



## **SENIORS, ELDERS AND GRANDPARENTS DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, September 12, 2010**

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**Lection – Leviticus 19:32** (New Revised Standard Version)

You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

We are living in a society that is running the dangerous and costly risk of overlooking one of the greatest resources of stability and wisdom we have. Because our society has decided that youth is to be favored and flaunted, and due to the need for immediate gratification, we no longer esteem

or acknowledge the importance and blessing of our seniors and the very necessary contribution that they make to our communities.

Today we celebrate and acknowledge the supreme contribution of our seniors, elders, and grandparents because, without their teaching by precept and practice, all of us who have succeeded would have been doomed and destined to a life of wandering, wailing and wilderness.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Leviticus 19:32**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Proverbs reminds us of an old adage, “Don’t move the old landmark.” This proverb exists for important reasons. Our country and Christian community cannot afford the extreme price we pay when we refuse to acknowledge those among us who have hard drives full of wisdom and are willing to share and download information so that the young are not harmed and trapped by old weapons of naiveté, ignorance, impatience, individualism and materialism. There are stark problems in our communities that could be severely lessened if only there was an acknowledgement that all the answers are not derived from persons who have new book knowledge and that it is not always “the what” that we are in desperate need of. It is often wisdom and the “how to” that is missing. Cornel West ably articulates this point when he states, “Never confuse knowledge with wisdom. By wisdom I mean wrestling with how to live.”<sup>1</sup>

As we acknowledge those seniors, elders and grandparents who have preceded us on the journey, we can discover the great wells of insight from which they have drunk and we will then be able to share and wrestle with how to live. As a result, we will be made more fit for the journey each of us is called to make.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Leviticus 19 records and captures God providing instruction for the people of God through Moses. The objective here is to provide the necessary precepts for Israel to be a holy people before God in order that Israel could properly function as a nurturing and loving community which would be able to meet one another’s needs. The words given in Leviticus 19 are closely related to Exodus 20:2-17 and speak to the responsibility of Yahweh’s people to be holy as Yahweh is holy. Israel is commanded to accomplish this objective by following all the commands which God has laid down for them through Moses. One such commandment is given in Leviticus 19:32.

What are the implications of Leviticus 19:32 for us as we celebrate our seniors, elders, and grandparents? Leviticus 19:32 asks that the people rise or stand before the gray headed and honor the faces of old persons. There are at least two implications here. First, the implication is that those who belong to God ought to walk in distinct contrast to those around them. While the youth-bent marketing culture of our time attempts to water down the value of old sages and suggest that because one has age they may not be worth as much, we who are in holy communion with God realize the great treasure God has placed within seniors, elders and grandparents and we acknowledge this gift by “rising.” The culture says ignore the aged; the

church says honor them. The culture says push aside the elder; the church says put them in the front of the line and defer to them. The culture says write policies and laws to maximize the power of the powerful. The church says recognize the power within your village—those who have lived long and laid mighty foundations.

Second, because we acknowledge the gift that is our elders, by reverencing them, we are also reverencing the God who has both given them something and given them to us to share the something that has been deposited within them. We “rise” to affirm that the gifts they carry have carried us. They carried us through the fire: the fire of segregation, the fire of racism, the fire of hate. They carried us through the floods: the flood of water from hoses turned on to knock us down and the flood of ignorance that birthed laws that attempted to make us second-class citizens. They have carried us even through the blood, the blood of our sons and daughters shed on streets, as we hung from trees and disappeared from our families in one backwards town after another.

The word “rise” has been used by African Americans as both precept and practice. It has been both word and work. It has been both a saying and a striving. For us as children of struggle and segregation, this duality has made all the difference for our survival.

We “rise” to reverence and cherish our seniors and elders and grandparents for in doing so we say “thank you” to both the Giver and the gift. We honor God because God is the embodiment of all supreme wisdom, and we honor the elders because they have been the chosen vessels of grace God has utilized in lifting and saving our families, defending our country, healing our communities, keeping us on the right track, sharing the morsels they had to keep us alive, taking us in when the rest of the family forsook us, teaching us how to cook soul food with love, showing us how to pull our families together and keep them strong and instilling within us that nothing can conquer you if God is on your side.

Lastly, we “rise” because the elders and seniors and grandparents pointed us beyond themselves to a Greater One who will receive both us and them. They reminded us that only what we do for Christ will last. They made sure that we understood the way to rise was through Christ Jesus. Maya Angelou captures this reality well in her poem, And Still I Rise. Our seniors encouraged us to understand that in spite of every failure, fault and flaw, we too could rise and that the beginning of our rising lay in our understanding that we were to fear/reverence God, just as is required in Leviticus 19:32.

## **Celebration**

We are encouraged by the example of our elders and grandparents to one day take their place and pour into others what they have so richly poured into us. We celebrate all that they are, and all that God has used them to do, and the tremendous difference they have made in this world. Thank you God for giving us persons who were not wrapped up in themselves but were wrapped up, tied up and tangled up in helping children, families and communities rise. Thank you for their wisdom, their love and their example. Thank you God for all that they went without so that others could have. Thank you for their prayers and their righteous living. Thank you that they taught us how to watch, fight and pray. Thank you for every quilt they made and make; every

meal they cooked and still do, every fear that they calmed and still do, every lesson they taught and still do and all of the love they gave and still give. Thank you God for our elders.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sounds:** The applause of those who stand to honor elders; the wise words given by elders;

**Sights:** The gray hair and the faces of seniors, elders on canes; elders in wheel chairs; elders rocking grandchildren and great-grandchildren; and

**Textures:** The soft feel of a quilt made by an elder; the silky collard greens cooked by an elder; and the rough hands of elders who have toiled for many years.

### **III. Additional Material that Preachers and Others Can Use**

Below is a portion (for legal reasons) of the poem Still I Rise by Maya Angelou.

....Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

### **Notes**

1. West, Cornel. African American Quotations. Ed. Richard Newman. New York, NY: Checkmark Books, 2000. p. 371.