



Vibrant hues of blue, yellow, and green draw us into Laura James' simple but iconographically rich image, which invites us to reflect on the universality of Christ and his teachings.

The Universality of Christ and His Teachings

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In *Sermon on the Mount* (on the cover) we can enjoy the colorful and iconographically rich work of the Brooklyn, New York, painter Laura James. As an artist of Antiguan heritage, her artistic inspiration traces not only to the Bible stories read to her as a child but also to her personal research of Ethiopian Christian art. This illustration—originally produced as the central image for *The Year of Grace 2005* church calendar—finds its power to teach through color, line, and form. The composition immediately attracts the eye with its bold blues, yellows, and greens.

The artist portrays Christ as a person of color in order to emphasize the ecumenical appeal of the gospel. James recalls that the illustrated Bible story books she knew as a child depicted the biblical figures in a way that did not look like her. Later, as she studied Christian iconography, she encountered the Ethiopian art that would have a profound impact on her understanding of Black history and the foundations of her faith. Christianity was practiced widely in Ethiopia by the fourth century and the tradition of Ethiopian Christian art dates back to the early fourteenth century. In this rich tradition she appreciated the depiction of Black people in the Bible stories.

James has had solo shows in New York City at The American Bible Society, Museum of Catholic Art and History, and Union Theological Seminary. Major Christian denominations, especially the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, have commissioned her paintings. She believes these churches are extremely committed to engaging communities of color. The critical praise and popular reception of her illustrations for *The Book of the Gospels* (Liturgy Training Publications, 2002), a volume designed for the public proclamation of the Gospels during Mass, inspired James to produce *Sermon on the Mount* for a church calendar project. This image, like those in *The Book of the Gospels*, marks a change in the traditional style of painting used to illustrate important biblical narratives.

Dedicated to creating images that teach with simplicity and focus, James draws us to her images through vibrant color and easily recognizable narratives. By portraying a Black Christ, she invites children of the next generation of Christians to reflect on the universality of Christ and his teachings.