



INDEPENDENCE DAY

(Honoring those who helped gain our independence)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 6, 2008

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Lection – Exodus 13:17-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." (v. 18) So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. (v. 19) And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here." (v. 20) They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. (v. 21) The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. (v. 22) Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Perhaps there is no other federal holiday that evokes the feeling of double consciousness that blacks in America experience as much as does Independence Day. We are painfully aware that when Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock, John Adams and others penned their names to the document that declared independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain on July 4, 1776, they did not have blacks in mind.

Our contemporary participation, or absence, in parades and picnics and pyrotechnics celebrating “America’s independence” is often a bitter sweet experience. We ask, “Where are we really in all of that?” It would be almost eighty seven years after the original Independence Day, with President Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863), that African Americans would begin the arduous journey toward legally recognized freedom. Certainly our trek, now one hundred forty five years later, continues to be a step by step journey toward freedom.

II Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 13:17-22

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The journey toward freedom is long and grueling. Over the course of my life, I have witnessed remarkable strides followed by devastating setbacks. For example, in the field of education our victory in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, ending the policy of “separate but equal public education,” was challenged on June 28, 2006 when the Supreme Court ruled in the cases of *Parents v. Seattle* and *Meredith v. Jefferson* that programs in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, which tried to maintain diversity in schools by considering race when assigning students to schools, are unconstitutional.

According to the Children’s Defense Fund, high school graduation rates are substantially lower for blacks than they are for whites. A report by the Harvard Civil Rights Project and the Urban Institute indicates that only 50% of black students graduated from high school in 2001.¹ According to historian Roger Wilkins, “Blacks have a 375-year history on this continent: 245 involving slavery, 100 involving discrimination, and only 30 involving anything else.”² Blacks in the USA and Hebrews in Egypt had similar sojourns of oppression. African Americans identify with those in our text who were led by God “the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea of freedom.” (Exodus 13:18).

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The deliverance narrative of the Hebrews out of Egypt comprises the historical context of Exodus 13:17-22. Our lection text is a continuation of Exodus 12:37-39 after the commentator introduces a number of regulations for engaging in celebrations and remembering in 12:40-13:16.

The preacher ought not get unnecessarily distracted as to whether the Hebrews' journey from Egypt took them by way of the Red Sea, or toward the Sea of Reeds (17:13). The author is making a theological point here rather than a geographical one. God's providential care in leading is the primary theological thrust of this text. God is leading at both the beginning and the end of this text.

It is worthy of noting that God "did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that would have been nearer" (13:17) to their final destination. God "led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea" (13:18). It is clear here that God thinks that the Hebrews are highly susceptible and vulnerable to changing their minds, or repenting, regarding their newly found freedom. God is not afraid of a conflict or war with the Philistines. God wisely considers just how ready this rag tag band of newly emancipated people are for facing yet another battle having just fled Egypt. As oppressive as Egypt was for this mass of 600,000 to 1.2 million refugees, Egypt was the only home they knew, the only culture that ordered their existence, and the only source of sustenance they had ever known. Here, God is concerned that a people addicted to oppression for so long under the Egyptian regime might easily renounce their resolve about freedom, and turn back toward their previously bonded state in Egypt.

In verses 17 and 18 the commentator affirms the leadership of God and does so in describing God as one whom, for our sakes, takes the "roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea." The affirmation here is that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."³ Each of us should explore where African Americans currently are in our own journey toward freedom, exodus, red sea crossings or wilderness wanderings.

In verses 21-22 the passage highlights a very powerful visual representation of the God that leads. We note that, "The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." God is there to lead God's people by day, protecting the newly freed from the noon day sun with a cloud that cools and comforts. In addition, God is present at night by a pillar of fire to provide light in the wilderness that is filled with enormous danger. God is with God's people 24/7/365.

Sandwiched between these two affirmations of God's presence and leading, is the text that refers to Moses bearing Joseph's bones out of Egypt toward the land of promise (13:19). The book of Genesis concludes with the words, "So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, 'When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.' And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt."(Genesis 50:25-26). It is worth pondering here that Joseph, not normally noted for a liberation agenda, compromised as he was by living a successful upper middle class lifestyle in Egypt and living his entire adult life under Egyptian definitions of reality, dares to proclaim that God will not leave this people in bondage but will see them and free them. Joseph uses the infinitive absolute "will surely come" to proclaim that God will not leave God's people in bondage but will in fact liberate them in God's own time.

Our text raises questions as to whether or not we are afraid of freedom and willing to pay the price toward progressively making it a reality. The musical group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, proclaimed in song, “We who believe in freedom cannot rest.”⁴ James Weldon Johnson, two generations earlier wrote:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;

Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, Our God, where we met Thee;
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;

Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand
True to our God, true to our native land.⁵

We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. Independence Sunday is an excellent opportunity to name the names of those who perhaps never made it out of Egypt, but nevertheless encouraged other generations to believe that the time of our deliverance would “surely come.”

Celebration

This text provides a number of opportunities for celebration. Especially poignant is the fact that God is still leading, protecting, and maneuvering us through the oppressive forces of history to bring us to a place where freedom and justice reigns. God’s leadership is thoughtful, reliable, and unabashedly committed to those who are oppressed.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The barren wilderness, devoid of life sustaining vegetation, filled with rocks and boulders for miles upon miles across the horizon. There are thousands of people fleeing Egypt with hardly anything on their backs other than the clothes in which they escaped. A few Hebrews have sacks filled with coins and household items they were able to steal from their Egyptian lords as they escaped in the middle of the night. There is Moses, protectively carrying the bones of Joseph; the bones are wrapped in linen and guarded by strong men; and

Smells: The acrid smell of fear is in the air as terrified men and women, longingly look back toward Egypt wondering if the Egyptians will catch them in flight. The smell of the livestock and herds of these refugees as they make their way through the wilderness.

Notes

1. "The Road to Dropping Out: Minority Students & Academic Factors Correlated with Failure to Complete High School." Children's Defense Fund. Online location: http://www.childrensdefense.org/site/DocServer/dropping_out.pdf?docID=396 accessed 13 February 2008

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2. See Pulitzer winning African American author, Roger W. Wilkins' book Jefferson's Pillow: The Founding Fathers and the Dilemma of Black Patriotism. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001. In this book Wilkins asks, "Can I embrace the founders who may have 'owned' some of my ancestors?" This is the backbone question of Jefferson's Pillow. This continues to be one of the many dilemma's for African Americans reflecting on Independence Day in 2008.

3. Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister, reformer, and abolitionist is the originator of this quote. Martin Luther King, Jr., a student of Rev. Parker's sermons, often quoted the line and so people now misattribute it to him. Floegel, Mark. "The Moral Universe." Common Dreams. Online location: <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2007/05/11/1118/> accessed 11 May 2007

4. "Ella's Song." Lyrics and music by Bernice Johnson Reagon. Songtalk Publishing Co., copyright 1981. Lyrics at <http://www.heroism.org/class/1960/cu-unknown.htm>
Audio at Daily Kos: Online location: <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/3/15/10616/1989/785/477199> accessed 11 May 2007