



Emancipation Proclamation Day

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Friday, January 1, 2010

Luke A. Powery, Lectionary Team Commentator

Lection – Daniel 6:23b (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 23b) So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In Year One and Year Two of the lectionary, insightful historical information was given for this particular liturgical moment (e.g., Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 freeing slaves in states that seceded from the Union); also, you can read the cultural commentary for this Sunday for further insight into the historical aspects of the writing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

For Year Three, I want to probe this liturgical moment theologically; that is, what does this moment say about God?

To designate a day “Emancipation Proclamation” implies that God is a God of emancipation, freedom, and liberation. It suggests that God is on the side of freedom and resists oppression. This is surely true for the black church’s traditional understanding of God as a God who is on the side of the oppressed. The God of black people is a freeing God. By making this distinction (i.e., God of black people), I am suggesting that there may be other gods, even supposedly “Christian gods,” at work in the world; other gods whom people worship, other gods whom people think are God. But, if these gods are oppressive and destructive, they are not the God of the oppressed, the God of African Americans, the God of our weary years and silent tears, the One who has brought us thus far along the way. This identity of God as a deliverer of the oppressed is critical for this Sunday and is a lens through which one can worship in celebration with trust in his or her heart.

Furthermore, to speak of an “emancipation proclamation” means that this Sunday proclaims in time, space, word, song, movement, and meal, the emancipation of black people today, not just in the past as a historical event but as a progressive movement of

the Divine in the present. If God is a God of emancipation, God can be trusted to liberate today. If God is proclaimed to be a God of enslavement, then this god must be mistrusted and destroyed. Within the black Christian traditions, God is a liberating God; thus, God can be trusted. A God of emancipation is a socially engaged God, not just a God of personal piety; therefore, emancipation occurs inwardly and outwardly. In worship for this Sunday, every black believer sings out in trombone fashion “freedom!” while our trustworthy God of liberation continues to proclaim to systems of oppression, “Let my people go!”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Daniel 6:23b

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Sometimes life may seem like a lions’ den of sorts. The lions of life are growling and ready to pounce on us at any moment. Because of this, we are filled with much fear. In fact, within the United States in recent years, a culture of fear has been nurtured through the powers that be, the media, and our own imaginations. Fear has been propelled by such events as the 9/11 attacks and the discovery of terrorist cell groups, even home-grown ones in this country. More so now, those who are different are demonized and viewed as a suspicious other. Borders are to be protected because of fear. Immigrants are called “aliens.” Governmental color codes for levels of terrorist threats heighten the sense of anxiety already in the den of life.

Additionally, there have been senseless college campus shootings, such as at Virginia Tech, and even rumors of such threats at Princeton University and Princeton Seminary, making us go on lockdown and during lockdown one is chained to fear. The Princeton episodes have been benign, but the fear has been lethal for the soul. The current economic crisis has not helped either but has fanned the flames of fear, particularly the fear of the future. Surrounded by the lions of fear in the world, who will we trust in these testing times?

We need to be emancipated or freed from fear even in the lions’ den of life. Fear can quench faith but faith can destroy fear. A fearless faithful trust in a delivering God will do just that as Daniel demonstrates.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Deep in Daniel’s soul must have been that old familiar song “I’m gonna trust in the Lord, I’m gonna trust in the Lord, I’m gonna trust in the Lord ‘til I die.”² His trust was unwavering in the face of a lion-style death. Just like our African ancestors, Daniel faced many trials, but his trials, his “slavery,” were not self-imposed. Others bound him.

Earlier in the chapter, we learn that the other presidents and satraps want to find a complaint against Daniel because they are jealous of him and do not want him to get promoted by King Darius (Dan v.4). But, he is blameless and “faithful” as an excellent leader and worker for the kingdom of Darius; thus, he escapes the traps of those jealous

of him for a time. His faithfulness to the kingdom of God is soon put to the test, however, when the king signs an ordinance against anyone praying to any divine or human being other than himself. If someone did this, they would be thrown into the lions' den which is where Daniel eventually finds himself—in this den of death (vv.7-9). The conspirators had seemingly defeated Daniel. All odds were against him. He was in serious trouble and, as James Cone notes, “trouble is inseparable from the black religious experience.”² Trouble is something African Americans have known all too well throughout history, which may be the reason why blacks have been drawn to the character of Daniel. Daniel experienced tremendous trials, but how he handled his trials set him apart to be emulated. The question is not *if* there will be trouble but *when* there is trouble, how will you respond to it?

Daniel responds like many of the enslaved blacks of the past and his actions intone the spiritual, “I’ve been ‘buked an’ I’ve been scorned, I’ve been talked about sho’s you’ born. Dere is trouble all over dis’ world’. Ain’ gwine lay my ‘ligion down.”³ Daniel would not lay his faith in God down. His soul had obviously been anchored in the Lord based on how he responds to his predicament. Despite the king’s edict, Daniel still prays to God three times a day (v.10). This lands him in the lion’s den. In the end, he is not harmed because “he trusted in his God” (v.23). Daniel did not allow his trials to triumph. Rather, he hoped in a God somewhere who would bring triumph.

Daniel reveals that he believed God would trouble the water. In his situation, trust triumphs over terror. In particular, what is stressed in this story is a distinction between Daniel’s God and other gods. Throughout chapter six, Daniel’s God is distinguished by references to God as “his God” (vv.5, 10, 11), “your God,” (vv.16, 20), and Daniel declares “my God” (v.22). One must be certain in which God one is trusting. Daniel did not trust in himself for deliverance, but he trusted in *his* God. Others might have made claims to divinity, like Darius, but he was not the one Daniel trusted to deliver him out of trouble. There are other gods, but there is only one who delivers. Even King Darius realizes this in the end when he declares, “people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, enduring forever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end. He delivers and rescues, he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth; for he has saved Daniel from the power of the lions” (vv. 26-27). Our ancestors sang this story, “Didn’t the Lord Deliver Daniel and Why Not Every Man?” Their God was the “God of Daniel” (v.26), a God of emancipation. They believed in the saving power of a trustworthy God as they sang, “*God is a God! God don’t never change! God is a God an’ he always will be God!*”

Fear in life and fear of death may fight for our allegiance but they are not God. This is not to say that all enslaved blacks trusted in God; one does not want to be ruined by such a romantic ideal. Some blacks may have gotten weary and given up hope in any God during slavery, but many trusted in the Lord ‘til they died to git them over; the vast literature of the spirituals reveals this. The God of the white man was not their God because “didn’t the Lord deliver Daniel and why not every man?” Their God, like Daniel’s, specialized in saving and liberating people, not binding them. **Thus, what is**

essential to an emancipatory theology is a God who emancipates and this God must become “my God” if trust is to override trials.

With this belief in the “God of Daniel” (v. 26), one can trust fully in the face of trouble. Trust is tested in the face of hardship and trials but if one continues to trust in the times of testing, one may sing “Nobody Knows the Troubles I See”⁴ but will also eventually sing “Glory Hallelujah.”⁵ “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel, and Why Not Every Man?”⁶ Why not you? Why not me?

Celebration

Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel? God is trustworthy. God delivers from lions’ dens! God will deliver you. God is able to save. For complete emancipation, only trust God jus’ now.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The roar of lions;

Sights: The den and the lions in it; Daniel coming out of the den;

Smells: The smell created by the animals in the den; and

Textures: The unharmed skin of Daniel after he stepped out of the lion’s den.

III. Sermonic Suggestions

- Langston Hughes’ poem “Still Here”

I been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered.
 Snow has froz me,
 Sun has baked me,

Looks like between ‘em they done
 Tried to make me
Stop laughin’, stop lovin’, stop livin’—
 But I don’t care!
 I’m still here!

The words of this poem could be used in a sermon imaginatively, as the words of a delivered and victorious Daniel. Daniel was “still here” even after his enemies tried to get rid of him. This poem could be used as an analogy between the

oppressive experience of blacks throughout history and the oppressive experience of Daniel.

- Because Daniel and the lions' den is a key biblical story found in the spirituals, it might be useful for integrative cultural purposes to have the choir or an ensemble sing some of the spirituals which include Daniel or the preacher may choose to sing or quote these songs in the sermon. Such spirituals include:

"He's Jus de same today." A verse of the song says: He's jus' de same today, an' de God dat lived in Moses'/Daniel's time is jus' de same today.

"Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel." A verse of the song says: Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel? Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel, and why not every man? He delivered Daniel from the lion's den, Jonah from the belly of the whale, and the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace, and why not every man?

Notes

- McClurkin, Donnie. "We've Come This Far by Faith / I Will Trust In The Lord." The Essential Donnie McClurkin. New York, NY: Verity, 2007.
- Cone, James H. The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991. p. 31.
- "I've Been 'buked an' I've Been Scorned." Traditional. Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/i_ve_been_buked_and_i-ve_been_scorned.htm accessed 2 September 2009
- "Nobody Knows the Troubles I See." Traditional. Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/nobody_know_de_trouble_i_see.htm accessed 7 September 2009
- "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." Traditional. Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/glory_glory_hallelujah.htm accessed 7 September 2009
- "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel." Traditional. Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/didn_t_my_lord_delier_daniel.htm accessed 7 September 2009