



WOMEN’S DAY (March is Women’s History Month)

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Lection – Proverbs 14:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her own hands.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

For more than a century, African Americans have celebrated Women’s Day. Nannie Helen Burroughs, a consecrated God’s Woman (a woman who loves and serves Jesus Christ),¹ envisioned this central day in the institutional life of the Black Church. Ms. Burroughs used her oratorical skills and her gift of exhortation to inspire the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. (NBC) to create a “women’s convention distinct from the NBC”² for the purpose of uplifting, educating, and advocating for women and girls. “Women’s Day was intended to raise the women

themselves: training them for public speaking and informed leadership, through authentic, prepared, challenge speeches; teaching music; and techniques on how to get, willingly, larger contributions for Foreign Missions.”³

Today, what Ms. Burroughs intended would be called spiritual, social, and economic empowerment. Her insight was multi-generational, holistic, and communal. As a result of her leadership she was appointed chairman of the Committee on Negro Housing,⁴ demonstrating her ability to “address the issues of the day.”⁵ Ms. Burroughs’s efforts helped women and girls construct new realities for their families, churches, communities, and the world. Since its inception, Women’s Day has passed the mantle of faith, activism, and community responsibility to succeeding generations as evident by our ability to respond with solutions to the problems of their time.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Proverbs 14:1

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a young African American woman with dual denominational affiliations (Progressive National Baptist Convention & American Baptist Churches, USA, Inc.), I am the beneficiary of the labor of love of my foremothers both past and present. My own call into professional ministry was a byproduct of experiencing Women’s Day in my childhood. The exposure of women demonstrating the whole of their spiritual gifts (i.e. preaching and leadership) modeled for me a religious alternative. Equally salient was the labor of women that continued beyond the benediction. The Uplifters were one such women’s group that taught young girls life skills (i.e. self-esteem, business, home economics, etc.) throughout the year.

In addition to the paradigm shift for women in ministry, Women’s Day also showcased the leadership and business acumen of women. Strategic planning, financing, marketing, and fundraising are transferable skills needed when 14.8 million people are unemployed, 16 percent of which are African Americans.⁶ What tools will we use to build and/or rebuild our home ownership level after more than 16 percent of Blacks have experienced home foreclosure?⁷

It becomes imperative that women use their God-given gifts, skills, and abilities to reshape our world in light of the emerging ministry opportunities within our communities.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

As we celebrate the work and ministry of women, this Scripture invites exploration of at least three key concepts: wise, woman, and builds. 1. What does it mean to be wise? 2. What is the significance of womanhood? 3. What is the woman’s responsibility in building?

From a literary perspective, this proverb is an antithetical wisdom saying. It expresses two contrary thoughts, attitudes, activities, and/or ideas. Yet, within this pithy saying lies the prescription for life. Its aim is instructional in order to shape conduct. Wisdom Literature contrasts are decisive. The stark polarization (wise vs. foolish, righteous vs. wicked, good vs. evil) serve to reveal a pathway to life . . . to relationships . . . and to one’s belief in Yahweh.

To be wise in its broadest biblical and historical sense is to recognize one's relationship to and reverence of the Deity as depicted in the "fear of the Lord" language (Proverbs 1:7; 14:26, 27). Hence, a wise woman is a person who has "a fundamental orientation to God's will."⁸

Wisdom is also personified as "Woman Wisdom" throughout Proverbs (chapters 1–9; 31:10-22). This is particularly significant, as the essence of womanhood is fluidity; women must possess the ability to be and do so many things amidst varying circumstances and challenges. Thus to ascribe wisdom a female gender is quite reasonable.

The woman God made is multidimensional whether viewed relationally as wife/helpmeet, mother/counselor, homemaker/caregiver, sister/friend, daughter, confidante, grandmother/matriarch; observed professionally as CEO/founder, entrepreneur/executive, breadwinner/head of household; or experienced religiously as pastor/preacher, chaplain, prophet/evangelist, deacon/deaconess; and the list goes on.

Consequently, to say that the home is the central focus and metaphor of the sphere of a woman's domain both biblically and culturally is somewhat limiting. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew reference to the word house is interpreted with varying meanings. It can be interpreted as a "physical structure, its inhabitants, one's property, and descendants."⁹ Furthermore, the physical structure could refer to "a temple, a palace, or peasant dwelling."¹⁰ The familial concept of home referred to the "good wife."¹¹ The good wife as depicted from a historical perspective is judged on her ability to maintain the home. One biblical scholar, Claudia Camp, states that the "woman is the source of the home's identity."¹² Perhaps. But if a woman's identity is limited to her home in its most narrow sense, then it negates the complexity and width of her scope, influence, power, and work. When nearly 30 percent of African American households are headed by females,¹³ what becomes of a woman's ability to build if her capacity for impact is restricted to or mainly determined by this one domain?

To build means to establish, construct, rebuild. Therefore, to build implies that something is produced. The wise woman creates something tangible. Every building project draws upon the creative nature of God as participant in the process.¹⁴

The wise woman creates space for herself and others to flourish. We serve a creative God who provides guidance, direction, and inspiration. God has provided us with the right materials (i.e. intellect, skills, wisdom) to establish new possibilities in this world. It is up to us to build/rebuild better homes, families, educational systems, and communities for the next generation. Further, Hebrew 11:1 suggests that wise women build new realities for their families and communities. The wise woman brings forth and creates new possibilities. She brings forth life in so many ways.

Finally, this text points out the labor and effort of the woman who builds juxtaposed to the woman who destroys. Although we discussed the decisive contrast between the two characteristics of Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly, in many instances we embody both beings—we are both wise and foolish, saint and sinner. Theologically, we must rely on the creative, regenerative, restorative possibilities of God to offset our foolish ways. God harnesses our power to build/establish and rebuild/re-establish our lives.

It's time for wise women to lend their wisdom to the masses so that more can be done to build our homes, our families, our schools, and communities. When we build places and spaces where

women and girls are educated and our communities thrive economically, then we truly begin to embody the vision cast by Ms. Burroughs more than a century ago.

Proverb 14:1 places emphasis on “*her own hands*”; it provides a hermeneutical mandate to work.¹⁵ Each of us is given an assignment to complete. The phrase conveys a correlation between the type of work performed and the beneficiaries of that work. Narrowly speaking, those within the household of the wise woman benefit, but in a broader sense her entire community prospers because of the work her hands accomplish. Thus, in this season of myriad crises, it is imperative that African American women lend their heads and hands to the creative process that will provide solutions to our communal problems.

What businesses can be started to combat joblessness? What can wise women do to halt childhood obesity? How can broadband technology be used to bring economic equality to communities? In a time when technology such as Twitter is used as a primary mode of communicating news, values, and conduct at a rate of 6,939 tweets per second,¹⁶ will our collective efforts show that the wise woman *still* has a following?

Celebration

We celebrate the wisdom of God exhibited through the lives of women. We sing hallelujah for the results of the labor and toil of women who put their hands to the plow to build a better world for others in the present and future. We thank God for the wise women who stand today to provide alternative ways to build new realities for our communities. They dream a world. And because of the creative and transformational power of the Holy Spirit, these women will help renew and restore our community. Amen.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Construction sounds, digging, hammering etc.; spoken words that build lives (i.e. words of affirmation, praise, cheers, instruction, correction); the sounds that emanate from homes that are being maintained (i.e. sounds of cleaning, cooking, ironing, etc.).

Sights: Women building; the parts of a house (i.e. the foundation, the roof, the windows, and garden); rubble, ruin, and destruction that folly leaves behind; the composition of a modern family (i.e. grandparent as guardian, single-parent households, married couples with children);

Smells: The aroma of food cooking (i.e. the smell of macaroni and cheese, peach cobbler); sweat and dirt from labor; the smell of cleaning supplies; the freshness of a clean home (i.e. smells such as bleach and other cleansers);

Tastes: The taste of various delicacies created in the kitchen; the taste of success after wise work; and

Textures: The roughness of the ridges of calloused hands after a woman has completed hard work; soft, smooth hands; and the texture of fabrics in a home.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- **Sermons by and for Women**
 For more information on righteous conduct, read Mother Lizzie Wood Robinson’s code of ethics, “Personal Purity: Advice to Young People and Mothers, Secrets Kept from Children, Facts for Boys and Girls 12 to 20 Years.” Preaching with Sacred Fire: African American Sermons 1750 to the Present. Ed. Martha Simmons & Frank Thomas. W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. Page 461. Preaching with Sacred Fire includes additional inspirational sermons by wise women.
- **Incorporate Young Girls**
 Look at ways to incorporate young girls in Women’s Day programs. For example, if a retreat includes the actual day, make sure to include programming specific to young women (especially teenagers). Perhaps you can have girls participate in service to do readings or to recite speeches by well-known women, or they could be part of liturgical dance groups or special choirs.
- **Rites of Passage**
 Consider using aspects of Rites of Passage programs in your worship service. These programs are intergenerational and highlight the wisdom of the elders while focusing on the nurturing of adolescents. These programs also emphasize the collective responsibility of the community. For more information on Rites of passage programs see Minnesota African Women’s Association. Online location:
<http://www.mawanet.org/html/amakolo.html>.
- **Outreach Programs**
 If your church does not have an outreach component specifically targeted to uplift women, consider adopting, partnering, and/or collaborating with some local women’s organization(s) that seek to assist women in transition (i.e. prison outreach programs, domestic violence shelters, etc.).
- **God Makeovers**
 Have a “God Makeover Day” to focus on women and girls seeing themselves as divine creations, loved by God and worthy of respect and honor.
- **Technology as a Tool**
 Use technology such as Twitter, Facebook, text messages, and webinars to communicate with young adult women. Using technology, offer them support, fellowship, encouragement, and counsel as they seek to build our communities. For more information on mentoring, read Sharon Park’s, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search of Meaning, Purpose and Faith. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2000.
- **Pamper Women for a Day**

The idea is to provide rest and Sabbath for the weary. The event should be designed to encourage, affirm, support, and help career women who are also parents balance their various responsibilities while staying healthy.

- **Mentoring Programs for Girls**

If your church does not currently have a mentoring program designed for girls, develop this type of ministry. One way to start is to contact your local school system and meet with leadership and find out ways in which your church can be a bridge to building young girls' lives in your city (i.e. through tutoring, raising money for a school, having grandparents offer assistance, bringing science and music programs to poor schools, etc.).

Notes

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4. Johnson, Charles. Negro Housing. Eds. James Ford & John Gries. New York, NY: Negro Universities Press, 1969. p. 53.
5. Burroughs, Nannie. "Not Color but Character." Can I Get a Witness: Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women, An Anthology. Ed. Marcia Riggs. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997. pp. 86–87.
6. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity 2010." <http://www.bls.gov>.
7. RealtyTrac Staff. "Record 2.9 Million U.S. Properties Receive Foreclosure Filings in 2010 Despite 30-Month Low in December." <http://www.realtytrac.com>.
8. Freedman, David. Dictionary of the Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000. p. 1382. For additional references to "Fear of the Lord," see Farmer, Kathleen. Proverbs & Ecclesiastes: Who Knows What Is Good? Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991.
9. Yonder, Christine Roy. Proverbs. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009. p. 158.
10. Van Leeuwen, Raymond. The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume V. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997. p. 138.
11. Aitken, Kenneth. Proverbs. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986. p. 153.

12. Camp, Claudia. Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs. Decatur, GA: JSOT Press, 1985. p. 93.
13. U.S. Census Bureau. "Household Type, African American." 30 September 2011. <http://census.gov>.
14. Vines, W.E. Dictionary of Bible Words. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999. p. 42.
15. Yonder, Christine Roy. Proverbs. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009. p. 158. Scholars have "amended the proverb to reflect a singular focus of the wise woman rather than the plural form of wise women."
16. Bullas, Jeff. "Twitter Reveals Its Latest Growth Numbers." 15 March 2011. <http://www.jeffbullas.com>.