



AFRICAN HERITAGE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 30, 2011

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Lection - Jeremiah 38:6-13 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 6) So they took Jeremiah and threw him into the cistern of Malchiah, the king's son, which was in the court of the guard, letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud. (v. 7) Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian, a eunuch in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah into the cistern. The king happened to be sitting at the Benjamin Gate, (v. 8) So Ebed-melech left the king's house and spoke to the king, (v. 9) "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city." (v. 10) Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, "Take three men with you from here, and pull the prophet Jeremiah up from the cistern before he dies." (v. 11) So Ebed-melech took the men with him and went to the house of the king, to a wardrobe of the storehouse, and took from there old rags and worn-out clothes, which he let down to Jeremiah in the cistern by ropes. (v. 12) Then Ebed-melech the Ethiopian said to Jeremiah, "Just put the rags and clothes between your armpits and the ropes." Jeremiah did so (v. 13) Then they drew Jeremiah up by the ropes and pulled him out of the cistern. And Jeremiah remained in the court of the guard.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This moment on our lectionary calendar grants us the opportunity to recognize and affirm our African heritage. The need for us to recognize and affirm our heritage can be seen amidst our current sociopolitical climate in which too many still seek to deify one's humanity based on the shade of melanin (or lack thereof) in one's skin pigmentation. This age old dehumanizing of individuals is seen throughout the journey of the sons and daughters of the Diaspora. Due to this dehumanization, there is an ethos among some in communities of African descent to disassociate

with anything dealing with the continent of Africa. Ask any child in our public school systems what contribution individuals of African descent have made to this nation and you will be disturbed by some of their responses or lack thereof. Like so many other forms of marginalization and oppression that seek to deny individuals their personhood, so too our African heritage has become marginalized in Euro-Western culture. Today we recognize and affirm that heritage which has been suppressed. We do so as a theological affirmation of God's relationship to persons from the Mother Land who are certainly citizens of what Dr. King called the "World House."

In this moment in our Lectionary, we learn that the people of Africa are represented in Scripture. Therefore we affirm today and always the presence of our ancestors being intrinsically a part of the fabric of Holy Scriptures. This moment in our Lectionary allows us to spread this news to African Americans and others.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 38:6-13

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Why is a celebration of our African heritage so important? A couple of years ago I recognized my entrenchment in Euro-Western culture as I was learning for the first time of the rich heritage of persons in the African Diaspora. I was a freshman at American Baptist College in Nashville taking a class entitled "Voices from the Movement" when I became introduced to the complex history of our struggle toward freedom outside of the major figures such as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the midst of my enlightenment, with a growing curiosity I remember asking myself why this rich heritage was shielded from me in my formative years of education. I asked myself why none of the public schools I attended exposed me enough to allow me to tap into the passion that I now exude when I read about the strides my ancestors made prior to enslavement. More importantly, why did so many Black Baptist churches I was familiar with seem so far removed from our African heritage?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Our text comes to us from the book of Jeremiah, who has been characterized as the "weeping prophet." Most sermons or sermon series on this book focus on the main character, Jeremiah, and his prophetic oracles. However in today's text we find an opportunity to teach and preach about someone other than Jeremiah. In our text we meet Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who delivers Jeremiah from murderous hands. As an Ethiopian, Ebed-melech is of the lineage of Cush, the son of Ham, the grandson of Noah (Genesis 9:25). In his 2008 African American Lectionary commentary for African Heritage Sunday, Dr. Frank Thomas focuses on this lineage as he states: "This moment on the Lectionary calendar is designed to discuss Scripture that has been used to degrade Africa and persons of African descent, and to show how erroneous retelling of biblical stories can damage the self-esteem of a group." While the retelling of the biblical story of Cush has been used to degrade "blackness" and to perpetuate racism, we see in our text

admirable activity by Ebed-melech, a descendent of Cush. In our text, Ebed-melech is a drum major for justice who assists the prophet Jeremiah in his prophetic ministry.

There are several aspects of our African heritage that we can celebrate which can be gleaned by Ebed-melech's activity in this passage. First, the text tells us that Ebed-melech heard what was happening to Jeremiah (v.7). In order to understand the significance of this it is important for us to note Ebed-melech's position as a servant in the king's house. As a servant, Ebed-melech had to step out of the tightly structured social order in order to assist the prophet Jeremiah. Despite Ebed-melech's socioeconomic differences from those of the prophet Jeremiah, Ebed-Melech recognizes a need to respond to Jeremiah's plight. This brings to mind the African Traditional Religion (ATR) belief in mutuality and interconnectedness. In his discussion on typical features of moral significance in African American families, Peter Paris speaks about this as he states: "As in Africa, slaves also extended the use of kinship names to members of the larger community. Thus, more often than not they called all other people aunts and uncles and called young people, brothers and sisters."¹ We descend from a people who believed that we are all interconnected. On the basis of this mutual interconnectedness Ebed-melech was able to recognize that what he heard was happening to Jeremiah also affected him. Today, we would do well to continue imagining the ways in which our understanding of mutuality and interconnectedness call us to hear the plight of injustice for persons around the country and the world. Yes! We are to be our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

Next, Ebed-melech confronts injustice as he takes on the African notion of "truth telling" or "calling it like it is." Notice that Ebed-melech does not mince words or sugar-coat the matter. Ebed-melech states, "My lord king, these men have acted wickedly in all they did to the prophet Jeremiah by throwing him into the cistern to die there of hunger, for there is no bread left in the city (v. 9)." Ebed-melech, a servant, speaks of the actions of men in higher authority than he as wicked and then he details their crime and its possible consequence. In the words of Peter Paris, "...African peoples have been persistent in their resistance to oppression and resilient in their endurance of it."² Ebed-melech recognized the urgency of Jeremiah's plight; Jeremiah's life was at stake. This was not the time for political correctness or cowardice. Oh, for men and women who, regardless of their social status, could just tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Tell it when it cost them nothing and tell it when it could cost them everything. Our banking system ran amuck because men chose money over truth telling. Oil has harmed one body of water after another because men choose money and status over truth telling. Churches are dying and parishioners are being abused because men and women choose to keep their jobs over truth telling.

Lastly, Ebed-melech responds to the injustice caused to the prophet Jeremiah by offering his service to Jeremiah. On account of the King's command, Ebed-melech takes individuals with him to help Jeremiah out of the cistern (v.10). The nature of the service offered by Ebed-melech to Jeremiah did not require him to have a laundry list of prestigious professional achievement or aspirations. But in the words of Dr. King, it only required "a heart full of grace, a soul generated

by love.”³ Ebed-melech could be great in this moment, because anybody can serve. Ebed-melech used what he had at his disposal; which were old rags and worn clothes to pull Jeremiah out of the cistern. This reminds us that often it simply takes ordinary people using ordinary things to change the course of one person’s life, a nation, or the world. No doubt, our heritage contains a long list of brothers and sisters who stood up and made their contributions; some bravely, and some in just the course of their ordinary, everyday work. From well-known achievements such as building the pyramids, to our contributions to mathematics, to leaders from Im-Hotep to Nelson Mandela, ours is an amazingly rich heritage.

While our lectionary reading ends at 28:13, I would be remiss not to point out the reward Ebed-melech receives for his concern, dedication, and service to the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 29:15-18 we read that the Lord saves Ebed-melech’s life. It pays “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.”⁴

Challenge

There is much to celebrate given the acts of our kinsmen in the text despite the continued dehumanization of our heritage within contemporary culture. However, because we have been so negligent in affirming our African heritage, it’s time that we are seriously challenged to uplift our heritage and our Mother Land in our communities, where we work and worship. When we do this African heritage will not be limited to the negative images mainstream media chooses to show of our culture. Remember and celebrate, Mother Africa, our birth place. Remember, oh, remember, Africa. Do not get put off by stories of wars in Africa or even bad leaders. Africa is a continent of millions; focus on those of whom we can be proud, even as work to correct conditions that must change. But, whatever we do, we cannot forget Africa any more than Jews in America can forget Israel. Yes, Israel has long been mired in war and occupying land that belongs to others, but Jews are still loyal to Israel, regardless of whether they were born in Israel or in America. So, let us continue to celebrate our African ancestors and write, teach, and speak of their contributions for their contributions are our legacy and the world’s legacy!

III. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include, but are not limited to:

Sights: A dry cistern/well; mud; a king’s royal palace; men lowering Jeremiah into cistern; the mud and filth that covered Jeremiah in the cistern and after he was pulled out;

Colors: Dark brown mud; murky water; dirty gray clothes;

Sounds: Commotion from Jeremiah being lowered into the cistern; Ebed-melech speaking to the King; Ebed-melech and a group pulling Jeremiah out of the cistern;

Smells: Old rags; the mud in the cistern; and

Tastes: The taste of bread and Jeremiah's hunger.

IV. Black History Books

1. Berlin, Ira. The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations. New York, NY: Viking, 2010.
2. DuBois, W.E.B. The Gift of Black Folk. New York, NY: Square One Publishers, 2009.
3. King, Martin Luther. The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Ed. Clayborne Carson. New York, NY: Intellectual Properties Management in association with Warner Books, 1998.
4. Paris, Peter J. The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995.

Notes

1. Paris, Peter J. The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. p. 92.
2. Ibid., p. 12.
3. King, Martin Luther. Excerpt from sermon, "The Drum Major Instinct." Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. 4 February 1968
 "...everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love."

King, Martin Luther. "The Drum Major Instinct." Sermon Transcript. King Papers Project. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute Stanford University. Online location: http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/the_drum_major_instinct/ accessed 15 December 2010; see also slide show presentation to help visualize the Martin Luther King, Jr. sermon "The Drum Major Instinct." "Drum Major 4 Justice Part 1 of 2." <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRFzBBRrJFk>, and "Drum Major 4 Justice Part 2 of 2." http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_keJ6I4QoC4&feature=related
4. Micah 6:8 (NRSV).