



Union Bethel AME Church, Great Falls, Montana, 1890-Present

***HOMECOMING/FAMILY AND FRIENDS DAY**

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 30, 2011

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Lection – Jeremiah 31:7-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 7) For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel.’ (v. 8) See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in

labour, together; a great company, they shall return here. (v. 9) With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. (v. 10) Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.'

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the African American church, "Homecoming/Family and Friends Day" means much more to the parishioner than a day when relatives and acquaintances are simply invited to attend a special church service in their honor. To the contrary, "Homecoming" or "Family and Friends Day" stands as a sacred day. It is a day within the church calendar year for which members travel from far and near. Friends, relatives, acquaintances, and community associates return to their "Home church" on this day to testify to the faithfulness of God and also to witness the *new* things being orchestrated by God in the life of their "Home church." This annual sojourn is made by many in the African American church because "Homecoming/Family and Friends Day" reconnects its parishioners to a story. Underneath all the festive dinners, scheduled sports events, fund raising activities, fellowships, choir rehearsals, and *ad hoc* family reunions exists a narrative detailing the compassionate activity of a God who has faithfully sheltered countless generations from the presence of evil. For the sojourner committed to this sacred day, "Homecoming/Family and Friends Day" not only reunites a particular people with their God, but also reunites a church with its liberating mission in Jesus Christ.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 31:7-10

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I love the occasion of "Homecoming/Family and Friends Day." As I am completing this commentary the church I serve and I are preparing to embark upon a weekend summer trip to Elizabeth City, North Carolina. I have been invited to uplift the New Sawyer's Creek Missionary Baptist Church congregation as guest preacher for their annual "Homecoming" celebration. Chartered buses have been reserved. Hotel rooms have been secured. Adults are already picking out their road trip outfits and the children have already claimed the victory in the church-wide volleyball contest. Members of the New Sawyer's Creek Missionary Baptist Church have already formed their committees to receive us. Dinners are being prepared. Games are being scheduled. Volunteers have already signed up and the pastor is pumping up the event from the pulpit.

Even though the First Baptist Church of Hillside is a northern congregation geographically speaking, its members are predominantly first- and second-generation African American migrants from the Deep South, and can identify with the underlying themes of the New Sawyer's Creek Missionary Baptist Church annual "Homecoming" celebration. As first- and second-generation migrants of the Deep South, FBC members know what it's like to long for the chance to go "home" and be "comforted" by the God of their childhood years. The idea of going "home" resonates well with the African American church. In this instance, the two churches coming together as one suggests that God still actively summons people to gather in God's name.

Through the memories of childhood baptism, that first Communion, that first Sunday school lesson, and that first church picnic, God rejoins the gathered community of sojourners and brings afresh a new sense of covenant into the hearts of God's people. God's calling at "Homecoming" enables the faithful to bear witness to a real experience of shelter, liberation, and an assurance that God is still leading God's people into the future.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This "Homecoming" or "Family and Friends Day" text should remind the reader of the ways in which God's grace works within the family of God. By God's grace the people of Israel inherit a new covenant that enables them to progress in the world and, though scattered, reclaim their spiritual inheritance in a way they never could by their own efforts. For the author of the text, the way "home" is described as a continuing repentance and remembering of the LORD. Through careful reflection and introspection the people of Israel will rediscover their place in the plans of God. It may seem as if the adversities of life have carried Israel far from the presence of God. However, the LORD declares, Israel is still God's chosen people. God promises to sustain their lives in the midst of adversity and bring them back home, the common place of their ancestors.

It should be noted that the author of the text does not deny the paradoxical nature in which this good news is being presented. The people of God are indeed scattered and have no apparent reason to shout concerning God's faithfulness in the land. Persecution under the tyranny of the Assyrian empire is believed to have reached its height. Israel has become faint. God's divine protection seems like a distant memory, and God's promises of redemption have been long forgotten. Once considered the apple of God's eye, Israel has now become a stench to the nations and is believed by many to have been disowned by their LORD.

It is with this backdrop in mind that we witness the prophetic voice of Jeremiah penetrate the despair of God's people. Jeremiah promises that the day of liberation is at hand where God's people will be set free and returned to their spiritual "home." Much like the African American church in the south during the Civil Rights Era, Israel will be protected from its oppressor and its survivors will be reunited with the land of their ancestors. Jeremiah declares that life will breathe again with great gatherings of worship. Israel's exiled residents will shout great 'hosannas' in their temple of old. The weary men, women, and children of Israel will remember their God of times past, and they will long to return to the place of their great "Homecoming."

The author of the text wants the reader to know that this day will happen. From the north and the far parts of the earth the people of God will come home. They will come blind, broken, and laboring; tears will be mingled with cries of joy, but God's love will be experienced by them, like a child reuniting with a long-lost parent.

This message is given to the people of Israel, but should also be received by the Church today. The LORD promises to redeem the suffering and the oppressed. All who turn to the LORD will be filled with joy and will be pointed towards their spiritual home in this life and the next. Though social media like Facebook and Twitter are now being mistakenly used to replace the more traditional modes of communal gathering in the African American church, none can ever replace the blessing of a true "Homecoming."

It is at the “Homecoming” where the people of God see the faithful hand of the LORD in their midst and are able to ascertain how God ransomed them from the hand of an oppressor mightier than they. At the “Homecoming” gathering, and in the face of oppressors, voices are lifted in song. Praises are declared in the atmosphere. Words of comfort are shared among the people. Children are reconnected with their spiritual lineage. This is all done to declare a people’s faith in their God.

Much like Jeremiah, a seasoned hosting pastor will command an attitude of exaltation to be expressed by those gathered at a “Homecoming” celebration. This call to radical exaltation runs counter to the trends of culture in that it empowers God’s people to defy the effects of a recession, racial and gender discrimination, poverty, joblessness, incarceration, drug abuse, and violence in the community. To the contrary, God’s people are reminded at the “Homecoming” by the pastor or guest preacher that the righteous will not be denied their inheritance. Though they may be scattered in different parts of the world, the people of God will live and receive the blessings of the LORD much like their ancestors.

In this regard, the “Homecoming” or “Family and Friends Day” celebration serves two purposes. It re-centers the people of God in their remembering of the LORD who kept them in years past. It also clarifies God’s will for the future of the “Home church” where the people have gathered. In the African American church tradition, special offerings are raised to support the mission of the “Home church” during “Homecoming.” New ministries are ignited. New leaders are often identified and charged to carry out the vision that nurtured previous generations. Sometimes new visions are birthed out of the “Homecoming” celebration.

In the gathering we also find a challenge from God to not forsake “the landmark,” but to keep it erect for the benefit of future generations (Proverbs 22:28).

Celebration

We celebrate the faithfulness of God and the assurance of God’s ways. In a world where the ten-point plan to success has become the more common option of choice for daily living, “Homecoming” reminds us that God’s ways of old still present the best option for daily living. “Homecoming” also serves as the event where the people of God are comforted and uplifted by the One who has always been with us; this is the posture of the Church in worship.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

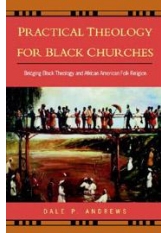
Sounds: The sudden shouting, weeping, and exalted praise of adults and children entering into the land their ancestors called home;

Sights: The priests waving their hands over the heads of the people as they enter the temple to experience their first “Homecoming” celebration; and

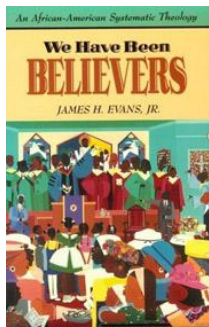
Smells: The smell of incense in the sanctuary as the priests prepare their offerings to the LORD; the smell of fresh olive oil mixed with frankincense and myrrh as the lotion of choice to smooth the chaffed skin of a people who just completed a long tiring journey back home to their homeland.

III. Suggestions to Help You Prepare for Homecoming/Family and Friends Day **See the cultural resource unit and the worship unit for many other great ideas.**

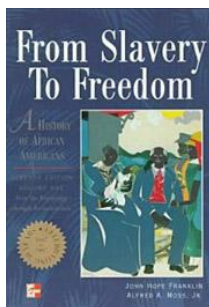
Books to Read Prior to the Service



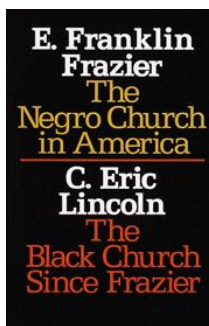
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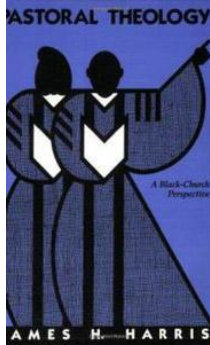
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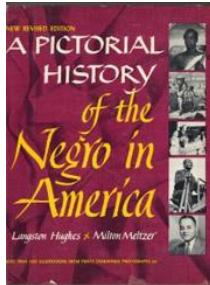
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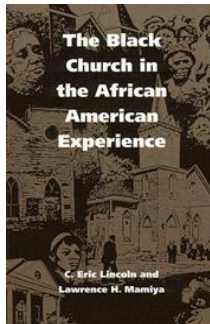
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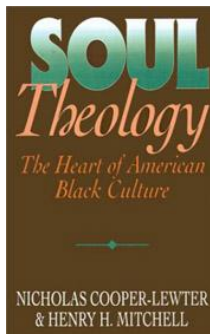
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Cooper-Lewter, Nicholas and Henry H. Mitchell. Soul Theology: The Heart of American Black Culture. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991.

Links and Videos

- Black families have long coupled their return to the family “home” church with a family reunion. Enjoy the speech titled “Take Your Place” from the movie Madea’s Family Reunion, Tyler Perry, director.
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pk8Bf5LWFPg>

*The song that accompanies today’s image is titled “The Old Landmark,” which was written by William Herbert Brewster. Here is it sung by Clara Ward and the Clara Ward Singers.