



CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 24, 2008

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Lection - Isaiah 42:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (v. 2) He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; (v. 3) a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring... (v. 4) He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (v. 5) Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: (v. 6) I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, (v. 7) to open the eyes that are blind, to

bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

African American history month is celebrated each year during the month of February. The year 2008 marks the eighty-second annual celebration of African American contributions to American civilization, since it was instituted by Dr. Carter G. Woodson as a weeklong celebration in 1926. Woodson was the son of a former slave. He taught himself the fundamentals of English and arithmetic at age 19. He completed high school in two years, earned his bachelor and master's degrees from the University of Chicago and later, at Harvard University, became the second black person to receive a doctorate in history. In 1972, President Gerald R. Ford extended Woodson's weeklong celebration to encompass the entire month of February. Dr. Woodson originally selected the second week in February to coincide with the birthdays of President Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

The Black Church has been a primary site for the production and recognition of heroes and heroines. In February, most black churches highlight in their orders of worship, through readings and other events, the achievements of Blacks in sports, religion, education, entertainment, the arts, politics, and business. In other words, during the month of February, we pause to highlight our heroes and heroines.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 42:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Webster's dictionary defines a hero as "a man or woman of distinguished courage or ability, admired for brave deeds and noble qualities. A person, who in the opinion of others, has heroic qualities or has performed a heroic act and is regarded as a model or ideal."

My life has been filled with heroes and heroines. My mother, Ophelia Wilson, was definitely one of my heroines. She was an honest and hard working woman – I learned to be both from her. Then there was my godmother, Mary Ellen Roberts. Although I was not her child, Mrs. Roberts treated me as if I was. She opened to me vistas and worlds that my parents could not afford to show me. She paid for me to attend conferences and introduced me to foreign lands such as France. Even after I was an adult, she kept investing in me, even sponsoring me in a sorority. Then, I had a great pastor, Reverend Clay Evans of Fellowship Church in Chicago. He was never too busy to encourage me or to listen, even though he was a world-renowned preacher and recording artist. Then, there was former Labor Secretary Alexis Herman, who though established in her career, took the time to teach me how to be an administrator and an organizer. But most of my heroes and heroines have been teachers. Whether in church (Pastor Evans), or public school (Mrs. Tatmun, my English teacher), law school (Dean of Students, Dr. Thatcher), or seminary (the late Dr. Samuel Proctor), teachers have always enabled me to be my best self. These women and men always knew what to say and do to help me believe that I

was a special child of God, that I could soar in my career of choice, and that I had something important to contribute to humanity. Who are today's heroes and heroines? How can we identify them?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Isaiah 42:1-7 is the first part of four "Servant Songs" in the book of Isaiah (49:1-13; 50:1-11; 52:12-53:12). The text suggests that a hero or heroine in the "Jesus tradition" is identified by the following characteristics: A hero or heroine...

1. Is a Servant (v. 1). "Behold! My Servant." Behold means to take notice of. The servant foretold in this text is the coming Messiah, Jesus the Christ. Jesus, our ultimate model of what a hero or heroine is, is shown to be a suffering servant. His service on behalf of others without regard to fame, fortune, or comfort, establishes a critical part of the hero paradigm for all future heroes and heroines; they will be suffering servants.

2. Is chosen (v. 1). Heroes and heroines have been called, appointed by God for a particular task. Our history is replete with persons who though ordinary citizens, answered the **call** to serve (even when frightened and appearing to lack the skills needed for the assignment) and accomplished monumental tasks under the most difficult circumstances.

3. Possesses God's Spirit (v. 1). This passage stresses that the Messiah will be filled with the fullness of God's Spirit. This Spirit would equip the Messiah to carry out his assignment to redeem humanity. Similarly the same Spirit has endowed countless heroes and heroines to go forth and contribute in their unique way to the regeneration and therefore the redemption of humanity.

4. Bring righteousness and justice (v. 1). Jesus, initial appearances to the contrary, was not chosen to define and distill justice to a small group in a select part of the world. His life, death, burial, and resurrection were a living testimony for all of humankind. Likewise, heroes and heroines (though born in a certain place and time) are those who embrace the weighty mantles of righteousness and justice in a manner that allows their embrace to reverberate to the nations. Rosa Parks sat down on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, U.S.A. But her embrace of righteousness and justice resounded to the nations.

5. Is peaceful (v. 2). Clearly the Messiah was a man of peace. However, this did not mean that he did not agitate for justice and in fact disturbances were continually caused by his actions, which challenged the status quo and disturbed those in power. Yes, he was a Savior who taught peace and to many troubled souls, gave peace, but his passion for justice and righteousness did not always engender from others a peaceful reception or response. Such has been the tale told of so many African American heroes and heroines. Though people of peace, their tenacious fights for justice have not always gained for them peaceful responses and receptions. Such will always be the sojourn of the hero and heroine.

6. Is compassionate (v. 3). The essence of the character of our Savior is unconditional love. In the beginning, when the Word was made flesh, what came forth was love and truth in the flesh. Because of the essence of His nature, the life of our Savior was one of constant pastoral care. Note the reference in the text to a bruised reed. Bruised reeds are useless, so they are broken and discarded, but because the Messiah's heart was full of compassion, He did not throw anyone away as useless. To the contrary, He came for the bruised reed, those who are wounded and weakened by the trials and hardships of life. The smoking flax or smoldering wick is a metaphor for people whose lives lack purpose and meaning, who have lost almost all faith and hope. Whatever desires or expectations they had have been snuffed out, and a sense of despair grips their hearts, but we are blessed with a Messiah who has compassion on the smoldering wicks of the earth. He cups them in His hands and keeps their flames—their hope and sense of purpose—from burning out. The trait of compassion is a hallmark of heroes and heroines. They have a yearning to help the weak, the aimless, those who have lost faith and hope, and those who are grieved.

7. Is steadfast and perseveres because of the mission (vv. 4-7). Our ultimate hero never waived in his mission to redeem humanity. He set his face towards the task because his mission was the salvation of humanity. Such steadfastness and perseverance allowed our Lord to endure temptation, betrayal, loneliness, an unjust sentence and an ignominious crucifixion on Calvary and yet complete his mission. Thanks be to God! Regardless of hardships or opposition heroes and heroines are not deterred from their goals. In times like these the call almost daily goes forth for leaders in so many areas. While others look for leaders, I believe that we need a few more heroes and heroines who stand in the Jesus tradition.

Celebration

Praise God for a Savior who taught us that everyone can be a hero or heroine if they serve others with compassion. This Savior endured death for us, and praise be to His name rose for us, and daily intercedes for us. We are ever grateful for the Messiah who has forever defined heroism.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A bruised reed; a dimly burning wick; the coastlands; God giving breath and spirit to humanity, the blind receiving sight;

Sounds: A quiet Savior; prisoners coming out of dungeons/jails; and

Colors: Beige and green reeds.

III. Ideas for Teaching on Heroism

A. Use this occasion to salute the heroes and heroines among you, those men and women who day after day, year after year, live for others. Help provide youth with new models of heroism. The following are heroes and heroines whom you may want to salute.

- The teacher of the year who raised her class test scores by 30% without a pay raise and without expelling the problem students, but instead by teaching with great expectations;
- All persons who have made a long-term commitment to assisting in rebuilding the spiritual and economic lives of Katrina victims;
- Those building schools and medical facilities in Africa; and
- Our social workers who daily fight for the rights of children to have quality living environments.

B. Have youth review or read excerpts about the lives of contemporary African American heroes and heroines such as:

- Benjamin Carson, neurosurgeon
- Anthony Davis, composer; composed The Life and Times of Malcolm X
- Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winning author
- Mark Dean, instrumental in the development of the "Personal Computer" (PC). He holds three of IBM's original nine PC patents and currently holds more than 20 patents overall.
- Rita Dove, first African American Poet Laureate of the United States
- Orlando Bagwell, documentary filmmaker
- Julie Dash, directed "Daughters of the Dust," first commercial feature length film produced by a woman
- Spike Lee, filmmaker