

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper
Sunday, January 3, 2021
Second Sunday after Christmas**

“The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead”

John 1:10-18



As everyone knows, I love my car. Not just because it is electric. But also because it has twelve speakers putting out 560 watts of sound. I like to play my music loud. Listening to music while driving is one of my greatest pleasures. One day while driving, I heard this song, a song I had never heard before, that was so emotive. The lyrics were about a ‘Peter Pumpkinhead’. I had no idea who Peter Pumpkinhead was, but I knew the song was about Jesus. The words were so simple, but they made me cry, so much so I had to pull off the road and have a bit of a sniffle. Ever since I heard that song, I’ve always wanted to preach a sermon on it. Today is that day.

52. The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead



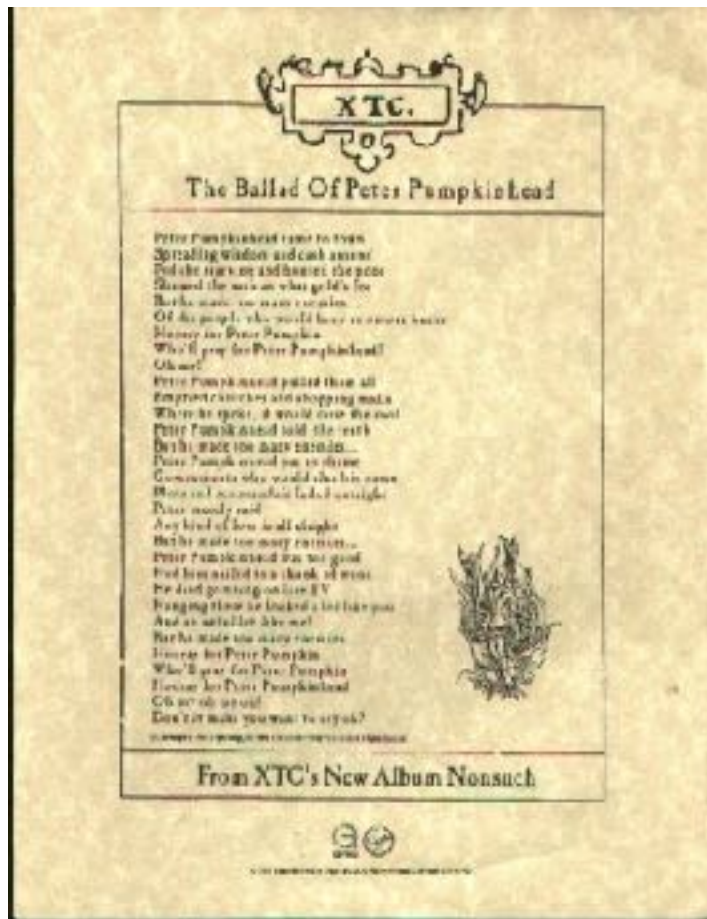
Nonsuch (1992)

Before we listen to the song, let me first explain how it came to be about ‘Peter Pumkinhead’. “The lyrics were inspired by a jack o’lantern that the songwriter had carved and placed on a fence post in his garden for Halloween. Afterward, the songwriter walked past the pumpkin each day on the way to his composing shed and, feeling sorry for the increasing decaying fruity head, decided to write a song about him. He said that he began thinking about ‘what would happen if there was somebody on Earth who was kind of perfect...God, [he or she would] make so many enemies!’”¹

“The song tells the story of ‘Peter Pumpkinhead’, a man who came to an unspecified town, ‘spreading wisdom and cash around’. He is extremely

¹ “The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ballad_of_Peter_Pumpkinhead, accessed December 31, 2020.

popular with the public, but extremely unpopular with the government. In the end, he is nailed to wood by his enemies for ‘being too good’”.²



Let us take a listen to the song. If you wish to just listen to the music, I encourage you to read the lyrics during the song (option one). If you wish to watch the video, perhaps refer to the lyrics later (option two).

First Option

XTC, still picture (5:04)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSXjxP8TPIM>

Second Option

Crash Test Dummies video (3:54)

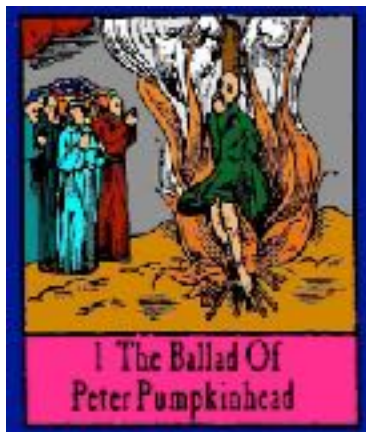
² "The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Ballad_of_Peter_Pumpkinhead, accessed December 31, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLt60MUv7AU>

You don't have to be a brilliant theologian to recognize that the song "The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead" is a contemporary account of Jesus and his ministry. Fortunately, since your minister is *no* brilliant theologian, we still have a message this morning!

What I love about this song is that, of course, the setting could be in first century Palestine, and a man named Jesus came to town and with his ministry turned the world upside-down. The ministry primarily disturbed the Pharisees and the Sadducees, those who governed the Jewish theocracy under the suzerainty of the Roman Empire.

Yet at the same time, the song's setting could be Europe during the Late Middle Ages.³



Notice the image of the album's cover (above). It is man being burned at the stake. The image and the reference in the beginning of the song to Peter

³ Or Early Modern Period.

Pumpkinhead showing “the Vatican what gold’s for” could very well refer to Jan Hus. Jan Hus wanted to reform the Catholic church even before Martin Luther’s Reformation.



While preaching against indulgences he said, "I would not for a chapel of gold retreat from the truth!". When he refused to recant, he was imprisoned. In July 1415, he was burned at the stake for heresy against the doctrines of the Catholic Church. He could be heard singing psalms as he was burning".⁴



And yet, at the same time again, the song’s setting is contemporary as evidenced by the reference to “shopping malls” and dying “grinning live on TV”. There are modern day heroes like The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who

⁴ “Jan Hus”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Hus, accessed December 31, 2020.

we will honor in about two weeks' time. Though he is not necessarily a saint, I think of John McCain. John McCain suffered as veteran of our country and was tortured as a prisoner of war for years. McCain showed humility and conceded nobly after his Presidential loss. McCain stood-up for millions of people who were to lose their health care insurance. Indeed, it has recently been the case that if anyone stands-up for the rule of law they are fired or they resign.



The very first verse of our scripture reading is the “Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead”’s thesis. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him” (John 1:10). This is precisely the connection that the songwriter made when he thought “what would happen if there was somebody on Earth who was kind and perfect? ... God, [he or she] would make so many enemies”. The refrain of the song is “But he made too many enemies”.



Friends, this song simply captures what has always happened. From Moses, to the prophets, to Jesus, to the disciples, and the apostles. They were persecuted and most were killed, more often than not by the people they served through, as Paul termed, the ‘powers and principalities’ (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus knew this all along. Speaking for God, Jesus one railed in a dispute, “Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town [...] Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matthew 23:34, 37).

The song directly references Jesus by having Peter Pumpkinhead “nailed to a chunk of wood”. This reference to Jesus speaks directly to the second verse in our scripture that relates that “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11). The cross, in Roman times, was not just a device for execution. More importantly, it was a device for shame, public

humiliation. The “Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead” laments that governments “put [him] to shame” and “would slur his name”. Indeed, that is exactly what happened to Jesus.



As we receive Holy Communion, we remember that we see ‘INRI’ on the cross, which in Latin is an acronym for **J**esus of **N**azareth, **K**ing of the **J**ews”.⁵ This appellation is a cynical accusation, a slur using his name.



I would like to conclude with one last point that the songwriter makes about Peter Pumpkinhead: “When he spoke, it would raise the roof. Peter Pumpkinhead told the truth”. I love this line. And it resonates perfectly with

⁵ Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum

verse 14 of our scripture this morning: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and *truth*”.



As we approach Epiphany this week Wednesday and celebrate it next week Sunday, we will acknowledge those who ‘recognized’ Jesus, namely the three Magi, or Wisemen. They were Persian astrologers who, though not Jews, understood that Jesus was the Messiah, the Chosen One. And of course, we recall they then avoided King Herod. Before Jesus spoke, he had, as our song repeats, “made too many enemies”.



And just now, we will celebrate Christ’s presence at the table and we remember that Jesus “merely said any kind of love is alright”.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".