



## **JESUS AND WOMEN** **(March is Women's History Month)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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#### **I. History**

Resilient, strong, and fearless are only a few descriptors that are often associated with the character of women in general and African American women in particular. Figures such as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Vashti M. McKenzie, and Michelle Obama are living testaments of such stature. Oftentimes, black women are seen solely as pillars of strength, an interpretation that overshadows their vulnerability to the pressures and pain of life. But we must never forget that women of African descent have experienced agonizing affliction—seeing their children sold in slave trades, losing their sons/daughters to

violence, working multiple jobs to provide for their families, and consistently being made to believe that they must validate their place in society because they are black women.

Like the widow of Nain in today's scripture, they are mothers, wives, daughters, and respected members in their local communities who represent pillars of strength, yet they are capable of experiencing immense hurt. And, to this end, Jesus empathizes and speaks to their lives. Such a move exhibits the type of relationship that exists between Jesus and women; one built upon the ability to see, feel, and experience personally the pain of the other. Strength to push through life's pain and restoration to wholeness occurs as a result of this type of relationship. In short, as Luke 7 expresses, the Lord saw, gave, and showed favor unto the widow from Nain. This delivered her from the throes of death that hung so somberly over her life for so many reasons. What does this tell us to do? Of what are we guilty if we allow women to suffer unaided? Can we say we understand what it is to live for Christ if we allow the majority of the world's population (female) to remain bound by the countless structures, systems and suffering they daily endure? Someone has said, "If we want to turn the world right side up, we must daily champion the rights of women."

## **II. A Woman Survives the Death-Dealing Reality of Slavery**

Born into slavery, Elizabeth, better known as "Old Elizabeth," experienced separation and reunion with her mother and father, only to be sold again before the tender age of thirteen. Overcome by the atrocities of slavery, this young girl wept. She wept in the fields, crevices of fences and corners of barns. She wept with "Nobody in the wide world to look to but God."<sup>1</sup> These words of wisdom spoken by Elizabeth's mother served as a temporary lifeline in her times of turmoil, loneliness, and pain. However, as Elizabeth shares in her memoirs, it was her face-to-face encounter with an "invisible power" that changed her. She states, "...I saw the Savior standing with his hands stretched out to receive me...while I wept, I heard the voice say, 'Weep not...'. The next day, when I had come to myself, I felt like a new creature in Christ, and all my desire was to see the Saviour."<sup>2</sup>

Amazingly, like the widow of Nain in today's scripture, Jesus not only saw the pain of Elizabeth, but endowed her with a sense of power needed to survive and conquer the harsh realities of slavery. Elizabeth was released from the bondage of slavery at thirty years of age. Armed with a commitment to share the same compassion that was afforded to her by Jesus, she traveled throughout the country from one meetinghouse to the next spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. She became known as the "watchman," and such a title caused male leaders, both white and black, to challenge her authority. Secular authorities tried to imprison her for blatantly speaking against slavery. However, because Jesus had strengthened and commissioned her, these oppositional forces only served as catalysts for Elizabeth. It was Jesus that met her in the barn and told her not to weep. It was Jesus that kept her in her right mind throughout the atrocities of slavery. And, because she truly believed that Jesus was with her, who could be against her.

## **III. The National Black Feminist Organization**

In 1973, a group of black women organized The National Black Feminist Organization. Their Mission statement said in part:

Black women have suffered cruelly in this society from living the phenomenon of being black and female, in a country that is *both* racist and sexist. There has been very little real examination of the damage it has caused on the lives and on the minds of black women. Because we live in a patriarchy, we have allowed a premium to be put on black male suffering. No one of us would minimize the pain or hardship or the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced by the black man. But history, past or present, rarely deals with the malicious abuse put upon the black woman.

We were seen as breeders by the master; despised and historically polarized from/by the master's wife; and looked upon as castrators by our lovers and husbands. The black woman has had to be strong, yet we are persecuted for having survived. We have been called "matriarchs" by white racists and black nationalists; we have virtually no positive self-images to validate our existence.

Black women want to be proud, dignified, and free from all those false definitions of beauty and woman hood that are unrealistic and unnatural. **We, not white men or black men, must define our own self-image as black women and not fall into the mistake of being placed upon the pedestal which is even being rejected by white women.** It has been hard for black women to emerge from the myriad of distorted images that have portrayed us as grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires, and pancake-box Jemimas. As black feminists we realized the need to establish ourselves as an independent black feminist organization. Our above ground presence will lend enormous credibility to the current Women's Liberation Movement, which unfortunately is not seen as the serious political and economic revolutionary force that it is. We will strengthen the current efforts of the Black Liberation struggle in this country by encouraging *all* of the talents and creativities of black women to emerge, strong and beautiful, not to feel guilty or divisive, and assume positions of leadership and honor in the black community.

We will encourage the black community to stop falling into the trap of the white male Left, utilizing women only in terms of domestic or servile needs. We will continue to remind the Black Liberation Movement that there can't be liberation for half the race. **We must, together, as a people, work to eliminate racism, from without the black community, which is trying to destroy us as an entire people; but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within.**<sup>3</sup>

This group had more than 10 chapters and thousands of members by 1974, but disbanded in the early 80s. However, their primary aim (liberation of Black women), is more relevant than ever. Now is the perfect time to work in your church and community to help in the liberation of black women. How? Begin by educating. For a lengthy period, at least three months, have the women in your church study the plight of black women. This can

be done in Sunday school classes, Women's Mission Study classes and Bible study classes. Or, through a gathering of women in homes, choose books to study the plight of black women. Be purposeful in making sure that young adult women are part of this effort. Then, decide what advocacy steps can be taken to help the women in your community and ACT. You may want to advocate for funding for women's shelter given the level of domestic violence in black America. Your group may select to work to gain more free mammograms or health check-ups for women given the dire state of the health of black women. You may choose to advocate for power for more women clergy in your church or denomination. Or, you may want to support efforts that already exist; especially literacy and employment organizations. **WOMEN CAN AND MUST DO SOMETHING.**

Following are a list of books that help shed light on and provide solutions to many of the problems that plague black women and thereby the black community and the nation:

- Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought. New York, NY: Routledge, 2000.
- Jones, Charisse and Kumea Shorter-Gooden. Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Feagin, Joe R. and Yanick St. Jean. Double Burden: Black Women and Everyday Racism. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp Publisher, 1998.
- Hull, Gloria, Patricia Scott and Barbara Smith, eds. All the Women are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave. New York, NY: Feminist Press at the City University of New York (Graduate Division), 1982.
- Sidel, Ruth. Women and Children Last: The Plight of Poor Women in Affluent America. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1987.
- Abramovitz, Mimi. Regulating the Lives of Women: Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1996/1988.

#### **IV. Poetry for this Lectionary Moment**

At times, poetry maintains a straightforward personality, while at other times it wraps itself in multiple layers of difficult language. Regardless of its form, it has a way of displaying—like biographies—activities, emotions, and experiences of life. The poem “The Body of Love,” testifies to Jesus’ understanding of the plight of women and that he stands as their ultimate Savior.

##### **The Body of Love**

Hands of love stretch forth and save her from a raging sea.  
Hands of love caress her broken heart and bring blessed unity.  
Hands of love are strong and defend at all cost.  
Jesus touches.

The voice of love speaks calmness into turbulent issues of her life.  
The voice of love speaks blessings which permeate the darkness.  
The voice of love encourages her to climb to heights that know no end.  
Jesus speaks.

Eyes of love can see her pain when no one recognizes it.  
Eyes of love can see the history of trauma after trauma.  
Eyes of love can see each dark moment of her life.  
Jesus sees.

Ears of love hear each tear that meets her pillow in too many midnights.  
Ears of love listen when family, friends and the world turn a deaf ear.  
Ears of love are always attuned to hear the very desires of her heart.  
Jesus hears.

Love reaches and touches.  
Love speaks and encourages.  
Love is attentive and sees.  
Love hears and listens.  
Jesus is love.<sup>4</sup>

## **V. Songs for this Lectionary Moment**

Songs, like biographies and poetry, serve as a space in which notions of life resonate in a lyrical format. For instance, the verses of the first song “Does Jesus Care?” seek to answer the very question imposed by the title. The second and third selections illustrate the notion of reciprocity, in which the one who is cared for by Jesus shares with the world what Jesus really means to her. In the second selection, Jesus is “The Center of Joy.” In the third piece, to sum it all up the blessed recipient proclaims he is “All The World.” The fourth and final song, “My Tribute,” expresses thanksgiving, praise, and honor for acts of compassion, grace, and empathy delivered because of a Savior who cares so much.

### **Does Jesus Care?**

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained,  
Too deeply for mirth and song;  
As the burdens press, and cares distress,  
And the way grows weary and long?

#### **Chorus**

O yes, he cares— I know he cares!  
His heart is touched with grief;  
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,  
I know my Savior cares. He cares.

Does Jesus care when my way is dark,  
With a nameless dread and fear?  
As the daylight fades into deep night shades,  
Does he care enough to be near?

Repeat Chorus.

Does Jesus care when I've said good-bye to the dearest on Earth to me?  
And my sad heart aches till it nearly breaks.  
Is it aught to him?  
Does he see me?

Repeat Chorus.<sup>5</sup>

### **Center of My Joy**

Jesus, you're the center of my joy,  
All that's good and perfect comes from you.  
You're the heart of my contentment, hope for all I do,  
Jesus, you're the center of my joy.

When I've lost my direction,  
You're the compass for my way,  
You're the fire and light when nights are long and cold.  
In sadness you're laughter that shadows all my fears when I'm all alone,  
Your hand is there to hold.

Chorus

Jesus, you're the center of my joy,  
All that's good and perfect comes from you.  
You're the heart of my contentment, hope for all I do,  
Jesus, you're the center of my joy.

You are why I find pleasure in the simple things in life,  
You're the music in the meadows and the streams.  
The voices of the children, my family, and my home,  
You're the source and finish of my highest hold.  
(Repeat Chorus)<sup>6</sup>

### **Jesus Is All The World To Me**

Jesus is all the world to me.  
My life, my joy, my all.  
He is my strength from day to day,  
without him I would surely fall.  
When I am sad, to him I go.  
No other one can cheer me so.  
When I am sad, he makes me glad, glad.

He's my friend.

Jesus is all the world to me.  
My friend in trials sore;  
I go to him for blessings, and he gives them o'er and o'er:  
He sends sunshine and the rain,  
He sends the harvest's golden grain;  
Sunshine and rain, harvest of grain,  
He's my friend.

Jesus is the entire world to me.  
And true to him I'll be;  
Oh, how could I this friend deny, when he's so true to me?  
Following him I know I'm right,  
He watches o'er me day and night;  
Following him by day and night,  
He's my friend.

Jesus is all the world to me.  
I want no better friend.  
I trust him now,  
I trust him when life's fleeting days shall end.  
Beautiful life with such a friend.  
Beautiful life that has no end.  
Eternal life, eternal joy, joy.  
He's my friend.<sup>7</sup>

### **My Tribute**

How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me—  
things so underserved,  
Yet you give to prove your love for me?  
The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude—  
All that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to thee.

### **Chorus**

To God be the glory, to God be the glory, to God be the glory  
For the things he has done!  
With his blood he has saved me,  
With His pow'r he has raised me.  
To God be the glory for all the things he has done.

Just let me live my life—Let it be pleasing, Lord, to thee;  
And should I gain any praise,  
Let me go to Calvary.

Short Chorus.

With his blood he has saved me,  
With his pow'r he has raised me.  
To God be the glory for all the things he has done.<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

1. "Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman." Six Women's Slave Narratives. Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988. p. 4.
2. Ibid., pp. 6-7.
3. Schneir, Miriam. "Statement of Purpose." Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present. National Black Feminist Organization. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994.
4. Guillory, Margarita Simon. The Body of Love.
5. "Does Jesus Care?" African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. p. 428.
6. "Center of My Joy." The New National Baptist Hymnal: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition. Nashville, TN: Triad Publications, 2001. pp. 530-31.
7. "Jesus Is All the World to Me." African American Heritage Hymnal. p. 382.
8. "My Tribute." African American Heritage Hymnal. p. 111.