



ASH WEDNESDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Wednesday, February 6, 2008

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I. Historical Background and Documents

Ash Wednesday is a day when members of the church, Christians who have confessed their sins, received baptism, and had their names added to church rolls, are asked to reflect inwardly on their Christian witness and publicly acknowledge and give penance for the times during the past year when they have “fallen short” or “back slid” in their Christian walk. Unlike the sinners seated on the mourner’s bench during camp meetings and revivals who wrestle with their sins, these saints occupy pews of distinction as they agonize over their past shortcomings of faith. During this worship service, they are reminded of the old African American proverb: “De people dat stir up de mos’ rackit in de meetin’ house ain’t always de bes’ Kwis’chuns.”¹

The symbolic use of ashes as “a display of extreme remorse or repentance or grief” is deeply embedded within the Judeo-Christian tradition. For example, the popular figure of speech “sackcloth and ashes” refers to the ancient Hebrew custom of indicating humility before God by wearing a coarse cloth, normally used to make sacks, and dusting oneself with ashes.” This phrase appears in Matthew 11:21 “[T]hey [the cities of Tyre and Sidon] have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.”²

The origin of the term “Ash Wednesday” can be traced to 1093. Ashes were given to those Christians who wanted to make public penance for their sins. On this day, they stood before the church barefoot and wearing sackcloth. A clergyman would give each worshipper penance for their respective sins. Then they were led into the church where they recited penitential psalms, such as Psalm 51, whose opening verse proclaims: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness: according to thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.” They were signed on their foreheads with ashes, which traditionally were generated from the burning of the past year’s Palm Sunday branches, as a symbol of their renewed commitment to Jesus Christ. Finally, they were

dressed in a hair shirt (a coarse garment designed to bring discomfort) and expelled from their church for forty days. During the next forty-day expulsion, they prayed; performed manual labor; did acts of charity; went shoeless; slept on the ground; and did not bathe nor cut their hair. This forty-day ritual is no longer widely observed.

However, the eleventh century tradition of accepting ashes as a symbolic act of penance is observed today. For example, in 2007, the pastor of the United Methodist Church in Speedway, Indiana left this Ash Wednesday invitation in the church bulletin: “Join us for the Ash Wednesday Service... come and get your forehead dirty as you let Christ clean up your heart!” And, in 1995, an African American parishioner of St. Augustine’s Catholic Church of Washington, D.C. concurred, saying of Ash Wednesday, “We all need reviving and we are in [St. Augustine] to be revived.”³

Few African American Protestant churches apply ashes but many observe the Lenten Season.

II. Prose Excerpt

Ash Wednesday’s theme of penance is evident in this prayer uttered by a deacon at a 1928 camp meeting in Nashville, TN:

*Almighty and all wise God our heavenly Father! ‘tis once more and again that a few of your beloved children are gathered together to call upon your holy name. We bow at your footstool, Master, to thank you for our spared lives. We thank you that we were able to get up this morning clothed in our right mind. For Master, since we met here, many have been snatched out of the land of the living and hurled into eternity. But through your goodness and mercy, we have been spared to assemble ourselves here once more to call upon a Captain who has never lost a battle. Oh, throw round us your strong arms of protection. Bind us together in love and union. Build us up where we are torn down and strengthen us where we are weak. Oh, Lord, Oh, Lord! Take the lead of our minds; place them on heaven and heavenly divine things. Oh, God, our Captain and King! Search our hearts and if you find anything there contrary to your divine will just move it from us Master, as far as the east is from the west. Now Lord, you know our hearts, you know our heart’s desire. You know our down setting and you know our up rising. Lord you know all about us because you made us, Lord! Lord!*⁴

III. Family Remembrance

“Love Feasts,” a ritual of my family’s Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, are contemporary rituals within the African American Christian community that are suited to assist Ash Wednesday worshippers in dealing with their sense of grief. According to The CME Discipline: “Love feasts shall be held quarterly or at such other times as the Preacher in Charge may consider expedient, with closed doors, to which besides Church members, other serious persons may be admitted...” The highlight of the service involves

the worshippers partaking of a communion consisting of water and bread. After drinking the water, the bread is presented and consumed in this manner: “The plain loaf of bread which the pastor breaks up into reasonably small pieces is passed to each one. They take a reasonable amount into their left hand then, under direction of the pastor the members pass and shake hands with their fellow members. Before they shake hands, each person takes a small part of the bread out of his left hand with his right hand and puts this morsel in the left hand of his brother or sister. As they shake hands, they give such salutation as: ‘May God Bless you,’ ‘Peace be unto you,’ ‘I Greet you in the Name of Jesus,’ ‘Let Us Rejoice in the God of Our Salvation,’ etc.” This ritual of breaking bread and fellowship handshaking is followed by “short testimonies and singing of hymns.” In my mind’s eye, I can envision my paternal grandfather, Reverend Nathaniel Hawthorne Wiggins, leading his Pittsburgh congregation in the singing the Negro Spiritual “Let Us Break Bread Together.”⁵

Perhaps, the best literary example of this theme is in “Part Two: The Prayers of the Saints” of James Baldwin’s novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain. Gabriel Grimes, the patriarch of the Grimes family and Assistant Pastor of Temple of the Fire Baptized, the Grimes’s family church, is the quintessential “holier-than-thou Christian” who is oblivious to his need for penance. His life is based on the unshakeable faith that he is saved and is not in need of forgiveness. Gabriel’s hubris is revealed in this dialogue between Esther and Gabriel just prior to their yielding to the lusts of the flesh in the empty house of their employers: “‘Reverend,’ she said, ‘I ain’t done nothing that I’m ashamed of, and I hope I don’t do nothing I’m ashamed of, ever...’ ‘But I can’t help it,’ she said, after a moment, maliciously teasing, ‘is you done things that you’s ashamed of, Reverend?’”⁶

IV. Traditional Songs

These African American Spirituals embody Ash Wednesday’s spirit of penance, humility, and the thirst for salvation.

I Am Free

I am free

I am free, my Lord

I am free

I’m washed by the blood of the Lamb

You knock me down

I’ll rise again

I’m washed by the blood of the Lamb

I fight you with my sword and shield

I’m washed by the blood of the Lamb

Remember the day, I remember it well

My dungeon shook and my chain fell off

Jesus cleaned and made me white

Said go in peace and sin no more
Glory to God, let your faith be strong
Lord, it won't be long before I'll be gone.⁷

Live a Humble

Live a-humble, humble
Humble, yourselves, the bells done ring
Glory and honor!
Praise King Jesus!
Glory and honor!
Praise the Lord!
Watch the sun, how steady he runs
Don't let him catch you with your work undone

Live a-humble, humble
Humble, yourselves, the bells done ring
Glory and honor!
Praise King Jesus!
Glory and honor!
Praise the Lord!
Ever see such a man as God?
He gave His Son for to come and die
Gave up His son for to come and die
Just to save my soul from a burning fire

Live a-humble, humble
Humble, yourselves, the bells done ring
Glory and honor!
Praise King Jesus!
Glory and honor!
Praise the Lord!
See God and you see God in the morning
He'll come riding down the line of time
The fire 'll be falling
He'll be calling, 'Come to judgment, come'”⁸

Lord, I Want To Be a Christian

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart, in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart.

Lord, I want to be more holy, in my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be more holy, in my heart, in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be more holy, in my heart, in my heart.

Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart.
In my heart, in my heart.
Lord, I want to be like Jesus in my heart, in my heart.”⁹

V. Suggested Images for Bulletins/Orders of Worship And Screens

An urn of ashes
A sackcloth garment
A broken loaf of bread

Notes

1. Brewer, John Mason. American Negro Folklore. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1968.
2. “Sackcloth.” The American Heritage® Dictionary of Idioms. Ed. Christine Ammer. 1997. Online location: www.answers.com/topic/sackcloth-and-ashes accessed 4 December 2007
3. Edwards, Robin. “Old-fashioned revival rocks D.C. church.” (St. Augustine's Catholic Church, Washington, D.C. – includes related article on evangelical revival history) National Catholic Reporter. 3 March 1995. Online location: www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-16732822.html accessed 4 December 2007
4. Bontemps, Arna Wendell, Langston Hughes, and Charles Harold Nichols. Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters, 1925-1967. New York: Paragon House, 1990. p. 256.
5. Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Lucius Henry Holsey, and Herman C. Riley. A Manual of the Discipline of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church Formerly Known As Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, in America. S.I: s.n.], 1984, pp. 98-99.
6. Baldwin, James. Go Tell It on the Mountain. New York: Dell Publishing, 1952. p. 126.
7. “I Am Free.” Lyrics online location: www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/i/am/free.htm accessed 4 December 2007
8. “Live a Humble.” Lyrics online location: www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/live_a_humble.htm accessed 4 December 2007
9. “Lord I Want To Be A Christian.” Lyrics online location: www.ez-tracks.com/SongLyrics-Lyrics-36.html accessed 4 December 2007