



USHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 7, 2009

Juan Floyd-Thomas, Lectionary Team Cultural Resource Commentator

Lection – 2 Chronicles 24:4-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 4) Some time afterwards Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord. (v. 5) He assembled the priests and the Levites and said to them, “Go out to the cities of Judah and gather money from all Israel to repair the house of your God, year by year; and see that you act quickly.” But the Levites did not act quickly. (v. 6) So the king summoned Jehoiada the chief, and said to him, “Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the Lord, on the congregation of Israel for the tent of the covenant?” (v. 7) For the children of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken into the house of God, and had even used all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord for the Baals. (v. 8) So the king gave command, and they made a chest, and set it outside the gate of the house of the Lord. (v. 9) A proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem to bring in for the Lord the tax that Moses the servant of God laid on Israel in the wilderness. (v. 10) All the leaders and all the people rejoiced, and brought their tax and dropped it into the chest until it was full. (v. 11) Whenever the chest was brought to the king’s officers by the Levites, when they saw that there was a large amount of money in it, the king’s secretary and the officer of the chief priest would come and empty the chest and take it and return it to its place. So they did day after day, and collected money in abundance. (v. 12) The king and Jehoiada gave it to those who had charge of the work of the house of the Lord, and they hired masons and carpenters to restore the house of the Lord, and also workers in iron and bronze to repair the house of the Lord. (v. 13) So those who were engaged in the work laboured, and the repairs went forward at their hands, and they restored the house of God to its proper condition and strengthened it. (v. 14) When they had finished, they brought the rest of the money to the king and Jehoiada, and with it were made utensils for the house of the Lord, utensils for the service and for the burnt-offerings, and ladles, and vessels of gold and silver. They offered burnt-offerings in the house of the Lord regularly all the days of Jehoiada.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The work of ushers is best envisioned as a means of safeguarding the house of God, as well as the people of God, in order that worship can be enjoyed to the fullest extent. Therefore, celebrating Usher's Day acknowledges the work of those who enable the Holy Spirit to have its way in the sanctuary in an imminent and uninterrupted fashion. This day serves as a way of giving thanks for the many acts of stewardship and service provided by those who labor under the divine mandate to welcome strangers and newcomers as though they were members of your church family.¹ Ushers function as Christ's church-greeters to those seeking renewal and refuge from the harsh realities of the world.

Those women, men, and girls and boys who take part in this crucial ministry of the church draw attention to the ways in which stewards of the church are born to extend God's grace toward the world. Thus, by acknowledging the patience, goodwill, determination, stamina, willingness, graciousness, and humility required of ushers, this special day gives much deserved recognition to the bearers of those gifts in accordance with how God would desire all of us to manifest and utilize our gifts.²

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Chronicles 24:4-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

When I joined the usher board of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, roughly ten years ago as a graduate student, I did not know what I was getting myself into. Having been born and raised in an Afro-Caribbean Roman Catholic household, I had no idea of the significance of the usher's role within the life of the church. I gained some very important insights from being an usher. First, I was grateful for the chance to serve in God's house. Next, as an only male child raised by a single mother, I greatly appreciated—even as a young man in my twenties—working in fellowship with a group of godly African American men ranging in age from 8 to 80 years of age. Finally, unlike so many other ministries in the church, I always enjoyed that the ushers represented a prime example of being able to “work equal” within the church. Regardless of whether someone is male or female, young or old, strong or weak, living large or struggling to get by, the work of the usher was essentially the same and each willing worker was expected to do their job to the fullest.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Today's text concerning Joash focuses on the issues of obedience and blessing. In its account of Joash's forty-year reign as King of Judah, the author of Chronicles presents him as a ruler who is faithful to God. His faithfulness is evident in his loyalty to maintenance of the temple as well as preservation of worship and ceremony.

Joash decides that the holy temple is in desperate need of repairs (v. 4) after it has been defiled and left in ruins during the reign of Athaliah for the benefit of the Baal

worshippers (v. 7). Prompted by his desire to restore the temple to its former glory, the king gathers the priests and Levites (Levites served as ushers for part of their history) for the purpose of setting forth a plan for reconstruction. Prior to this action on Joash's part, the responsibility of maintaining the temple was historically that of the king alone; this effort by Joash was a positive innovation, because it was the first time that people were collectively seen as having the obligation of keeping the temple in good condition. The first step in Joash's plan was instructing the priests to collect the money required for the project of rebuilding the temple. This is notable because, unlike the parallel account told in 2 Kings 12: 4-16, according to the author of 2 Chronicles, the collection of funds necessary for the temple's repair work were gathered not just from the priests and the pious believers worshipping in the temple but rather from "all Israel" (v. 5). In other words, the ushers played a tremendous role in the rebuilding of the temple. Their collection work was so vast in scope, a chest had to be constructed to hold all of the money. Demonstrating a biblical example of a capital campaign, the author of 2 Chronicles shows a direct link between this offering and the tax instituted by Moses during the Israelites' trek through the desert (Exodus 25:1-9; 38:25-31).

Next, as referred to above, the king proceeds to call for the construction of a chest to store the monies collected. The chest was the repository of the revenue that would be utilized for the temple's renovation, including the making of utensils that would be part of the ensuing construction process. Finally, when the task was finished, worship was resumed on a regular basis during the lifetime of Jehoiada, the high priest of Israel. Ultimately, this was symbolic not only of Joash's success in restoring the temple, it also

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demonstrated his faithfulness to God. In many regards, the example provided by this text illustrates how faithful obedience, with everyone doing their part, brought forth divine blessing.

In many ways, the narrative concerning Joash's employment of the righteous workers in the temple mirrors the activities of ushers in the modern-day church, but their work has been expanded. Ushers are now entrusted with numerous duties, such as collection of tithes and offerings, oversight of members as they move throughout the church building, and general stewardship of the decorum and the sanctity within the church. The term "sanctity" shares a common Latin root, *sanctus*, with the words sanctification and sanctuary. Seen in this light, the efforts by ushers to maintain a sacred atmosphere in houses of worshippers, the consecrated nature of houses of worship, and holy integrity of worship services is all connected. When considered in this manner, more than focusing on hospitality, orderliness, and service, the role of the ushers is seen as tied to the notion of safeguarding the sense that the Holy Spirit has full and free reign within the church along with the understanding that all things are to be done "decently and orderly."³ This experience of allowing the Holy Spirit full and free reign has been referred to as "the numinous" (rhymes with "luminous"), a theological term used to describe that which is wholly—and holy—other to the human experience.⁴ As ushers proceed to handle their

official tasks, they are striving on our behalf to make the overall worship experience all that it possibly could be, even luminous.

What is equally important about this text, is that it indicates how, when we seek to restore what is most holy and precious about our worship, the necessary resources for upholding God’s glory in the church—whether it concerns money, laborers, or simply a new attitude—are already in our midst and merely await being activated by the right leadership.

Challenge

Ushers play a vital role in the church which is usually taken for granted until problems arise. The challenge remains how to embrace their ministry as a model of responsible stewardship and diligence for everyone in the church not just on Usher's Day but throughout the calendar year. Even if we are not actively soliciting people to become members of the usher board, we should encourage all members to recognize that all work, especially labor done in reverence of God and on behalf of God’s people, has honor, dignity, and meaning, especially the work of ushers.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The king giving orders to the Levites (v. 8); people dropping coins into a large heavy chest (v.10); the cacophonous noise of a construction zone (v. 12-13); the clanging and clattering of many utensils used during worship (v.14); and

Sights: The king holding court with the Levites; crowds of people bringing their offerings to the temple; coins being tossed into a huge box; various building materials being hauled to the temple while workers hurriedly put them in place; and priests moving to and fro.

Notes

1. Leviticus 19:33-34; Deut. 10:18-19.
2. See Parrott, Leslie. Serving As a Church Usher. Paul E. Engle, ed. Zondervan practical ministry guides. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002.
3. 1 Corinthians 14:40.
4. “Numinous” is a term coined by German theologian Rudolf Otto in his text, The Idea of the Holy; An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational. New York: Oxford University Press, 1923. Otto uses the word to both describe how human beings confront the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, (a Latin phrase meaning “fearful and fascinating mystery”) and know that they are in the presence of something that is so awesomely sacred albeit unknown. Otto argues that this is at the core of all religious experience.

