jesus also criticizes the wealthy for their treatment of the poor, and it was to the wealthy, religious people that Jesus was speaking. The manager has squandered the rich man’s money by looking out for his own interests. Threatened with being fired, the manager decides to reduce what the debtors owed. In doing this, the manager was moving from exploiting people to treating them fairly and justly. Releasing people from their debts creates an egalitarian relationship, rather than an exploitative one. In this parable, the debtors are set free, but so too is the manager. He no longer serves money, but is freed up to serve God by caring for the poor. The manager is called “shrewd,” but this can also be

translated “wise.” Jesus was saying that the manager made a wise decision to treat the debtors with justice.

This parable and the prophecy of Amos both hold the same message. God’s people must choose. We must choose. We cannot serve God and exploit the poor. This is a difficult truth, especially in today’s society. It used to be clear who was enslaved. Not so today. It is almost impossible to trace world-wide supply chains on the goods that we consume, and that enslave the people who produce them. Even in Canada, those who are enslaved are all but invisible.

Perhaps like me, you feel overwhelmed by the spectre of modern slavery. The problem is so widespread, so insidious, so interwoven into the fabric of our global society, that it is hard to know how to confront it. It would be easy to assume that the peace and prosperity we enjoy comes cost-free. We may have peace, but not see the injustice that creates it. We may have prosperity, but not see the poverty that produces it. Israel’s prosperity made them blind not just to the suffering of others, but to the suffering that they themselves caused. Our prosperity makes us blind not just to the suffering of others, but to the suffering that we ourselves cause.

Amos wrestled with this dilemma. He saw the exploitation but hesitated to confront people. When God called Amos to prophesy, he said, “I’m no prophet, I’m just a shepherd.” We may say, “I’m no prophet, I’m just a regular person.” But God calls shepherds, God calls regular people, to go, and prophesy. I remember Ray Hobbs saying in a class once that prophecy isn’t so much about “foretelling” as it is about “telling forth.” Prophecy is not speaking about the future, but speaking about the present, and what God requires of us in the present. Amos spoke to the wealthy and the religious people of his day. But *we* are the wealthy and the religious people of our day! How do we confront something that we ourselves are complicit in? How can we be both prophet and participant?

The first step is to confess that we benefit from slavery, and through our ignorance, perpetuate it. And yet, even though we benefit from slavery, we too are trapped in it. Like the shrewd manager, we need to acknowledge that we have participated in exploitation. By confronting our complicity, and by working to free those who are enslaved, we too can be set free.

The second step is to join together with other people – family, friends, church, social action groups, anti-slavery coalitions. We do not perpetuate slavery as individuals, and we will not end slavery as individuals. We can accomplish more together than we can alone. We can call each other to account, encourage each other, and educate each other.

The third step is to focus on the forms of slavery that we want to stop. We can’t address all of them, although we can start by avoiding certain products. None of us need to drink Coke. We can choose

not to eat shrimp. But there are some products that we can't live without. Where possible, we can find alternative products that don't exploit the workers who produce them. But not all products have anti-slavery options.

Trying to end all forms of slavery goes too far. Simply choosing to avoid some products doesn't go far enough. Somewhere in the middle is a place where we can make a meaningful impact. It is up to us, together, to decide what that impact looks like.

Today, over 40 million people around the world are enslaved. These people cry out, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows my sorrow." But with God's help, we can say, "We know! We see!" What does God require of us? To seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. May it be so. Amen.