



KWANZAA

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, December 28, 2008 (Kwanzaa is traditionally celebrated December 26 - January 1)

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Lection - Genesis 50:24-26; Acts 7:2-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

Genesis 50:24-26

(v. 24) Then Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” (v. 25) So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, “When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.” (v. 26) And Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Acts 7:2-16

(v. 2) And Stephen replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, (v. 3) and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.’ (v. 4) Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living. (v. 5) He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as his

possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child. (v. 6) And God spoke in these terms, that his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and maltreat them for four hundred years. (v. 7) ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’ (v. 8) Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs. (v. 9) The patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him, (v. 10) and rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him ruler over Egypt and over all his household. (v. 11) Now there came a famine throughout Egypt and Canaan, and great suffering, and our ancestors could find no food. (v. 12) But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there on their first visit. (v. 13) On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. (v. 14) Then Joseph sent and invited his father Jacob and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five in all; (v. 15) so Jacob went down to Egypt. He himself died there as well as our ancestors, (v. 16) and their bodies were brought back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by Dr. Maulana Karenga, professor and chair of the Department of Black Studies at California State University, Long Beach, California. Its name is derived from a Swahili word meaning “first fruits.” Dr. Karenga’s intent was to provide a vehicle through which the African American community could reaffirm and restore African cultural identity, strengthen community and family, and reinforce African cultural values. He stated those values in the Seven Principles or Nguzo Saba:

- Unity (Umoja)
- Self-Determination (Kujichagulia)
- Collective Work and Responsibility (Ujima)
- Cooperative Economics (Ujamaa)
- Purpose (Nia)
- Creativity (Kuumba)
- Faith (Imani).

Though Kwanzaa began in the United States, it is currently a Pan-African celebration, combining elements from many African cultures. Over the years, Kwanzaa has become a time for both people of African descent and their friends from other cultures to learn more about African culture and values.

Reverend Dr. Kirk Byron Jones was so right when he wrote the following for the African American lectionary commentary for Christmas: “It is important to remember that along with Christmas, many African American Christians now celebrate Kwanzaa, a week-long familial communal observance of *unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith*. The kinship of these ideals with the

Christian faith is obvious. Thus, to exclude Kwanzaa and its ideals from the content and presentation of Christmas worship and preaching is to miss a golden opportunity to affirm familial and cultural commitment as a vital dimension of faith growth and development.”

An increasing number of churches include Kwanzaa observances on their worship calendar as another way to celebrate black Christian identity. Kwanzaa is traditionally observed between the 26th of December and the 1st of January.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 50:24-26; Acts 7:2-16

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The year 2008 is destined to be marked by attentive historians, for among other things, being the year that racism came out of the closet – again! Although a black man was victorious as the candidate for president, the 2008 presidential campaign revealed that so-called tolerance has always been an invitation to assimilation in disguise and, that all things black are still considered suspect: African culture, black church, black preachers, black people. Folks in the mid-South, where I live, have seen the renaissance of old-fashioned racism as license to splash the N-word on buildings – hate graffiti-style – and have widened their attacks to include any group perceived to be different. Paired with the re-outing of racism is the reality that far too many of our young adults and youth are overwhelmed by this seemingly new reality. It has been 40 years Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, and many of our children and grandchildren have no clue about our African origins, our racially-turbulent past or their own cultural or bi-cultural identity. If ever we needed an opportunity to tell our own stories and frame our own understandings of being black and Christian, it is now! Now that there is a black man in the White House, what does this mean for black people? Kwanzaa continues to be a viable opportunity to initiate, or continue, this and related conversations in the black church.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

By the time of Genesis 50:24-26, Joseph has lived to be one hundred and ten (110) years old – long enough to see the births of his great-grand children. He and his entire family have taken up residence in Egypt. Verse 24 hints that Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers decades before, continues to experience a sense of displacement. *God will surely come to you and bring you out of this place . . .* Joseph’s suffering, as one mistreated first by his brothers and then later by his captors, mirrors the suffering of the black community in Diaspora. Though some boast that their fathers and mothers built this country, and others are able to trace their generations back to 1865 or earlier, we find ourselves continually at odds with our surroundings.

The death of Joseph is placed at the end of the book of Genesis. Exodus follows with an account of the suffering that this displaced family experienced at the hand of a new Pharaoh. Joseph’s death would be just another melancholy transitional passage were it not for the words of faith and hope in verse 25: *when God comes to you, you bring my bones out of this place with you!*

When God comes! Though Joseph died a displaced man, he had faith that displacement, estrangement and alienation did not represent God's will for the people. When God comes, carry my bones up out of here! Look at the certainty expressed in this dying man's last wish: Take my bones with you. Remember me. Though it may be hundreds of years before you leave here, I want to continue to be part of the community and an important part of your history. Such is the character of any sermon preached during Kwanzaa. We have untold numbers of ancestors who died as a direct result of the atrocities of slavery. There are additional untold numbers who continue to suffer from the cosmic shockwave created by that level of injustice, but we persevere in the certainty that our present condition is not permanent and that God will come. As our community experiences the ebb and flow of victory and setback, we keep alive the memories of those who have gone before us. In the words of one poet writing post-Hurricane Katrina we,

Walk lightly in the streets where our kin have floated into history; the streets are sacred as are the memories.¹

The call is to remember the faith of those who have gone before us as we continue to resist injustice – even unto death, knowing that

“If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
in vain;”²

Our second passage, Acts 7:2-16, is a portion of Stephen's speech to opponents from the Synagogue of the Freedman (Acts 6:9). The word translated freedman in the NRSV is “*Liberti`no*” derived from a Latin word for former slaves, *libertines*.³ The members of this synagogue were freed slaves from areas of the Roman Empire as far away as Asia and Africa. Stephen was one of the original deacons appointed to attend to the needs of Hellenistic Jewish widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Stephen came from a group of people considered compromised in some way by Greek language, custom and culture. Both Stephen and his accusers were likely to experience some forms of bias from the more orthodox Jewish residents of Israel. From our historical distance it would seem to us that the freedman and the Hellenists would be allies instead of enemies. Instead, the freedmen used false witnesses to accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God (Acts 6:11).

Stephen's rebuttal sermon was a retelling of faith history in shorthand. Stephen reminded his accusers of their origins as a people. God appeared to Abraham with the command to leave his country and relatives to follow God to a new land (Acts 7:3, Genesis 12), gave him the promise of a child (Acts 7:4-5, Genesis 22), and foretold that Abraham's descendants would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years (Acts 7:6, see also Genesis 15:13). Abraham became the father of Isaac; Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of twelve sons. Then the attention of Stephen's sermon shifts to Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers.

It is at this point of Israel's faith history that we see major points of comparison with our history. The roller-coaster ride of Joseph and his family in Egypt eerily resembles the history of black folks scattered across the Americas and the Islands. Abraham's descendants were enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years; similarly, people of the African Diaspora have been displaced for nearly four hundred (400) years. The points of comparison do not end here. Just as Joseph was positioned to save his estranged family of origin from starvation and famine, a significant number of black churches in the African Diaspora have been positioned to help the plight of Africans on the Continent and to remind our communities that we are one family.

The final verses of the passage call us to remember the Genesis text. Joseph's bones were brought back to Shechem in the Promised Land, and he and the ancestors are remembered.

Challenge

Kwanzaa presents a unique opportunity for our faith community to celebrate its black *Christian* identity. This cultural observance should not be seen as something outside the faith; the spiritual values of the Nguzo Saba are consistent with Judeo-Christian spiritual values. The texts selected for this liturgical moment prod us to remember the faithful who have gone before us. Our communities are intimately acquainted with Josephs who have been betrayed as well as Stephens who died as martyrs for causes in which they believed. We are so beholden to them and responsible to those who come after us.

Descriptive Details

The Kwanzaa visual environment may include textiles, carvings and African art, drums and other indigenous instruments, and fruits, grains and vegetables from any place where people of African descent are found. Traditionally, Kwanzaa observances are replete with drumming, music, dancing, drama, original poetry and readings from classical writers of the African Diaspora.

III. Kwanzaa at Church

Scripture is an excellent reminder that the African moral values, found in the Nguzo Saba, are consistent with Christian spiritual values. Consider the use of multiple speakers to deliver short meditations on each of the Nguzo Saba.

Additional Scripture suggestions for meditations on the Nguzo Saba:

- Unity (Umoja) – Luke 9:46-48, Luke 11:17;
- Self-Determination (Kujichagulia) – Nehemiah 4:6, 6:15;
- Collective Work and Responsibility (Ujima) – Matthew 5:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:7-13;
- Cooperative Economics (Ujamaa) – Luke 19:28-32, Acts 4:34-35;
- Purpose (Nia) – 2 Kings 2:11-14;
- Creativity (Kuumba) – John 6:5-14;

- Faith (Imani) – Matthew 17:20.

IV. Resources

Kwanzaa on the History Channel online location:

<http://www.historychannel.com/cgi-bin/frameit.cgi?p=http%3A//www.historychannel.com/exhibits/holidays/kwanzaa/index.html>
accessed 5 September 2008

History Chanel Video online location :

http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Video_Clips&content_type_id=52698&display_order=4&mini_id=1047 accessed 5 September 2008

CNN's Kwanzaa Page online location:

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1998/kwanzaa/> accessed 5 September 2008

V. Online Resources for Kwanzaa from Denominations not Historically African American:

- Episcopal Church online location: <http://arc.episcopalchurch.org/worship-that-works/00kwanza.html> accessed 5 September 2008
- National Black Catholic Congress online location: http://www.nbccongress.org/black-catholic-spirituality/what_is_kwanzaa.asp accessed 5 September 2008
- National Council of Churches online location: <http://www.nccusa.org/nmu/mce/kwanzaa.pdf> accessed 5 September 2008
- Reformed Church in America online location: <http://www.rca.org/NETCOMMUNITY/Page.aspx?pid=1693&srcid=1600> accessed 5 September 2008
- United Church of Christ online location: <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/pdfs/06Celebrate-Kwanzaa.pdf> accessed 5 September 2008
- United Methodist Church online location: http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item_id=24044&loc_id=1,1061,1081 accessed 5 September 2008

Notes

1. Davis, Valerie Bridgeman. "In the Wake of Katrina: Lest We Forget ... Call to Renewal." 2006. Online location: <http://www.sdpconference.info/assets/downloads/litany-clr.pdf> accessed 5 September 2008
2. McKay, Claude. "If We Must Die." 1919. Online location: http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/mckay.html accessed 5 September 2008

3. Keck, Leander E. New Interpreters Bible, Volume 10: Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Acts - 1 Corinthians. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.