

ADVENT 2021

A VISUAL DEVOTIONAL

THE SLAVE SHIP – J.M.W TURNER

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Instructions

General Instructions

- Resources for the Devotional: The Slave Ship Devotional (This PDF)
- [The Slave Ship – Blog Post](#) (for the Reading sections explained below)

Advent 2021 consists of 5 total works of art. 1 each for the four Sundays in Advent and a final work to be delivered to your inbox on Christmas Morning. The Blog Post will be reproduced here for your convenience and following the blog post will be a devotional. This week it is in three parts. You can work that into your week however you like – either taking it in an all-in-one sitting or spreading it out during the week.

The works for each week are as follows:

Week 1 – We Light Amsterdam (an art installation)

Week 2 - The Slave Ship, J. M. W. Turner

Week 3 - IThemba Tower, Johannesburg (an art installation)

Week 4 - Nativity at Night, Geertgen tot Sint Jans

Christmas Morning - A Meat Stall with the Holy Family Giving Alms, Pieter Aertsen

These works are far from traditional and nudge us to think about Advent and our ongoing celebration of the incarnation in new and fresh ways. The theme of the series is Light out of Darkness. Glad you are joining me for this journey.

The Slave Ship

The Judgement of JWN Turner's *The Slave Ship*

Years ago, when I first saw this painting, I assumed I was just looking at another seascape with an interesting exploration of light. However, as I continued to look, small details came into focus. I began to wonder: What are those surprising dark lines in the water? Is that a leg? Are hands randomly reaching from the depths? Who painted this? My original thought of a beautiful sunrise began to fade, and the light I'd taken as warm and beautiful shifted to something more threatening.

Then I noticed the title, *Slave Ship, Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. This both answered some questions and raised others. The title was clear enough, and I could spot the ship in the oncoming storm. With a growing sense of horror, I realized I was viewing body parts, remains of those dumped into the sea. Blood, coloring the water red, and monstrous fish feeding in a frenzy, were now clear to me. The sea seemed alive as it churned and swirled into a mass of muddied brown. Disturbingly, the colors of the foreground resembled the earth of a freshly dug grave, more than the deep blues of the ocean.

Quickly, this painting of a beautiful seascape, shifted before my eyes into an emotional and compelling work about the barbarity of the slave trade.

I knew Turner was an abolitionist, and that many of his works combined imaginative land and seascapes with historical narratives. This work appeared to move beyond the mere telling of a story, and into judgement. Turner is clearly meting out justice on the slavers and campaigning for the viewer to join him in the abolitionist cause.

Continued Relevance of Turner's *The Slave Ship*

Slave Ship is a political picture meant to compel the viewer to join the campaign for the abolition of slavery. Painted in 1840, just 7 short years after England had abolished, not just the slave trade, but the owning of slaves, the work of the abolitionist movement was not done. While they had achieved their goals in England, they now looked beyond to the international community, seeking to end slavery abroad.

It should be noted that much of the work of the abolitionists was problematic, and even after the ending of slavery, the deeply embedded racist beliefs continued. Rarely is history clear cut. While Turner worked for abolition, there is evidence he was also invested in sugar work that was dependent on slave labor. We shouldn't be surprised. Today we purchase coffee and chocolate that is often harvested by exploited child and slave labor. Supply chains, rife with slavery and exploitation, still exist and we still participate. Extricating ourselves completely from systems that abuse and exploit is a complicated, imperfect endeavor.

I admit, that is part of the draw for me as I view this work. While based on a very specific event in history, the message of this work continues to call us to account.

Lines as judgement

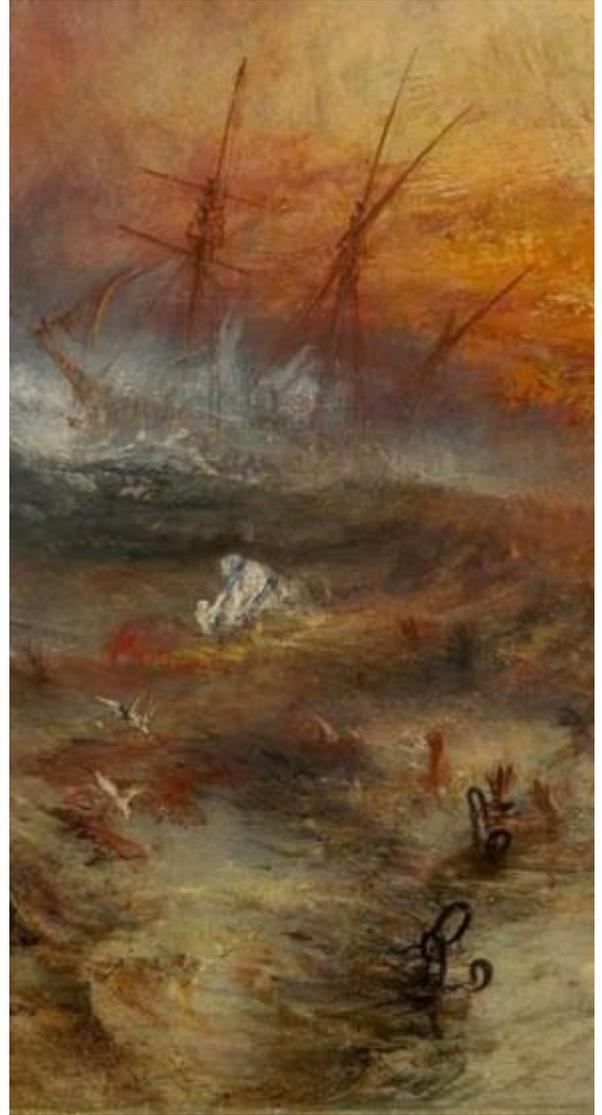
As I view the painting as a whole, I'm struck by the lack of lines. The drawing of lines is one of an artist's primary tools. Straight, curved, thick, and thin, lines build shapes. Lines form people, create vistas and make art recognizable. Noting how an artist uses lines can be illuminating to the viewer. With this work, the very lack of lines is striking. Turner uses thick, energetic brushstrokes of color to give what form the work contains. Waves, sun, storm, fish, even body parts are done without clear lines. Instead, Turner uses the shift from color to color to define his shapes.

Only the stark chains and the masts of the ship are drawn with clear lines, linking the ship and the chains. As the ship hurls toward the judgement of the oncoming typhoon, the lines of black in the foreground and the red lines of the masts testify to the guilt of those onboard. A few simple lines bring jarring clarity, forever linking the ship to the horror it has wrought.

Color as Jury

Turner's, *The Slave Ship*, is primarily about color. His emphasis on color is emblematic of the Romanticist work of his time and was used to engage and stir the emotions of the viewer.

Centering the painting is the vivid sunset. The beautiful clear white and yellows of the sun, and its reflection on the waters creates a vertical line that appears to divide the canvas in half. Another line of white starting on the far left with the foam on the waves continues across the canvas horizontally, nearly carving the space into quadrants. Each quadrant calls us to examine the evidence and fill the role of jury.





The lower, left of the painting, as we've noted, is filled with creams, browns, and splashes of red. Blood, earth, chains, hands, all call out to us to make a ruling. To me this portion resembles a battlefield, or perhaps the aftermath of a massacre. I feel the terror and silent screams of the victims as their hands reach in a final grasp for life.

Next to them in the lower right section we find one single leg, not yet consumed, directing our eye to the piranha like fish consuming the body. As if drowning is not enough, the slaves were torn apart by these monstrous fish. Even the birds, portrayed by slashes of white are part of the carnage, feeding on the scraps.

The colors of the left continue onto the right, uniting this lower portion.

It's as if Turner is calling on each of us to examine the evidence, to serve as judge and jury. Innocent or guilty, we have to decide.

The upper right corner is the only hopeful, peaceful area. The painterly mist of white, cream, soft pink, and a glimpse of blue sky offer a counterbalance to the violence. Perhaps Turner meant to offer an area of hope in the midst of the struggle. A sense that after the verdict has been read there might follow a period of peace.

Color as Verdict

For sailors the bright red sunset was a herald of a coming storm, in this case, a typhoon. The red and oranges around the sun seem to have set the sea ablaze, perhaps a nod to the fires of hell. Judgement for the atrocities just committed is on the horizon. Even the blood red color of the ship's masts shouts the guilt of those aboard. We see the crew has lowered the sails, giving up control as they head into the oncoming gale.

The white in the upper right of canvas brings a sense of calm and peace. This contrast sharply with the shade of white used on the left. Here the crisp, pure white of the whitecaps herald the coming storm. Black, dark grays, deep blues, provide the backdrop that makes the white in the waves stand out. Black and white, right and wrong, there is no room for negotiating or plea bargaining here. The ship sails into the bright white of justice while the storm looms.

Turner has created a bulkhead of color in purples and reds that appear threateningly above the ship. The more I gaze at this portion of the canvas the more menacing the shape feels. Its sheer size dwarfs the ship.

Nature as Executioner in Turner's *The Slave Ship*

Turner was known for his violent marine paintings. He was fascinated by the terrifying forces of nature, and the emotions that terror could incite. There are at least two themes running through the narrative of this canvas. First, the evil and violence that humans inflict on one another. We've seen that clearly in the slaves who have been tossed from the ship. Secondly, we see the struggle of men against nature, and the resounding conclusion that nature is superior. The small ship is no match for the raw power of the coming storm.



Nature hands out divine retribution for the crimes committed against humanity. While Captain and crew showed no mercy to the cries of their captives, so the storm will be indifferent to the prayers of the sailors. In this case, justice is truly blind, and mercy will have no part.

The canvas lays out the crimes of the crew. The verdict is in, all that is left is for the executioner to carry out the sentence.

The size brings us into the Court

This is not a massive painting, but relatively small and thus approachable. Measuring approximately 35 inches by 45 inches, and currently hanging at eye level at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, the work invites us to come closer. We are drawn in and can get near enough to pay attention to the small details.

Now that we are so close, we notice things that we might not have if the canvas was massive. In particular, we feel we are gazing, as if from above at the scene.



Perspective Declares Us Guilty

Turner was Professor of Perspective at the Royal Academy for over 30 years. Therefore, we can assume he understands, thoroughly, how to manipulate perspective, and the viewer.

When viewing art, it is always useful to ask where we, as the viewer stand. Often, artists provide a space for us in the foreground so that we feel we are 'there,' other times we are gazing up at an event. Wherever the artist places us, it is generally intentional and meant to create specific feelings. For instance, gazing up at a large statue makes us feel small and insignificant.

When we stop to consider the perspective in this work, we are looking down into the surf, as if we are standing on the deck of another ship. Are we witnesses of the atrocities just committed?

I don't think so. The way the work is constructed, the ship in the distance is fairly far away, far enough that the chains should have already sunk beneath the surface of the water. But what if we are standing on the deck of the ship that is tossing the slaves in? What if we are not merely witnesses of these atrocities, but accessories. What if we share in the guilt of the slave trade?

I believe that was Turner's intent. Turner meant to place us on the slaving vessel, to force us to examine how we are complicit in the cruelty and exploitation.

Artist as Prosecutor

Born in 1775, Turner called London home his entire life. A child prodigy, he entered the Royal Academy at the age of 14, exhibiting his first work at 15. He was championed by the prominent art critic of his day, John Ruskin, and elevated the genre of landscape painting to such a degree that it rivaled historical paintings. Working in oil, watercolor and print, Turner flourished as a Romantic painter. He quickly became known for his creative use of color and often violent depictions of nature, particularly in his marine landscapes.

Despite his professional success, his early life and young adulthood was shadowed by his mentally unstable mother. She would eventually be institutionalized and die when he was a young man. Turner, himself, would suffer from periods of depression and isolation. Turner retained his cockney accent and middle-class values throughout his life. He understood struggle, and never fully embraced the trappings of success.

Turner was considered controversial during his life for a variety of reasons, including his liberal politics. An active abolitionist, Turner was passionate about ending slavery, not just in Britain, but



internationally. His work as an abolitionist exposed him to the horrific events of the Zong Massacre and the subsequent trial. The Zong Massacre is believed to be the inspiration behind this work.

The Zong Massacre

In 1781, the captain of the Zong, a British slave ship, ordered his crew to throw overboard 132 -140 slaves. The crew began with women and children forcing them, still shackled, through portholes on the lower decks. The massacre lasted several (some say 10) days; many slaves begged to be allowed to die of thirst onboard the ship rather than being tossed into the sea. The ship carried 470 slaves, nearly double what they could safely hold. Purportedly, the decision to toss overboard these slaves was due to a shortage of fresh, drinking water. (For the record, the Zong still had 502 gallons of drinking water when it docked.)

Standard business practice of the day allowed slavers to deliberately kill slaves in this manner. In this way, financial losses were kept to a minimum. Slave syndicates could collect insurance monies for goods (slaves) who were 'lost at sea.'

The Trials

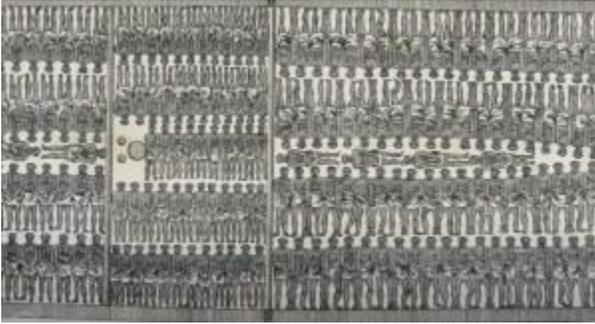
When the ship made port back in England the syndicate submitted a claim to the insurance company to recoup their losses. The insurance company took the case to court, blaming the water shortage on the captain's faulty navigation. The trial was somewhat inconclusive, first resulting in the insurance company being required to pay, and subsequently the decision was reversed.

While the original trial was over money, an attempt was made to move the trial into criminal court.



A freed slave from the Zong, recounted the massacre to an anti-slavery group who tried, without success, to prosecute the crew for murder. The British Solicitor General at the time dismissed the charges with these words, "no human people had been jettisoned," and "it was madness to accuse these well-serving honorable men of murder...the case is the same as if wood had been thrown overboard." In essence, slaves were perishable goods that could be damaged during shipping and the discarding of these 'goods' had no moral ramifications.

Results on the Abolitionist movement



The Zong Massacre highlighted just how inhumane and cruel the Middle Passage was, and support grew for regulating, and eventually eliminating slavery.

In 1787 Parliament passed the first law which limited the number of slaves that could be loaded onto a ship. Prior to this overcrowding was a primary cause of death and disease onboard.

In 1791 Parliament stopped the practice of insurance companies reimbursing ship owners when living slaves were thrown overboard.

In 1807 the slave trade was abolished, and in 1833, slavery itself was abolished.

This didn't end the abolitionist work. While slavery was illegal in Britain and its holdings, internationally both the slave trade and slavery itself continued. While it would be heartening to believe Britain continued to fight slavery for purely humanitarian reasons, the truth is ending slavery was critical for Britain's continued economic survival. If slavery continued in places like America, England could no longer compete economically. A free work force tipped the scales too far.

The Slave Ship Promotes the Cause of Abolition

In 1840 there were to be two anti-slavery conventions in London. Turner decided to exhibit *The Slave Ship* so that it would coincide with the conventions.



Turner's goal was to keep the issue in the public eye. Reminding the public, in an emotional way, of the inhumane practices of slavery was a call to action.

When Turner first exhibited, *The Slave Ship*, he paired it with the following extract from his unfinished and unpublished poem "Fallacies of Hope:"

*"Aloft all hands, strike the topmasts and belay;
Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds
Declare the Typhon's coming.
Before it sweeps your decks, throw overboard
The dead and dying – ne'er heed their chains
Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope!
Where is thy market now?"*

Rockets and Blue Lights



An interesting footnote to this painting is that Turner's *The Slave Ship* may have had a companion piece, or a 'pendant' painting in the form of *Rockets and Blue Lights*.

This work shows humankind in a more humane light. The lights in this work serve as a warning to Steamboats to avoid the shallow water. The goal is to save lives. Taylor painted *Rockets and Blue Lights* the same year as *The Slave Ship* and may have been meant to hang together. Unfortunately, this work has sustained quite

a bit of damage over the years.

How Turner's *The Slave Ship* Came to be in Boston

Noted art critic, John Ruskin, was the first owner of *The Slave Ship*. He extolled the use of color and claimed this was Turner's greatest canvas. Then the painting was given to an abolitionist in Boston, and from there was moved to the Boston Museum of Modern Art.

Sources

E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*. (New York, Phaidon Press, 2016)

Professor Sharon Latchaw Hirsh, *How to Look at and Understand Great Art*, Lecture series, Great Courses

Professor William Koss, *History of European Art* Lecture series, Great Courses

Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Story of Painting* (London, Dorsey Kindersley, 2000)

Marilyn Stokstad, *Art History*. (New Jersey, Pearson Education, 2005)

Boston Museum of Fine Art <https://www.mfa.org/>

<https://www.bruceonarthistory.com/>

The Devotional for The Slave Ship

This week we are going to start on a bit of a low note. I ask that you hang with me as we work our way through this piece of art and tie it into the spirit and message of Advent.

Part 1

For today, read the post about JWN Turner's work, The Slave Ship. This is a longer post with many ideas to consider.

Part 2

What many of us long for during the season of Advent is renewed hope, peace, and goodwill. We look forward to this time of year because we feel the world is a bit kinder, a bit more loving, and honestly, a bit more fun.

Yet, if you are like me, sometimes all the words tossed about during the holidays can feel hollow. Hope, love, joy, peace, goodwill toward men, sounds lovely, but seem to be in short supply. Often the idea of Christmas doesn't live up to the hype and we are left disappointed.

We long to have our spirits resonate with the message of Christmas, and yet we feel out of sync.

I think that is because we are trying to embrace partial truths. We believe we need to create this fairytale world of peace and joy to be in the Christmas spirit. **The truth is**, the message of Christmas is that Christ left the good and the perfect to enter into and experience the brokenness with us.

The truth is we live in a broken world full of hurting people. The Slave Ship shows just how cruel we can be to one another. While I pray you never experience anything approaching the pain of the slaves in that work, you know that cruelty exists. You have tasted pain at the hands of another.

The truth is that, at times, instead of being the victim, we have inflicted pain onto those around us. In a twist of perspective Turner placed us in the disturbing position of being the abuser, the slave trader. We all have experienced that sick, sinking feeling when we know we have hurt someone with a cruel or careless word or action.

The truth is, sometimes it can feel that nature itself is rising up against us. Wildfires, floods, or pandemics, there are times we are at the mercy of the elements with no way to defend ourselves. We are helpless.

During the season of Advent, we are called to embrace hard truths, not deny them. As we wait in anticipation of the celebration of Christmas morning it is imperative that we recognize the brokenness in ourselves and the world. Otherwise, what are we waiting for?

Part 3

While I spent a great deal of time explaining Turner's painting of *The Slave Ship*, I'd like to give a completely different take on it here. This is not a logical interpretation of the work, but merely my re-interpretation.

The canvas is filled with horror, violence, and cruelty. The events portrayed are frankly, unimaginable to me. The red sunset tells us that fresh horrors are on their way in the form of a fierce storm. This is a painting of despair.

Yet, as I consider *Advent*, I feel a strong compulsion to re-interpret the canvas, imagining it as a sunrise. Instead of moving into a stormy night, I see light breaking on a new day. The light moves across the water bringing hope and life to what was a watery grave. The blue sky on the right is peaking through the clouds offering a chance to begin again, to proceed on a different path.

What if I view *The Slave Ship* as an *Advent* work? What if I interpret the light in the center of the painting as Christ coming, breaking into the brokenness of this horrific scene and bringing about a new day where his sacrificial love, grace, and mercy rule?

After all, the message of the nativity is read backwards through the lens of the crucifixion. To frame it for our purposes here: the act of justice is turned into the vehicle of redemption. In this painting the foreboding retributive typhoon can be seen as redemptive if only the people who face the reality of the picture embrace a new reality. A reality where all humanity is seen as the image of God, worthy of the grace offered as the vehicle of salvation.

Advent means more than just looking back on the nativity. As I confront the truths of our brokenness, I realize I need to continually reorient my gaze so that I see through the eyes of *Advent* from the bow of the ship. How can I offer grace from the bow of the ship as a broken vessel to others because I have received grace myself?

Christ came to bring healing to our brokenness, to bind up our wounds, to love sacrificially, and to extend grace to all. Christ came to establish a kingdom where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but where we are all one Christ.

And so, as we continue through this *Advent* season, I challenge you, and myself, to notice and embrace the brokenness and to ask how we can be Christ to bind up the wounded and bring light and peace where there is none to be found.

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