



A SERVICE OF HEALING

(For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

LECTIONARY READINGS

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Michael R. Lomax, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Associate Minister, Fifteenth Avenue Baptist Church, Nashville, TN

Lection - Revelation 22:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb (v. 2) through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (v. 3) Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; (v. 4) they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. (v. 5) And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Healing services have provided African Americans the hope to endure racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and emotional trauma, debilitating physical illnesses, death, and ruptures in relationships. In certain contexts, the social conditions of

African Americans have improved. Thus, some African Americans have access to various modes of physical, mental, and emotional healing, including advanced health care and various kinds of counselors. Still, healing services continue to be a mainstay in African American congregations, where worship leaders invite the community to look beyond problems to catch a glimpse of God's plan for restoration.

It is important not to confuse *healing* with a *cure*. In a cure, the pain and suffering of a disease or sickness are removed. In contrast, God's healing may not include a cure of our immediate ailments. Instead, God's healing may provide resources for us to press on in spite of our ailments. In healing services, God awakens the hope that allows us to live with grace and dignity in the present, even as we await God's ultimate transformation of our brokenness in the future.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Revelation 22:1-5

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

While African Americans face different obstacles than my great-grandfather, the Reverend Eli Lomax (a nineteenth century Baptist preacher), contemporary dilemmas continue to frustrate our search for communal and individual wholeness. Political issues, such as economic and educational policies, marginalize the poor and children. Healthcare issues, such as HIV/AIDS, cancer, and diabetes, send African Americans to premature graves. Relationship issues, such as the death or even murder of loved ones and the pain of divorce, burden people with sadness and shame. Because of these and other challenges, it appears at times that hurt, not hope, will have the last word.

Yet as a follower of Christ, I am a witness that the trials of God's people can be transformed into triumph for God's people. Indeed, profound tests often produce powerful testimonies. People who are tossed by the winds of family trauma discover that Jesus can still say to those winds, "Peace, be still." People who thought that the death of a loved one was too much to overcome are uplifted by the promise of resurrection. People who struggle with physical ailments find courage and determination in the declaration that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in the time of trouble" (Psalm 46:1). As worshippers clasp hands around the altar, as holy oil is gently dabbed on forehands, as soft music is played on keyboards, and as familiar hymns and fervent prayers lift heavenward, believers are reminded that God "... heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3).

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Roman Caesar Domitian had exiled John to the Isle of Patmos for his refusal to worship Caesar. In this book, hope bursts forth from God's gracious revelation to a person enduring political persecution. The unveiling of God's plan to this Patmos prisoner demonstrates that no oppression, pain, fear, or isolation can block God's communion with us.

God's vision to John includes a tour of heaven. The tour begins in Revelation 4:2, where an angel of the Lord eagerly invites John to come and see. John sees many vivid images: the lofty throne of God (4:2); the blood-soaked Lamb (5:6); the flaming torches (4:5); the opening of revelatory seals (chapters 6-8); the monstrous beasts (chapter 13); the mystical Babylon (17:5); and the great, flowing river (22:1).

As the angelic guide ends this journey, John sees the shores of the river whose source is the throne of God. This is in direct contrast to John's experience on the earth where the source of power is Rome. This vision reminds John that God's authority is more powerful than Caesar's government. Hurting people need to know that attacks on human wholeness are not God's ultimate design. Furthermore, God's plan for our spiritual, physical, and financial well-being is not contingent upon the ruling powers, but rather upon the sovereign authority of God.

The vision describes a tree of life with twelve crops of fruit (22:2). Additionally, John beholds the healing leaves on the tree. There may be a perceived scarcity of resources on earth, but in God's heavenly plan, there is enough. Indeed, there is *more than enough* for everyone. The rejuvenation from the water of life and the healing leaves are accessible to all since the river flows down "... the middle of the street of the city" (22:2). This, too, is good news for ailing souls. God's "healthcare plan" provides equal access to wholeness and does not simply favor those who are already powerful and privileged. The healing leaves that God offers in this scene are as accessible as the river that flows. The healing supplied is not only an *individual* experience but also a *communal* experience because the leaves are "... for the healing of the nations" (22:2).

In v. 3, the angel informs John of the elimination of curses. In the attempt to understand their trials and tribulations, many African Americans have felt that they have been "cursed" by the sins and shortcomings of their pasts and the pasts of their families. For instance, these curses can include addictions, physical sickness, and emotional dysfunction handed from relatives to the present generation. The good news is that God can and will put an end to all curses.

In v. 4, the angel tells John that the redeemed will see God's face. The Old Testament informs us that no one can see God's face and live (Ex. 33:20). Since at the throne of God all curses have been removed, God will lovingly allow people to see God--face-to-face! It is the blessed anticipation of seeing God's face that causes African American Christians to joyfully sing that familiar hymn: "O I want to see Him, look upon His face/There to sing forever of His saving grace/On the streets of glory let me lift my voice/Cares all past, home at last, ever to rejoice."² One day, we will be finally and fully at home with God, *never* again to be separated from God and each other by hurt and harm.

John learns in v.5 that heaven is complete. At the throne of God, there is an everlasting supply of water, food, and light, the elements necessary to sustain life. The elements for life, which in today's society are so greedily consumed by a few people on earth, are abundantly and widely available in heaven. In heaven, God does not ration out healing,

but rather provides it without limit.

Celebration

God desires health and abundance for us all! Regardless of mistakes and mishaps in our marriages, God's promise to heal us does not change. God's promise is not affected by the harassing footsteps of death. Nor can the ruling powers of our day deter the sovereign plan of God. While many African Americans lack access to healthcare or education, this is not the final word. God has not forgotten isolated, addicted, or downtrodden people. In the present, God gives us a "tour of heaven" to provide strength until we are completely made whole in God's future. But, while we are down here waiting, this tour also gives us the audacity to hope against hope and to struggle for healing to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The gentle rush of flowing water (v. 1); the joyful sounds of worship at the throne of God (v. 3);

Sights: The crystal clear river (v. 1); the majestic throne of God and of the Lamb (v. 1); the broad, great street in the city (v. 2); the strong, sturdy tree of life (v. 2); the colorful fruit on the tree (v. 2); the green healing leaves (v. 2); the worshipful servants at God's throne (v. 3); God's name on the foreheads of the redeemed (v. 4); the never ending light of God and of the Lamb (v. 5); the New Jerusalem filled with rejoicing people from all over the world (21:23-24);

Smells: The mouth-watering aroma of twelve kinds of fruit; the medicinal scent of healing leaves (v. 2);

Tastes: The delicious taste of twelve types of ripe fruit (v. 2); and

Textures: The refreshing moisture of life-giving water (v. 1); the multiple surfaces of a variety of fruit (v. 2); the stout trunk of the trees (v. 2); the smooth surface of healing leaves; the great streets of pure gold (mentioned in Revelation 21:21).

III. Additional Suggestions for A Healing Sermon

- **For an example of a complete sermon on healing** see Gardner C. Taylor, "The Authority of Experience," in The Words of Gardner Taylor: Quintessential Classics, 1980-Present, vol. 3; compiled by Edward L. Taylor (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000), pp. 23-28.
- **A Quote for Use in Sermons (A Definition of Healing)**
"Cure is the elimination of at least the symptoms if not the disease itself. *Healing*,

on the other hand, has many meanings attached to it. Consider the phrases “healing presence,” “healing moment,” and “healing service.” Each of these images elicits a sense of peace and of well-being, but they do not imply *cure*. While a healing worship service may include hope and even prayer for a cure for a particular individual, the intent of the service is to bring some sense of wellbeing into the person’s life, a sense of comfort, support, and peace.”

Black, Kathy. A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996. pp. 50-51.

Notes

1. For further information, consult Black, Kathy. A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996. (See especially pages 50-51 for the distinction between a “cure” and “healing.”)
2. Cornelius, Rufus H. “I Want To See Him.”