



## THANKSGIVING DAY

### CULTURAL RESOURCE

**Sunday, November 22, 2009 or Thursday November 26, 2009**

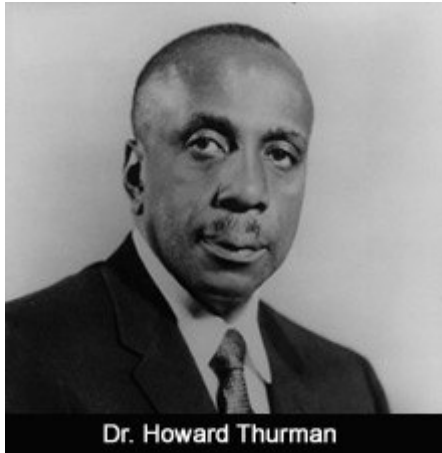
**Anthony B. Pinn, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator**

**Lection - Job 1:20-22 (New Revised Standard Version)**

#### **I. Historical Considerations**

**For Christians, thanksgiving is not shorthand for the story of a shared meal between Europeans and Native Americas, reenacted November of each year.** Rather, there is a depth to the term and its meaning that cuts across the centuries and speaks to humanity's basic connection to God and this changing world. Thanksgiving provides the

basic posture of humans toward the Divine. That is to say, thanksgiving involves celebration of the ultimate logic of life made possible through the workings of a God concerned with justice. It is not shortsighted; it is not concerned only with the present moment but, instead, thanksgiving allows recognition of the ultimate value of what is to come. It is a tenacious hold on the possibility of goodness and justice in spite of current circumstances.



Dr. Howard Thurman

Many African American religious leaders have wrestled with the nature and meaning of thanksgiving, perhaps none more profoundly than that twentieth century minister, activist and mystic, Howard Thurman. One of the most significant events in Howard Thurman's life was his trip to India in 1935, during which he had the pleasure of an audience with Mahatma Gandhi. This trip, and his meeting with Gandhi, inspired and sharpened his commitment to the fundamental connections between all peoples and the need to link religious commitment and social transformation. However, during this trip, there was a question that challenged

his basic religious and theological assumptions. A gentleman asked him a black man, whose people had been enslaved and oppressed and had had religion used to justify his oppression, could be a Christian. This probing critique forced Thurman not to abandon his faith, but to more deeply reflect on the nature of his faith. What he discovered about his love for the biblical message was captured beautifully in his writings and sermons produced upon his return.

At the very start of his powerful book, Jesus and the Disinherited (1949), Howard Thurman asks a haunting question. "Why is it," he writes, "that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself?"<sup>1</sup> Please do not read this question as fundamental despair or a cry of hopelessness.

Instead, his are the initial wonderings of a Job-like figure that give way to persistent belief in the face of death-dealing circumstances. In his sermons, lectures, prayers, and worship services he organized over the course of his career, Thurman, with great vividness, told what had been the pain of black life. Drawing from his story and the larger story of black life in the United States, Thurman drew graphic pictures of the discrimination faced by African Americans over the centuries. Growing up in the Deep South during a time of racial violence and repression, Thurman knew all too well the limited value given to African Americans and the disregard for the integrity of their bodies and souls. But even in these dark moments of life, Thurman witnessed the potential for transformation; and he recognized that we must live out of this possibility rather than be beaten down by our current conditions. For Thurman, as it should be for us, thanksgiving is a sacrament, an opportunity during the ordinary course of life to

recognize what we have. In his words, **“we celebrate the sacrament of life, the simple delights of being alive with varying measures of health, strength, and vitality.”**<sup>2</sup> The story of our lives must be punctuated by sustained thanksgiving for what we with God’s help might achieve. Howard Thurman, one of the shining lights of the twentieth century religious world, perhaps better than most, recognized the power of thanksgiving, the celebration of what can be.

The African American Christian tradition in general terms entails this thanksgiving even in the face of socio-economic, political and cultural oppression. Through its rituals, teachings, and the best of its practices, African American Christianity offers a way to recognize, speak about, and live out our relationship to God in ways that promote a good life. And, according to Thurman, it does so to the extent it projects Jesus the Christ. “When a solitary individual is able to mingle his strength with the forces of history and emerge with a name, a character, a personality,” writes Thurman, “it is no ordinary achievement...such a figure was Jesus of Nazareth. To some he is the grand prototype of all the distilled longing of mankind for fulfillment, for wholeness, for perfection.” What is more, Thurman concludes, “When [we] look into his face, [we] see etched the glory of [our] own possibilities, and [our] hearts whisper, ‘Thank you and thank God!’”<sup>3</sup>

## **II. Thanksgiving Is Really about Family**

The stories of African American families gathered on Thanksgiving Day around dining room tables, kitchen tables, on floors, grass and even dirt are legendary. Who among us can’t roll off the list of what was on the table on Thanksgiving? Did your table contain turkey or was it ham or both with chicken thrown in for good measure? Were there candied yams, macaroni and cheese, sweet potato pie, German chocolate cake, potato salad, dressing with cranberry sauce and even more vegetables? Yes, we can all go on about the food.

However, much more important than the food, Thanksgiving was the time when everyone tried to come together. Some would drive home and others would fly home. It was about family being together. And unlike Easter, no new clothes were required. Unlike Christmas, you did not have to bring a gift. If dinner was potluck, you had to make a contribution, and that was what made the time great, too. So many gave of themselves and shared their culinary talents.

Thanksgiving was also one of those rare times that people actually sat down and talked. You heard stories, some over and over each year and some brand new, that gave you information about your family that you appreciated having later in life. Children heard the stories and participated in the day’s festivities, too. If a child could play an instrument, they were asked to do so right on the spot. If they could recite the Bible or a famous oration, this was the time to have them do it. Recipes were handed down and so much was learned about cooking on Thanksgiving.

But Thanksgiving was not only about one’s personal family, it was about all the families that were part of the human family. This is why African American churches, small and

large, prepared bags and boxes for families that did not have enough to eat; everyone was supposed to dine well on Thanksgiving. Even today, this tradition still continues and, now, some churches have elaborate lists that are handed out to church members long before Thanksgiving Day, to make sure that families within and not within the church receive bountifully on Thanksgiving. As the country endures one of its most difficult economic periods, one only hopes that this spirit of embrace of all families spreads throughout the year.

### **III. Reflection: I Am Thankful for the Life of Reverend Anne Hargrave Pinn**

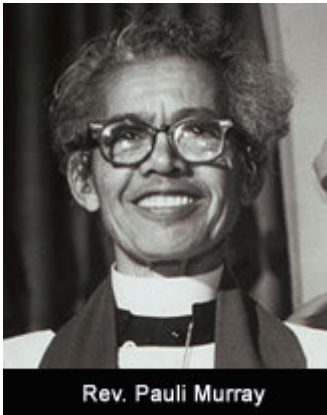


The autobiographical voice is powerful. It allows us to place ourselves in history, to assert our presence in the world – to say, “Hey, I am here!” Over the past several years, I have found that it is playing an increasingly important role in my professional writings. And much of it has to do with my reflections on my mother, who passed away recently. My mother, Anne Hargrave Pinn, walked through the world with grace, an understated determination and patience. She used this posture toward the world to handle the overwhelming responsibilities placed on her. A child of parents who moved from North Carolina to Buffalo, New York during the Great Migration in search of promised opportunity, my mother held onto the optimism and sense of possibility that had fueled her parents. Ongoing health problems did not dampen her determination, as she took care of her children, held a job, and enrolled in college. I recall something of those college years because they took place during my very early life, and I often accompanied my mother to class wondering why the teacher was free to write on the board but I was not. Sometime after college, my mother combined her career in hospital administration with church ministry.

She moved from her work as a support to the pastor’s ministry, to the preaching ministry. My mother, Anne Hargrave Pinn, became Reverend Pinn. After her ordination, my mother took charge of a small and struggling church in Buffalo and worked long hours to bring it in line with its potential. This she did until her death in 2005.

I think back on the mother with whom I was blessed, and I think one of the things that impressed me most is what I remember of her ability to see things as they could be. Rather than lamenting the challenges of the present, my mother celebrated our potential to make our individual lives and our communities better. Each challenging moment was met with hard work and punctuated by celebration. During quiet times, I can still hear my mother saying, in a way that inspired, “I thank God for the opportunity to do right, and to make a difference. Thank you Lord!”

### **IV. Thanksgiving for the Life of Pauli Murray**



Rev. Pauli Murray

There is an under-appreciated but significant figure in the history of African American religious life and thought. This leader and visionary is Pauli Murray. Born in 1910 in Maryland, Murray became involved in the struggle for civil rights long before the formation of the modern civil rights movement. Using the training received at Hunter College and eventually her law degree from Howard University Law School (as well as her degree from Yale Law School), Murray worked to secure for African Americans all the opportunities and responsibilities represented by the best of our democratic ideals.

With time, Murray would recognize that her work to better life in the United States for all its citizens had a religious and theological dimension that had to be tapped and explored. She realized that at the fundamental level of our relationship to each other and to the world was our connection to the Divine.

We work to change our world in light of our commitment to the best of the human spirit and strengthened by our relationship to God. Murray's tireless efforts, her involvement in numerous organizations, her work in the civil rights struggle spoke to this perspective. She critiqued a history of discrimination that marred the United States, but she also acknowledged and celebrated the moments of success we achieved as a country. For Murray, being thankful and recognizing progress as well as the role our partnership with God plays in fostering of healthy life is not the end of the story. It is merely the recognition of our potential, the shape of the promise of a better life in relationship to ourselves, others, and God. In her words, our life meaning and work involves "project[ing] ourselves beyond our present circumstances, to envision a better world and to call upon our latent resources in the struggle for survival of the good life and in the adjustment to rapid change." This is the rightful consequences of the Christian's understanding that humans are made in the image of God, with certain rights that must be respected and protected.<sup>4</sup>

## **V. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

Enslaved Africans faced unspeakable pain, with limited signs of change. Physical abuse, destruction of families, the threat of being sold, labor that destroyed the body's integrity, all marked the existence of enslaved Africans. Yet, within their religious commitments, they found resources for forging life; and, in the spirituals, they chronicled this life – its sorrows and its joys. In the song, "How I Got Over," the lyrics speak to a subtle celebration of life continued against the odds.

### **How I Got Over**

How I got over,  
How I got over, my Lord  
And my soul looked back and wondered  
How I got over, my Lord

The tallest tree in Paradise  
The Christians call it the tree of life  
And my soul looked back and wondered  
How I got over, my Lord

Lord, I've been 'buked and I've been scorned  
And I've been talked 'bout as sure as you're born  
And my soul looked back and wondered  
How I got over, my Lord

Oh, Jordan's river is so chilly and cold  
It will chill your body but not your soul  
And my soul looked back and wondered  
How I got over, my Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Charles Tindley, who wrote the gospel tune “We Will Understand It Better By and By,” was one of the great figures in the history of African American gospel music. Like the spirituals, gospel music uses the Christian faith and rhythm to explore and unpack the experiences of a people. In this particular song, Tindley recognizes the struggles of life, the manner in which our existence seems without reason and without much joy but, consistent with the nature of a thankful heart, he grabs hold of the glimmer of hope that break through life's troubles and proclaims that we are better than our current circumstances: Life will improve.

### **We Will Understand It Better By and By**

We are often tossed and driv'n on the restless sea of time,  
somber skies and howling tempest oft succeed a bright sunshine,  
in the land of perfect day, when the mists have rolled away,  
we will understand it better by and by.

Refrain:

By and by, when the morning comes,  
when the saints of God are gathered home,  
we'll tell the story how we've overcome,  
for we'll understand it better by and by.

Verse two

We are often destitute  
of the things that life demands,  
want of food and want of shelter,  
thirsty hills and barren lands;  
we are trusting in the Lord,  
and according to God's word,  
we will understand it better by and by.

(Refrain)

Verse three

Trials dark on every hand,  
and we cannot understand  
all the ways of God would lead us  
to that blessed promised land;  
but he guides us with his eye,  
and we'll follow till we die,  
for we'll understand it better by and by.  
(Refrain)<sup>6</sup>

## **VI. November 4, 2008: Giving Thanks Looking Back and Forward**

November 4, 2008! This is a date that forever changed the nature of life and the meaning of democracy in the United States. It is, as you know, the day when Senator Barack Obama – an African American – was elected President of the United States of America. Just think, although the history of the United States is marked by disregard for African Americans and is embarrassed at times by the violent reaction of its citizens to the presence of African Americans in the collective life of the nation, Senator Obama's message of hope and the call for change sparked the imagination of citizens from all walks of life, from all regions of the country, from various generations, and from a variety of viewpoints.

Those who had never bothered to vote before were inspired to stake a claim to this bright future he said we could achieve through hard work, determination, and vision. There is good reason to feel a measure of pride and a sense of accomplishment in that after the energy of the modern civil rights movement we have finally achieved something long desired. Some recognition of this achievement has certainly been present in the conversation following the election. But there has also been a looking back on and recognition of how our attainment is built on the struggles of our ancestors. In the echo of Senator Obama's acceptance speech, one could almost hear the faint voice of the ancestors singing "I'm so glad, trouble don't last always." Barack Obama is the President not simply because of our votes but because of the hard work and sacrifices of so many for so many years. We have made progress through and for our ancestors. While the election of the first African American President is a wonderful development, few of us are naïve enough to believe that it is an indication that discrimination in the United States is dead. No, injustice is still part of our socio-political, economic and cultural landscape. We recognize this, but not in a way that prevents hope, not in a way that distracts us from the work ahead and our potential to achieve it for those who have come before, for ourselves, and for those who will follow us. This look back and forward is the mark of our hope, and a moment of celebration and thanksgiving.

## **VII. Learning More About Our History: Why We Are Thankful**

### **Video Presentations**

Hampton, Henry, et al. [Eyes on the Prize](#). Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 2006.

Pollard, Sam, Betty Ciccarelli, Tracy Heather Strain, Denise A. Greene, and Sheila Curran Bernard. I'll Make Me a World. VHS. Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 1999.

### **Books**

Thurman, Howard. The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope. New York NY: Harper & Row, 1965.

Wilmore, Gayraud S. Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans. 3rd ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998.

### **Notes**

1. Thurman, Howard. Jesus and the Disinherited. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981. p.7.
2. Thurman, Howard. "The Sacrament of Life." The Centering Moment. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2000. p. 20.
3. Thurman, Howard. "Jesus and the Disinherited." The Centering Moment. p. 112.
4. "Continuity of Values amid Pressures for Change." Address (Commencement Convocation), University of Florida. 10 June 1978. Schlesinger Library, Murray Papers, Box 89, Folder 1554, Gainesville, FL.
5. "How I Got Over." Traditional Negro Spiritual
6. Tindley, Charles Albert. "We'll Understand It Better By and By." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA, 2001. #418