



CELEBRATION OF BLACK HISTORY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 7, 2010

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Lection - Genesis 2:10-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. (v. 11) The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; (v. 12) and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. (v. 13) The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. (v. 14) The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

This Sunday marks the first week of Black History Month; but how often do we embrace the cultural heritage and sacred legacy of what it truly means to be black in today's world? For instance, while it is important to celebrate the long march of African Americans from slavery to freedom, how often do we give serious consideration to ways of uplifting the stories of our historical origins as both a race and as faithful believers long before the slave trade was a facet of

black people's reality? While there is hardly enough focus on African American history in our churches, schools, and homes, there is even less mention of the African roots of humankind as illustrated in the Bible. When we consider the longstanding record of Africa and Africans noted in the Bible, we need to look no further than the first few pages of the Book of Genesis.

Situated between the two creation narratives in Genesis, this biblical passage specifies the exact geographical location and physical boundaries of the legendary garden known as Eden by providing the names of four rivers drawn from antiquity: Pishon (the Blue Nile), Gihon (the White Nile), Hiddekel (The Tigris), and the Euphrates. The description of Eden, the birthplace of humanity, is identified as the expanse of land from the location of modern-day Iraq outlined by the Tigris and Euphrates and extending in through the region presently regarded as the Middle East and into the Nile Valley region of Northeast Africa from Egypt and Sudan downward to Ethiopia and Uganda in sub-Saharan Africa. Ultimately this passage—so often overlooked in discussions and debates about the origins of the human race—clearly articulates Africa as the center of the biblical world. This fact has been verified by the revelation of scientific research by contemporary scholars that the oldest human remains were found in the Olduvai Gorge. In light of this history, more attention must be given to the African roots of human history.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 2:10-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

So many decades after the civil rights movement and the Black Power era, there is still a profound aversion to talking positively about anything African. Despite proclamations of “Say it loud, I’m black and proud” and “Black is beautiful,” it is more commonplace for Americans of African descent to be either fearful or resentful of mentioning the land of their ancestors. Drowning in countless stories of the African continent as a land dominated by death, debt, dictators, disease, and devastation, it has become too easy to forget that God chose African soil as the seedbed for the human race. Having taught in countless classrooms, conference workshops and consultations across this nation on matters of the faith of black people, the most heartbreaking experience is when we encounter black men and women who still doubt that Africa and Africans are a genuine part of God’s creation.

The greatest hurt in those all too frequent instances comes from either the ongoing mis-education of black youth, who are taught little to nil about their heritage in a supposed “post-racial” America, or black elders who have been so downtrodden and wounded by racism that they have no belief in themselves, no belief in history, and no belief in God’s love, grace and mercy in the unfolding of black people’s faith. To teach those folks—regardless of race, class or background—that Africa and its children worldwide are part of God’s gift to the planet, we have had to learn new levels of persistence about spreading the truth on the one hand and greater depths of patience proclaiming the legacy of African roots as an act of loving ourselves into wholeness. Knowing one’s history, as the great pan-African scholar John Henrik Clarke asserts, “... is supposed to make one self-assured but not arrogant. It is not supposed to give one any privileges over other people, but it should make one see oneself in a new way in relation to other people.”¹ As we move forward in celebration of black history and heritage, let the knowledge

take root in our minds and hearts that Africa was first and foremost God's property that was bequeathed to Adam and Eve's African descendents.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

When looking at this passage, there are several elements reflected in this depiction of the Garden of Eden. First, the text specifies that not only did God make this particular locale habitable and fertile but also blessed them in advance by having the abundance of water flowing forth from Eden and divided into four separate headwaters (v. 10). Whether symbolized in the soulful power of the spiritual "Deep River," the stirring poetry of Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," or the staggering prose of Vincent Harding's book There is a River, there is a deep cultural connection between African peoples and the life-sustaining power of rivers. This passage confirms that this historic bond between black people and rivers is an act of God and not an accident. Our history is rife with such examples.

Next, the identification of the location of the four key rivers found in (vv. 11-14) designates the African continent as central to the map of the biblical world. Contrary to the prevailing view of Eurocentric historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and biblical scholars who have wrongfully declared the Mesopotamian's "Fertile Crescent" as the so-called "Cradle of Civilization," the fact is that the entirety of the zone referred to as the "Garden of Eden" included a sizable portion of Africa. The land known as Cush by ancient Hebrews and later hailed as Ethiopia (*Aithiops*, literally meaning "land of burnt face people") figures prominently in the description of Eden. Moreover, the primacy of African civilizations emanating from the Nile Valley, such as Egypt and Ethiopia, are mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament while there is not a single reference to England, Germany or Italy found anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. Recognizing this simple yet powerful fact ought to lead to the undoing of so much of our society's misguided and detrimental dominance of Western notions of black inferiority. In turn, the presence of people of African descent at the heart of the biblical narrative in their ancestral homeland can be a prophetic revelation in this generation.

Lastly, God's placement of human beings in the well-watered garden situated between the Tigris, Euphrates and Nile rivers was indicative of divine blessing for all of humanity. In Genesis, the Hebrew name "den" can be readily translated as "pleasure," "delight," and, most importantly, "paradise." Whereas, black people in America might rarely envision their surrounding as paradise in any meaningful way, it is impressive that God entrusted dominion and stewardship of this pristine, primordial place to Africans, which in turn led to the outgrowth of all human diversity.

Challenge

There is a sad paradox at work in many African American churches when black pastors are loathe to mention the word "Africa" to black congregations for fear of their upset or disinterest. What if sermons were crafted and enveloped in celebration of black history in order to acknowledge the legacy and the ongoing heritage of their African homeland and to make the continent more relevant to their everyday reality? Rather than taking for granted that our congregations might learn positive lessons about African peoples, cultures and societies

somewhere, somehow at sometime, our churches have to be ready, willing and able to counter misinformation at every turn. Let this Sunday mark a turning point, one that leads to greater focus on Africa, the cradle of civilization and our Motherland.

III. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Lush greenery; rushing water flowing across the land; rainbows arising from the mist; flowers and animals;

Colors: Bright greens, yellows, reds contrasted against the lush blue of water;

Sounds: Rustling of leaves in the breeze; water splashing against rocks; animals frolicking; African music, chants, beats, and drums; and

Smells: Slight herbal and floral scents mixed with hints of ocean breeze; and the earthiness of clay.

Notes

1. Clarke, John Henrik, Ed. New Dimensions in African History: the London Lectures of Dr. Yosef ben-Jochannan and Dr. John Henrik Clarke. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1991. p. 139.