



GOOD FRIDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

Good Friday is the day that Christians all over the world observe and honor the crucifixion and death of Jesus. This day represents the suffering of Jesus. Represented in all four of the Gospels, in addition to the non-canonical Gospel of Peter, this suffering is also represented in the week prior to the crucifixion of Jesus called the Passion of Christ. This passion, meaning suffering, is an extreme time of pain in the life of Jesus.

Good Friday falls on the last Friday before Easter. It is a day to show humility and reverence; many persons observe this as a day of prayer and fasting. In the worship space, candles and decorations are often removed. Crosses and chairs may be draped in black. During Holy week, you will often see a cross either inside a church or outside draped in black or purple cloth. The

service of worship is traditionally offered between noon and 3:00 p.m., the time that coincides with the hours that Jesus hung on the cross.

However, as Good Friday is not a secular holiday but a religious observance, many parishioners have to work and are only available to attend an evening service. Good Friday evening services are commonplace in the context of the black church.

II. Songs that speak to the Moment

Often used as a somber processional for the Good Friday Service, the hymn “Calvary” is effective in helping sustain a reflective meditative mood. Ministers are traditionally robed in black for this service. This song identifies with the suffering of Christ.

Calvary

Calvary, Calvary,
Calvary, Calvary
Calvary, Calvary,
Surely He died on
Calvary.

Can't you hear the hammer ringing.
Can't you hear the hammer ringing.
Can't you hear the hammer ringing.
Surely he died on,
Calvary.

Can't you hear him, saying it's finished.
Can't you hear him, saying it's finished.
Can't you hear him, saying it's finished.
Surely he died on,
Calvary.¹

Another well known Negro Spiritual sung in the midst of suffering is “I want Jesus to Walk With Me.” It is a plaintive cry for the Lord to abide with us at all times, especially during the worst of times. This cry is made to the one who understands suffering and pain.

I Want Jesus to Walk with Me

I want Jesus to walk with me
I want Jesus to walk with me
All along my pilgrim journey
I want Jesus to walk with me

In my trial, Lord, walk with me
In my trials, Lord, walk with me
When the shades of life are falling
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me

In my sorrow, Lord walk with me
In my sorrows, Lord walk with me
When my heart is aching
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me

In my troubles, Lord walk with me
In my troubles, Lord walk with me
When my life becomes a burden,
Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.²

Another song that comes from the Gospel Music Workshop of America is “He Decided to Die (He Would Not Come Down from the Cross).” This is often done in a rousing rendition by choirs as the last selection on Good Friday. There are many African Americans who have sacrificed for their families and for their people. As we remember the death of Jesus, we also remember those who have sacrificed and died, especially those who died in the civil rights struggle for freedom and justice.

He Decided to Die

When Jesus hung on Calvary,
People came from miles to see
They said, if you be the Christ
Come down and save your life.

Oh but Jesus, my sweet Jesus
He never answered them
For he knew that Satan was tempting Him.

If he had come down from the cross
Then my soul would still be lost.

Chorus:

He would not come down
From the cross just to save himself
He decided to die, just to save me.³

III. Making It a Memorable Moment: A Ritual of Suffering

In the traditional Seven Last Words Service, or Seven Stations of the Cross, the suffering of Jesus can be emphasized through ritual. Before the ministers enter the church, in a dramatization, a person dressed as Jesus can come in with a cross on the way to Calvary and stumble down the aisle because of the difficulty of carrying a heavy cross. As this person is midway down the aisle, a person dressed as Simon of Cyrene comes to assist him. After the person dressed as Jesus exits the sanctuary and disappears from sight with his cross at the top of the sanctuary, on the PA system, persons should hear hammering signifying that Jesus is being nailed to the cross, as the second verse of the song Calvary (given above) is sung. As the song is concluding, the ministers

then enter the sanctuary. Given that you know the nature of your congregation, you can devise other rituals that drive home the point that Jesus actually suffered and died for us.

IV. Cultural Response

Pastors often find themselves ministering to those who are suffering. They are called upon to bring a fresh approach to meet people where they are, and effectively bring forth care and comfort. Jesus suffered tremendous physical and emotional pain, torture, if you will. I believe, however, that it did not compare to the pain he felt in being spiritually estranged from God. Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34).

Because of the deep physical, emotional and spiritual pain experienced by Jesus, it is clear that the Savior God can identify with us in our suffering. Jesus quoted chapter 22 of Psalms to bring a prophetic voice through a suffering servant. This Psalm, today, can express the agony of God’s people. We can pray these scriptures back to God.

Psalm 22

1 My God, my God, why have you
Forsaken me?
Why are you so far from
Helping me from the words
Of my groaning?
2 O my God, I cry by day, but you
Do not answer
And by night, but find no rest.

V. The Universality of Suffering

There are those who have suffered through natural disasters, such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Some are still displaced. Some have recovered by relocating to a new state and even obtaining new employment. The outer appearance of recovery is evident but, for many, the emotional and spiritual torture continues to be part of their lives. In his book, Disciplines of the Spirit, Howard Thurman wrote a chapter on the universal phenomenon of suffering reminding us that no one can escape suffering.⁴ It may be a natural disaster, or the deep grief felt in the loss of a loved one but, Thurman says, it is always painful and unavoidable. Although no one voluntarily endures agonizing pain, Thurman says this pain can serve as a warning sign when we are starting to go off in a self-destructive direction. This is something to seriously consider.

Our people suffer the emotional and spiritual pain of poverty, broken relationships and various other losses. We are sometimes left, as Thurman says, to “decipher the meaning of the suffering.” Did we cause it? Is it punishment? If not, why are we suffering?

I recently visited someone in the hospital who was young and had been very vibrant. In her early 30s, this young woman had pursued excellence and obtained her Ph.D. degree. She self-

published a book entitled Lord, I Owe You Me. A matter of months after graduation and the publication of her book, she was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer and had never smoked a day in her life. Within a short time, she died. Her suffering did work its way through the community, for there were those left behind who were inspired by her. However, we were left suffering the loss of her life. The innocent do suffer; it rains on the just and the unjust. Jesus suffered out of his love for humankind. It is when we suffer out of love that we may bring some sense of purpose to our suffering.

In my own family, my seven-year old grandson, who is smart, loves to express his love with cuddles and hugs. He was born with SS type Sickle Cell Anemia. At two-years old, I watched him using breathing techniques to deal with the pain of his sickle cell crisis. He is sometimes given morphine because the pain is too much for his little body to endure. He has been hospitalized and suffered so much in his young life. Yet, I am amazed at his joy, his faith, and his vibrancy to keep on keeping on. I see the suffering on the faces of his parents as they wish they could take his pain. Because the prayers of the faithful do avail much, we pray and sing and lay hands and anoint him with oil, a symbol of God's Spirit. Though we are in pain, we pray, and we believe and love this child.

In her classic book, Sisters in The Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk,⁵ theologian Delores Williams addresses the suffering of slaves as she describes the exploitative relationship between slave owners and female slaves as it relates to slave women's bodies and their labor. Williams makes reference to the slave narrative written by Linda Brent. Brent tells the story of how her Aunt Nancy had to sleep on the cold floor outside of her mistress's bedroom door in case she needed her. Nancy had to leave at midnight one night because she gave premature birth to a child. She had to come back within two weeks, even though her body was not healed. Nancy continued to lie on the floor to serve her mistress spring, summer, fall and winter until she had given premature birth to six children, and every one of them died.

Williams conveys that, despite this kind of suffering and adversity, slave women were devoted to the care of their children. Great emotional and psychological strength was needed, in addition to physical endurance, to deal with the suffering and pain in the daily lives of these women. Faith in the midst of suffering challenges persons to go deeper within to find new strength and to expand their faith. This provides an opportunity for an intimate love relationship with Jesus to develop as the one who suffers knows that Jesus can identify with them in their suffering, empower them, and stay with them to see them through.

Notes

1. "Calvary." Various versions of this song exist; versions often differ by regions of the country. Verses are also changed and added at will as is often the case with beloved Negro Spirituals that have been closely embraced by the African American community. For another version see Carpenter, Delores, and Nolan Williams, Jr., Eds. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001. #239
2. "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me." Online location: http://www.negrospirituais.com/news-song/i_want_jesus_to_walk_with_me.htm accessed 9 January 2009
3. "He Decided to Die." James Cleveland and the Gospel Music Workshop of America Choir.

Hear “He Decided to Die” performed by James Cleveland and the Gospel Music Workshop of America Mass Choir. Online location:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QqsLMPmya9k&feature=PlayList&p=0F437F608A1D8FF0&playnext=1&index=47>

4. Thurman, Howard. Disciplines of the Spirit. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1977. p. 64-85

5. Williams, Delores S. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. p. 36