



THANKSGIVING DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, November 22, 2009 or Thursday November 26, 2009

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Lection - Job 1:20-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 20) Then Job arose, tore his robe, shaved his head, and fell on the ground and worshipped. (v. 21) He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (v. 22) In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Foundational to the Christian experience is the act of thanksgiving. Our level of thanksgiving often defines who we are and what we are called to express daily in concrete ways. Couple that with the Thanksgiving holiday and, potentially, you have a powerful worship experience that blends the best of the Christian faith. Thanksgiving, though not a distinctly Christian holiday, at least in America, is still important. Throughout the United States, churches and families gather to express their appreciation to God for all that God has done. It is one of the moments of the year where worship is both easier for, and expected by, all who attend church services. The premise being, of course, that all of us have something for which we can be thankful.

Within the African American faith community, Thanksgiving is both a holiday and an ongoing act that speaks of our intense passion and love for God who has, throughout our tumultuous journey in this country, brought us “a mighty long way.” Thanksgiving allows us to gather as family and celebrate the many “marvelous acts” of God. As the Christian church gathers to celebrate Thanksgiving, it is a great time to reflect upon the suffering and challenges that have arisen throughout the year and how God has, through Jesus Christ, enabled us not only to endure but also to grow.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Job 1:20-22

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

As I settle with certainty into middle age, my appreciation for the Thanksgiving holiday grows. With my parents in the evening of their journey, my siblings now in their mid-to-late 50s, our time together is much more precious. Because Thanksgiving serves as our annual family gathering, it is a staple for the Guns clan to come together during this holiday. During this time we laugh, eat, play and remember. This time calls us as a family grounded in faith, to continue to live out that faith regardless of the trials we have faced during the year.

I believe that the African American Church and so many African American families place great value on Thanksgiving Day because this holiday calls us together to remember and celebrate the bounty of God’s grace evident in and in spite of all conditions. Though we may have had great challenges throughout the year, God has been faithful. Testimonies of God’s faithfulness come through as my family, both blood and church, and your family gather each year. This celebration should, perhaps more than any other, place emphasis on the God who continues to be faithful despite the challenges of life. Our time of worship should reflect the depth of our appreciation to God. What we preach and how worship is designed should point to God and all God continues to do for us through Jesus Christ. We gather both at the House of God and our houses to offer thanksgiving in ways that are clear and concrete.

Part Two: The Biblical Commentary

The story of Job is an incredible journey that often brings preachers to a rather precarious place. While we feel called to preach hope, healing, and abundance, there are moments within the Job saga where hope, healing, and abundance seem absent. Some see this story as a myth and Job as simply a representation of the righteous whose suffering seems to be overwhelming and inexplicable. I approach this story as if Job were a real, not fictional, character and believe that his story, though personal to him, has universal messages. Job embodies for us the painful reality of being one who loves and follows God yet is assigned the call to endure the unimaginable. Though God has been incredibly generous to Job for much of his life, there comes a moment when his life is invaded by the stark implication of sin in his day--suffering. His friends even tell him that some sin he has committed is the reason he is suffering. Eliphaz the Temanite expresses his view that the innocent don't suffer, the wicked do. As support for his position, he refers to a vision that he had. Eliphaz then directs Job to seek God's forgiveness, reminding him of the blessings that will come if Job repents (4:1-5:22). But his friend was wrong. This episode in Job's life had little to do with sin.

Here is a man who is portrayed in the early verses of the book named after him as a man with no righteous rival. He is thrust into an unusual season of oppressive discomfort and personal loss. It is obvious in this text that God and Satan are in a battle for his soul, but the underlining message is that, though he hurts deeply and aches for comfort, ultimately, his love for his God enables him to declare that God is deserving of worship and gratitude.

This is so liberating because for the vast majority of African Americans who preach and who hear preaching, suffering is not a stranger but far too often a frequent visitor. Suffering is not something that we can avoid; it demands both time and attention. The challenge is to not allow it to consume our allegiance.

Job's words then in 1:20-22 provide a marvelous backdrop for the merging of Thanksgiving and suffering. Yes, suffering at Thanksgiving. Many of us make the mistake of creating an illusionary moment where those in pain in the pew experience a ceasefire and, momentarily, they do not hurt. While that seems and sounds good, it is neither their nor our reality. Even suffering is a part of the holidays, and for many it is magnified during the holidays.

Job gives us the blueprint for handling the deepest pain while maintaining a profound love and loyalty to God. In preaching during this season, the Job story fits awkwardly well. He helps us through his own loss to remember the following:

1. God is sovereign. God gives and God takes away. Job uses powerful words when he says "God gives." When the giver is God, these words suggest assigning of something to one who has less or is in need. This giving and taking as God wills are sovereign acts that can only be done by the one who creates and controls the universe. This also means that we live under the authority of a giving God who chooses us despite us.

2. God offers us stewardship. Both our prosperity and our pain can be assignments entrusted to us by God. The idea conveyed is that even our pain is lived out as stewardship. We do not live in isolation or fragmentation, so both our prosperity and suffering are linked to the God who trusts us with it all. Each Christian must grow to understand that his or her loss is as much his or her assignment as is their prosperity. Job reminds us that we are called then to behave as thankful stewards, even when we disdain the present state or stage of our lives.

3. God deserves our thankfulness. In the end, God deserves our adoration and thankfulness because all things exist because of God. This is where preaching becomes healing and helpful, because we are empowered to place side-by-side suffering and worship. Created in this moment of preaching is a discourse between that which seems diametrically opposed—thankfulness and suffering. Job declares that we are called to be grateful and suffering is not an excuse for a lesser response. While he makes this declaration early in his saga of suffering and we see him move from this state to anger and frustration, the awesome thing is that he returns to this place by chapter 42. We see him again expressing his gratitude to God, but this time by acknowledging in verse 5 that he has gained some spiritual immaturity and that God has still been gracious.

Challenge

Each of us is challenged to courageously look at this text. Then, we can begin to bridge Job's pain to his worship and our pain to our worship. This will help us gain the spiritual maturity to understand that our losses are as much our assignment as is our prosperity. The Apostle Paul declares in Philippians 4:10-13 that even the contradictions are manageable because of our relationship with the God who has now expressed his sovereignty through the life of Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving then allows me to live out my faith while I am yet hurting, because I know that through it all God is still sovereign and God cares enough for me to entrust me with all aspects of the journey that God has planned for me. For this and so much more I am thankful, mighty thankful.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: Job tearing his robe off his body; Job shaving his head; Job falling on the ground and worshipping; a child coming from its mother's womb; and

Sounds: The sound of Job falling on the ground; and the sound of Job worshipping.

III. Suggested Reading for Thanksgiving

Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. 12 Sermons on Thanksgiving. This book was republished in 1982 by Baker books, Grand Rapids, Michigan. However, each of the 12 sermons can

also be read online for free at several websites including the Spurgeon Archive. It contains these sermons in alphabetical order, on displaying a thankful attitude: Special Thanksgiving to the Father; Jesus the Example of Holy Praise; Laus Deo; The Saints Blessing the Lord, Wonders; Our Lord Before Herod; Inexcusable Irreverence and Ingratitude; Marvelous Things; Christ's Joy and Army; A Wonderful Transformation; and A Harp of Ten Strings. Online location: <http://www.spurgeon.org/index/aindex.htm> accessed 30 June 2009