



MEN'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The Significance of Men's Day: "Be Strong, Take Courage"

Men's Days are significant in African American churches for a number of reasons and, as such, they tend to have strong, meaningful, historical overtones. Some people speak of America's racist and unjust history toward black people in terms of "manhood denied." Ice Cube said in a rap, "You treat me less than a man, cuz right now you got the upper hand." But rather than seeing the day as an opportunity of reprieve for black men from an oppressive existence, what the day offers black church communities is a chance to celebrate the healthy roles men have played, and can continue to play, in the unfolding divine drama of black freedom that involves the entire community—women, men, youth, and children.

What the day also allows us to do is to be conscious of the ways that our community has endured despite the challenges against us, and to celebrate men who do not reproduce the oppression that they have overcome by marginalizing women, children, or gay and lesbian persons.

The day is a day in which to celebrate wholeness or to begin on a road to wholeness by emphasizing similar themes as the Million Man March did in 1995—namely, redemption, reconciliation, and atonement. A focus on redemption allows men to be purpose driven by reminding them that many black men need others to reach out to them, and that we continuously have to lift as we climb to greater emotional, religious, and social heights in our lives. Reconciliation reminds us how important it is for us to come to grips with our own issues and to unite with other men and women across class and cultural lines within black communities and heal broken relationships and strengthen community ties. Atonement reminds us that we need forgiveness from our friends, families, colleagues, partners, and children for our failures.

Like the lection suggests, all of these commitments require strength—not in the popular sense of the word—but courage to face ourselves and others in ways that may result in vulnerabilities that make us doubt our status as men. We can begin to re-envision manhood so that our notions of what it means are fruitful and productive, both in terms of the new possibilities this affords us in relationships and opportunities, and in the ways in which our transformation can bless those we love and those who love us.

II. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Several of the songs that follow are traditionally sung on Men's Day Sundays. The songs simply represent that, on this day, the church is adulating the Divine through the particularity of men. These traditional songs may even benefit from modifications that reflect the desire of men to present themselves in fuller ways.

God of Our Fathers

God of our fathers, whose almighty hand
Leads forth in beauty all the starry band
Of shining worlds in splendor through the skies
Our grateful songs before Thy throne arise.

Thy love divine hath led us in the past,
In this free land by Thee our lot is cast,
Be Thou our Ruler, Guardian, Guide and Stay,
Thy Word our law, Thy paths our chosen way.

From war's alarms, from deadly pestilence,
Be Thy strong arm our ever sure defense;
Thy true religion in our hearts increase,
Thy bounteous goodness nourish us in peace.

Refresh Thy people on their toilsome way,
Lead us from night to never ending day;
Fill all our lives with love and grace divine,
And glory, laud, and praise be ever Thine.¹

Faith of Our Fathers

Faith of our fathers, living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
O how our hearts beat high with joy
Whenever we hear that glorious Word!

Refrain

Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death.

Faith of our fathers, we will strive
To win all nations unto Thee;
And through the truth that comes from God,
We all shall then be truly free.

Refrain

Faith of our fathers, we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife;
And preach Thee, too, as love knows how
By kindly words and virtuous life.

Refrain²

Breathe on Me

Holy Spirit, breathe on me,
until my heart is clean.
Let sunshine fill its inmost part,
with not a cloud between.

Refrain

Breathe on me, breathe on me.
Holy Spirit, breathe on me.
Take thou my heart,
cleanse ev'ry part.
Holy Spirit breathe on me.

Holy Spirit, breathe on me,
My stubborn will subdue.
Teach me in words of living flame,
What Christ would have me do.

Refrain

Holy Spirit, breathe on me,
Fill me with power divine.
Kindle a flame of love and zeal
Within this heart of mine.

Refrain

Holy Spirit, breathe on me,
Till I am all thine own;
Until my will is lost in thine,
To live for thee alone.

Refrain³

III. Cultural and Artistic Response to Men's Day

Since the focus of this moment is Men's Day and the thematic thrusts are strength and inheritance—a strength that is not dominating, but is secure and confident enough to be in loving and vulnerable relationships with others—below are some poems that I composed that I hope will assist men in being reflexive as they strive to leave a Godly inheritance as their legacy. They range thematically from celebrating black women, to embracing romance, to exploring one's own vulnerability and frailties. They reflect some of my own early wrestling with intimacy and openness for which I used poetry therapeutically to give voice to my struggles and to define strength in my own life. This capacity to withstand the suspicious gaze of others who understand manhood monolithically as aggressive and dominating and to assert that it is something deeper, more meaningful, and relational is indeed true strength—to give one's inner development and the ability to maintain fruitful relationships the highest priority.

(a) Poem One

The first poem reflected my quest for love and meaning. It is applicable to various types of relationships, not merely romantic ones, since the primary human search is for life meaning.

Meaning

What does it mean that I think about you everyday
That my soul is consumed with the inescapable notion that we belong together?
I search for the answer.
Divine destiny. . .perhaps.
Though I struggle to divert my attention,
I realize that the answer to the question may be meaning itself,
Meaning that we will impart to one another
. . . from the depths of our souls.

(b) Poem Two

Like many black men who lacked a community of men where frank conversation was had about intimacy and wholeness, I reflected deeply and privately. This search for confluence reflected my working and desire to avoid the fragmentation of spiritual, emotional, romantic, and vocational longings—but for them all to come together in my life simultaneously. That is what the next poem concerns.

Confluence

For you, my heart's desire, my most sacred pleasure, I search inwardly,
seeking to find that authentic place that is sacred.
It is for you that I endure, that I wait patiently, that I allow the image to project
for you are my soul.

You are my soul and without you my heart is left searching. . .
wondering if I shall ever be consonant, content, complete.
I linger in ambiguity, for the convergence of divine consciousness has not come,
so close yet so distant.

It shall forsake me no longer.
Soon it shall be for me as it was in the beginning, and I shall be ready, when the paths
meet.
My soul shall be complete.
The moment is moving toward fulfillment.
But without you I still wait.

(c) Poem Three

Written nearly thirty years ago, the next entry is my celebration of black women.

My African Woman

My African Woman....
My African woman, at various places in time...
Yet I have always been proud to say that you were mine.
My African woman, queen of humanity, mother of the earth...
Oh sweet ebony princess, to kings and queens have you given birth.
Many names you have been called throughout the centuries:
Nefertiti, Nzinga, Makeda, Rachel, Kiasi....
Never fully understanding why you loved me,
But to you I have remained true,
although sometimes lost in your mystique, beauty, and grace.
Loving you is so divine...
God has so blessed you I wonder if I can...
Then I think: "Of course, that is the passion that the universe had given this black man."
My African woman, all the ordeals you have gotten me through....
My African woman, my African woman, my African woman....
All my patience, love, sensitivity, and desire are for you....
My African woman...

IV. Audio Visual Suggestions

- On this day, throughout the sanctuary and on screens, place pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and President Barack H. Obama with their wives and families and the men of your church with their families.
- Place images from the Million Man March throughout the church and on screens throughout the service.
- Display pictures that show black men embracing their sons.

- Display throughout your church and your order of worship/bulletin, depictions of black men serving the community, e.g., after Hurricane Katrina and in other instances.

V. Christian Education Material for Men's Day

- See, the Million Man March Pledge:
<http://www.africawithin.com/mmm/mmpledge.htm>
- Stories of black men in the Bible:
<http://www.elite.net/~ebedyah/PastorsSite/topicalstudies/blackmeninbible.htm>
See, sections III and VI.

VI. Resources for Reading about Men, Masculinity, & Religion

Journals & Websites

Black Theology: An International Journal. This journal offers a diverse array of articles related to black religious thought that may serve as points of departure for study and discussion groups.

Journal of Men, Masculinity and Spirituality. Published free online at <http://www.jmmsweb.org>. This is a fairly new but growing journal that is an excellent source for conversations specifically about men and religious life and thought.

This is the site for the movie “What Black Men Think,” but it also makes available video clips from prominent African American men from diverse political and cultural perspectives. <http://wbmt.wordpress.com/>.

A national organization of African American men, the 100 Black Men of America, Inc., has resources for health and wellness, economic development, education, and leadership—all of which focus on black men and their role in black communities. <http://www.100blackmen.org/>.

The Concerned Black Men National Organization is an excellent resource in that their interest is specifically on black men and youth. Their website can offer helpful guidelines for mentoring, tutorials, and community service. <http://www.cbmnational.org/>.

BlackMen in America website features illustrations, videos, and stories of black men in America. <http://bmia.wordpress.com/>.

Books & Articles

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Notes

1. "God of Our Fathers." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #609
2. "Faith of Our Fathers." African American Heritage Hymnal. #409
3. "Breathe On Me." By Edwin Hatch.