



ARTS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 25, 2009

Maria Mallory White, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Associate Minister, Mt. Hermon African Methodist Episcopal Church, Miami Gardens, FL

Lection - 2 Chronicles 2:1-7; 11-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Solomon decided to build a temple for the name of the LORD, and a royal palace for himself. (v. 2) Solomon conscripted seventy thousand labourers and eighty thousand stonecutters in the hill country, with three thousand six hundred to oversee them. (v. 3) Solomon sent word to King Hiram of Tyre: “Once you dealt with my father David and sent him cedar to build himself a house to live in. (v. 4) I am now about to build a house for the name of the LORD my God and dedicate it to him for offering fragrant incense before him, and for the regular offering of the rows of bread, and for burnt-offerings morning and evening, on the sabbaths and the new moons and the appointed festivals of the LORD our God, as ordained for ever for Israel. (v. 5) The house that I am about to build will be great, for our God is greater than other gods. (v. 6) But who is able to build him a house, since heaven, even highest heaven, cannot contain him? Who am I to build a house for him, except as a place to make offerings before him? (v. 7) So now send me an artisan skilled to work in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, and in purple, crimson, and blue fabrics, trained also in engraving, to join the skilled workers who are with me in Judah and Jerusalem, whom my father David provided.” (v. 11) Then King Hiram of Tyre answered in a letter that he sent to Solomon, “Because the LORD loves his people he has made you king over them.” (v. 12) Hiram also said, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who made heaven and earth, who has given King David a wise son, endowed with discretion and understanding, who will build a temple for the LORD, and a royal palace for himself. (v. 13) I have dispatched Hiram-abi, a skilled artisan, endowed with understanding, (v. 14) the son of one of the Danite women, his father a Tyrian. He is trained to work in gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone, and wood, and in purple, blue, and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and to do all sorts of engraving and execute any design that may be assigned him, with your artisans, the artisans of my lord, your father David.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Bring on the dancers, the poets, the sculptors, the painters, the singers, and all of the gifted persons who have for centuries helped the African-American community stand out as a bastion of talent. We are an artsy people; this is indisputable. Whether at the church house, in the club, or on the campus “yard,” as we cut a strut, chant and call, or twist and turn. Our people are proud practitioners of performance art forms: dance and drama, rhythm and rhyme, speech and song. We are an artsy people, and that includes the so-called “plastic” arts, too. Watch us salvage and sew, point and shoot, imagine it and immortalize it. We take castaway cloth and make blankets and quilts worthy of display at the Smithsonian. From Gordon Parks’ photos, Langston and Zora Neale’s turns of phrase, Augusta Savage’s sculpture, Henry Ossawa Tanner or Jacob Lawrence’s paintings—and do not let me get started talking about our singers—we are an artsy people.

There is no denying it: We are an artistic people. So, a celebration of God through the arts is not something that should be foreign to the black church. Arts Sunday is designed to worship God through the gifts of those who, through their commitment to excellence in their craft, make us feel better, show us another spark of beauty, and attempt in their own way to bring to earth, the “aesthetics of the infinite.” Arts Sunday provides the church with yet another lens through which to see God, to hear God, and touch God. More than poems read on a particular Sunday, though poetry readings are definitely an integral part of the typical arts day celebration, it is an opportunity to help persons slow down long enough to incline their eyes, their ears, their hands and hearts towards the beauty created by our artists/crafts-persons.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Chronicles 2:1-7; 11-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I was raised by a mother who loved the arts. She had a special calling for reaching youth through Christian Education, and she brought all her creativity and exposure to the arts to the task. And though we never had an Arts Sunday that was singled out as such, my mother’s signature approach was to teach us through creative arts. She made the Bible fun and engaging; I wouldn’t go to anyone else’s classes but hers! I realize now that her work with us was no less than theological exploration and education through artistic expression. We renewed our minds and worshiped our God through the arts. These were some productions, too. Of course the singers sang, but there was always dancing, poetry reading and even miming before it had caught on in churches (I’m talking back in the ‘70s).

No mechanical memorization. No rote recitation in my mother’s ministry. Sometimes she used improvisational drama, and we reenacted a biblical story in our own words and within the contemporary context. I remember crafting our own slideshows—and this was before PowerPoint. Using colored slides, we drew images within the tiny frames, depicting the life and ministry of Jesus. I remember a grand puppet show, featuring our elaborate home-made costumes and my Kara doll (a Black Barbie) in the starring role of Esther. My brother’s G.I. Joe with “kung-fu grip” played the king. We made banners and crismons, too. And since my area has always been writing, when plays and skits were on Mom’s agenda, I was routinely called on to craft a script.

Such experiences developed in me a life-long appreciation for arts of all types. I especially appreciated those whose artistic work gave you a sense they were doing it to the glory of God.

This meant, at a minimum, that they were giving their best artistically and intellectually. The other thing that these experiences did was erase the sharp line that I often saw religious folk attempt to draw between what they described as the sacred and the secular. So much of art erased these lines for me and allowed me to see God in the hands of painters, in those of a seamstress, and even in those of Mr. McMillan who cut hair in the barbershop near the church. Yes, he made fading, trimming and edging a ministry, and the broths he served sported his works of art.

In reading the Bible, I came to understand that God must love poetry, singing, and artisans in general because so much poetry is contained in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, along with singing and scripture on the work of artisans. In other words, God loves art. God must, because, as I heard one writer say, “The Bible is not only revelation. It is a work of art,” after all. “And this work of art has been the single-biggest influence on art. It sheds more light upon the creative process and the use of the arts than any other source, because in it are found the great truths about [humanity] as well as God that are the wellsprings of art.”¹

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Taking over as the reigning monarch of Israel, Solomon continues in the covenantal legacy of his father, King David. Solomon built a temple for God. This was a glorious building project David longed to undertake, but God instead assigned the work to Solomon’s hands (1 Chron. 22:8-10). To our contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and standards of splendor, this project gives new meaning to the terms “mega-church” and “cathedral.” Resplendent in gold, silver, iron, bronze, draped with rich ornate fabrics—what a house!

The Chronicler, in presenting the details of Solomon’s reign, gives primary attention to the First Temple as it came to be known. In fact, the bulk of the first nine chapters in which Solomon is mentioned all concern, in some way, the building of the temple, the Israelites’ first in Jerusalem.

Attention is given to the raw materials Solomon will use in the temple, not only the metals—gold, silver, bronze, and iron—but also purple, crimson, and blue fabrics (v. 7). These represented the very finest and best there was to offer. Following in his father’s footsteps of faith in the God of Israel, Solomon desired to build a house of worship like no other to honor a God like no other (vv. 3-5).

David had already stockpiled much of the materials (1 Chron. 22:14), laying a foundation for the work. But this was not meant to be merely a house of bling or a sanctuary of opulence, a superlative structure erected for ecclesial ego. Such artistry was collected and constructed in honor of God and God alone, who is worthy of our best, executed with excellence. In our text, the Chronicler is clear to point out that, though Solomon is concerned with building a magnificent temple, his main concern is to glorify God (vv. 6-7).

We can learn a lot from Solomon. His interest and intent were to create an awesome atmosphere for worship of an Almighty God. The lavishness and luxury in carrying out the task were in recognition of the God who had so lavishly and luxuriously protected and provided for his chosen people—despite their sins and shortcomings. Solomon was focused, not on building a building, per se, but an atmosphere of worship that was crafted from the raw materials of

extravagant gifts and shaped by the collective talents presented by recipients of God's exceptional grace.

Solomon begins with calling on a workforce some 153,000-strong to take part in the construction. Even on the journeyman level, there was a role for the "common workers" to play in the grand project of the Temple construction. Not everyone is called to be a soloist, but we can all make a joyful noise to the Lord and work within our abilities and giftings.

And Solomon, a wealthy king who it could also be said was the wisest in his kingdom, did not try to do it all. He wasn't foolish enough to think his gifts were the ultimate and, therefore, the only ones that should be on display. Not willing to try to seize the spotlight, he humbly acknowledged his unworthiness for the task (v. 6). Like a pastor who isn't afraid the ministry of an anointed soloist will outshine the preaching moment, here we have a leader who is simply intent on building a place of worship with which God will be pleased.

So, Solomon requests from King Hiram of Tyre an artist. Not just any artist, but a "skilled artisan endowed with understanding" (v. 13). King Hiram sends a multi-talented, highly trained person to assist Solomon. He is trained to work with multiple minerals (gold, silver, bronze, iron and stone), wood and fabric, and even as an engraver (v 14). This is the ultimate artist. What's more, his skills are all being put to use to glorify God, through use of his craftsmanship. King Hiram may be aware that a place of worship for God hangs in the balance.

The passage shows us that David did not build the temple, but he left an inheritance of materials stockpiled for Solomon. We also see that, although Solomon asked for and received a master artisan, he also needed the participation of entry-level workers; 150,000 workers were used. All skill levels can be employed to honor God. We, too, have inherited much from our elders that we can use to continue to build great things for God, employing the best from each generation. Second, we have creativity among us across the spectrum of expertise, from the entry level to the master artist, everyone is needed. And, finally, the text shows us that with God-ordained leaders/teachers (the Solomon's of our day) we can build anything, from houses of worship to houses for our communities using our diverse offering of gifts, talents and artistry all to the glory of God.

Celebration

This passage presents a king who offers his best to God. Only our best offerings, drawn from diverse raw "materials," and given with a commitment to excellence will do. As African-Americans, we are undeniably gifted artisans and stewards of great creativity across a grand spectrum of genres. So, we will worship our God not only in song, but in dance, in drama, in poetry, in mime—in artistry in all its forms. In a world that so often seeks to compromise, demoralize, jeopardize or scandalize our precious creativity and talent, we will hold fast to the excellence that is the hallmark of our creative genius.

Descriptive Details

Some of the descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: With a building crew more than 150,000 strong, the passage foreshadows the crescendo of construction that will produce the temple; and

Sights: Solomon envisions a great temple, built by a great multitude and greatly adorned with in gold, silver, bronze, and iron, and in purple, crimson, and blue fabrics. He also sees a vision that only comes to fruition with great artistry executed with excellence by divinely endowed leadership.

Note

Ryken, Leland. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin "Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics." The Christian Imagination. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1981, pp. 48-49.