



# Women's Day

## CULTURAL RESOURCES

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### **I. History**

Women's Day was originally proposed in 1906 by Nannie Helen Burroughs, then Corresponding Secretary of the Women's Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention USA, in her annual report to the Convention which convened in Memphis, Tennessee. The Convention voted to accept her proposal and designated the fourth Sunday in July as National Women's Day, with the intent of galvanizing women to raise money for foreign missions, the Women's Convention's primary emphasis. Ms. Burroughs also proposed that the day afford women an opportunity to deliver prepared addresses or speeches "written from research and study of the firsthand current information about the Missionary enterprise."<sup>1</sup> Women's Day, therefore, served the dual purpose of preparing women as public speakers and disseminating information about foreign missions. The first Women's Day was observed in July 1907, yielding an encouraging return and creating the foundation upon which Women's Day might become an annual observance. In her 1908 report, Ms. Burroughs challenged the Convention to make the fourth Sunday in July an annual observance of National Women's Day; a challenge that the Convention accepted and supported.

In their article, "Something Within," Jualyne E. Dodson and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes remind us that in addition to "raising money for foreign missions, 'Women's Day' was intended to raise the women themselves—training them for public speaking and informed leadership through authentic, prepared, challenging speeches—music and techniques on how to get, willingly, larger contributions for foreign missions."<sup>2</sup> The observance of Women's Day is as important today as it was in 1906 as women continue to claim their voices in a cultural and religious milieu that is still learning to value women as proclaimers of the Gospel and co-workers in the ongoing ministry of the church.

Since its initiation in 1906, Women's Day has become one of the most important and lucrative days in the life of the church. Though most prevalent in African American churches, Women's Day has gained popularity in other ethnic and cultural religious communities. Women's Day remains a major fundraising day in many congregations, though its primary focus upon foreign missions has diminished or expanded to include other concerns. As suggested in the 2009 Lectionary Cultural Resource, Women's Day offerings have "insured the financial stability of many churches, supported missions to Africa and other countries, as well as provided financial support for pastors and delegates to denominational meetings and conventions." Women's Day offerings have similarly supported denominational colleges through scholarships and direct contributions.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Women's Day is that it continues to afford women an opportunity to plan worship and proclaim the Gospel as speakers and preachers, as well as address the unique joys, struggles and concerns evident in the lives of women in our worship communities and in the large society in which we live. Of particular note is the attention given to the experiences of biblical women in many Women's Day sermons, inviting women and their worship communities to value women's contributions to religious life and acknowledge the injustices in church and community against which women continue to struggle. Women have accomplished much in religious life since 1906, yet there is much work to be done.

In light of our ongoing efforts to affirm women and girls in church and society, we celebrate Women's Day and women like Nannie Helen Burroughs who took the risk of speaking at a time when women were just beginning to carve out a space for themselves in many churches throughout our nation. We also note with a keen awareness that we are not yet healed. Many women continue to claim their voices and proclaim the Gospel as preachers and speakers in the face of barrier that deny their right to do so. Therefore, we celebrate this Women's Day while also lamenting the struggle that still exists for our sisters and for persons and communities throughout the world for whom the right to speak and live without suffering has been denied.

## **II. Word Etymology**

"Lament" is a powerful form of address to the Divine that seems somewhat anachronistic (archaic) to our twenty-first century religious sensibilities. In a time when too many have adopted practices and theologies that emphasize personal gain, avoidance of pain, and a God who is primarily concerned with material prosperity, we rarely consider our own participation in perpetuating the cultural ills and injustices that keep persons and communities with their backs against the wall. The emphasis upon lament as a religious practice, however, invites us to not only consider the reality of suffering, but to identify the systems and practices in church and community that prevent us from living in a just and life-affirming relationship with God and with each other. Lament, in other words, does more than articulate pain or give voice to our individual and collective struggles. It looks beneath the surface, unearthing that which perpetuates cultural and religious ills so that we, in cooperation with God, might become agents of wholeness and wellbeing. So, it is significant that today's scripture, chosen for Women's Day, is filled with lament.

In Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care, Emilie Townes proposes *communal lament* as an adequate response to our collective illness. She explains that “the power of lament, particularly communal lament, is that the community must recognize its condition and act in faith-filled ways.”<sup>3</sup> Lament, as a faith-filled practice, “enables us and even requires us to acknowledge and to experience the fullness of our suffering.”<sup>4</sup> As such, lament will not permit us to ignore or minimize the seriousness of societal ills, but rather reveals our deep need for repentance and calls us to faithful action in the presence of the One whose “compassions...fail not.”

In Jeremiah, God calls upon the mourning women to “raise a dirge” over the nation to expose their transgressions with such poignancy that tears of sorrow and repentance begin to flow from the very depths of their being. The imperative to lament was urgent! It was so vital to their existence that God admonishes the women who are skilled in mourning to teach it to their daughters and neighbors, for this dirge must be heard throughout the land. The mourning women appear to know something that others do not know and are able to see their world with a degree of clarity that is both surprising and comforting. They see the transgressions of their people and know the words that they must speak in order to awaken them to the errors of their ways. And though our worlds are far apart, I cannot help but wonder what might become possible if women today were to embrace lament as a spiritual practice in the face of our cultural and religious maladies.

Our world cries out for wholeness, says an unknown poetic prophet, “praying and sighing and groaning for wholeness... wholeness of persons: well-being of individuals.”<sup>5</sup> We are unwell, not primarily because of our individual struggles, pains or transgressions, but because our collective existence falls short of the just and humane world that God desires. Domestic violence, poverty, and the continued silencing of women’s voices in our church and society are among the persistent challenges that women face at home and abroad. Yet some, so consumed with the busyness of life or with the benefits that they accrue from the system as it currently exist, can scarcely hear the cry.

Lament responds to the cry for wholeness that resounds throughout the land, and admits that we have not lived in loving and obedient relationship with God—that we do not *know* God as we should (Jeremiah 9:3). For, if we really knew God, we would not hesitate to synchronize our hearts to the heartbeat of God and take up God’s commitment to a just and life-affirming existence for all persons.

### **III. Biographical Story**

Women and others who have experienced the sting of oppression have engaged in the practice of communal lament (Townes) for centuries, revealing and naming the problems that prevent us from living as God’s marvelous creation, seeking justice, and hoping for God’s deliverance. Women’s efforts in establishing the National Women’s Convention, Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. (NBC), is one example of the power of voice and action to transcend barriers of exclusion.

The National Women's Convention was established, simultaneously with the National Baptist Convention, in 1895 with an overarching goal of eradicating inequalities and exclusions within the black community, the church and American society. Accordingly, the Women's Convention advocated greater inclusion of women in the operation and governance of the church, and sought an end to gender discrimination, racial discrimination and violence. The efforts of the Women's Convention were applauded by Baptist women and touted in the National Baptist Magazine as "new era for women."<sup>6</sup> The Women's Convention's notoriety and membership grew rapidly, making it a potentially powerful body in Baptist life. Because of its popularity at a time when the place of women in American society and in the black church was still tenuous, the Women's Convention was disbanded in 1896 by vote of the NBC.

In 1896, American women and blacks were confronting the discriminatory practices that denied them full enfranchisement. Therefore, while seeking their distinctive voice among Baptists, black Baptist women found themselves in a dual struggle against racism from without and gender discrimination from without and within. Within this historical context, the women of the National Baptist Convention embarked upon a four year campaign to reinstate the National Women's Convention. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, the women lobbied men who were both sensitive to their cause and influential in the NBC from 1896 to 1900 and won support for their position.<sup>7</sup> The National Women's Convention was reestablished in 1900 and continued their dual task of eradicating inequalities and exclusions, and advocating greater involvement of women in the governance and operation of the church.

Sarah Willie Layten and Nannie Helen Burroughs were among the first leaders of the National Women's Convention. They offered a space in which the voices of women could be heard, and were central in the fight against racial inequality and discrimination. Since that time, a women's convention has been instituted in each state as an auxiliary to the state conventions. The national and state women's conventions continue to be vital and powerful auxiliaries to the NBC and its state affiliates.

#### **IV. Poetic Lament**

Two additional resources might prove helpful as pastors and worship communities consider the emphasis upon lament in this year's observance of Women's Day: Sojourner Truth, devoted to the antislavery movement and a relentless advocate for women's rights, challenged white males and female suffragettes regarding the continued exclusion of black women as coequals and partners in the Suffrage Movement. She expresses this challenge in her speech, "Ain't I a Woman," at a Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. She begins the speech with these words:

*Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about? That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?*<sup>8</sup>

Hear Alice Walker read “Ain’t I A Woman?” in its entirety at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsjdLL3MrKk>.

Though the Fifteenth Amendment was passed on May 19, 1870, several states rebelled by establishing literacy laws, segregated primaries and grandfather clauses that prevented black men from freely exercising their right to vote. White women won the right to vote fifty years later, with the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920. Black women and men were not fully enfranchised until 1965 when the Voting Rights Act was passed, giving all black Americans the right to vote.

Some of the most poignant articulations of lament can be found in Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu’s African Prayer Book. One such lament, “Reflection on Wholeness,” draws us away from the busyness of life and challenges us to hear the cry for wholeness resounding throughout the planet. Busyness, the unknown poet advises, distracts us from the cry for wholeness, deceptively assuring us that we are well even though physical, spiritual and psychic pain remains widespread:

*We, busy, “normal” people: we are sick. We yearn to experience wholeness in our innermost being: In health and prosperity, we continue to feel un-well, un-filled, or half-filled. There is a hollowness in our pretend wellbeing: Our spirits cry out for the well-being of the whole human family.<sup>9</sup>*

This poetic prayer calls us together as human family and urges us to remember that we are not truly well until all persons are whole. Even more, the poet reminds of the Christian imperative to participate in the process of creating well being, for “Even if there are ninety-nine: Without the one we do not have a whole.”

## **V. Songs that Speak to the Moment**

### **Great Is Thy Faithfulness**

(Verse 1)

“Great is Thy Faithfulness,” O God my Father,  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;  
Though changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou has been Thou for ever will be

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,  
Join with all nature in manifold witness,  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,  
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

(Chorus)

“Great is Thy faithfulness!

Great is Thy faithfulness!”

Morning by mourning new mercies I see;

All I have needed Thy hand hath provided,

“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord unto me!<sup>10</sup>

### **I Want to Live So God Can Use Me**

I want to live so

God can use me anytime anywhere,

I want to live so

God can use me anytime anywhere.

(I want to walk so...)

(I want to pray so...)

(Help me live so...)<sup>11</sup>

Hear Sister Rosetta Tharpe sing “I’m Want to Live So God Can Use Me” at

<http://www.rhapsody.com/sister-rosetta-tharpe/sister-rosetta-tharpe-vol-2-1942-1944>.

### **Notes**

1. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 122. See also, Wiggins, Daphne. Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith (Religion, Race and Ethnicity). New York, NY: NYU Press, 2003.

2. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. p. 124.

3. Townes, Emilie. Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care. New York, NY: Continuum, 1998. p. 25.

4. Ibid., p. 25.

5. Tutu, Desmond, ed. An African Prayer Book. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995. pp. 110-113.

6. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920. p. 165.

7. Ibid., p. 156.

8. Truth, Sojourner. “AIN’T I A WOMAN?” Read Sojourner Truth’s speech in its entirety at online location: <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artsspeech/genwom/sojour.htm> accessed 1 May 2010; See also Washington, Margaret, ed. The Narrative of Sojourner Truth. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993. p. 9.

9. The excerpt from “Reflections on Wholeness” was quoted from Tutu, Desmond, ed. An African Prayer Book. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995. p. 111.

10. “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #158

11. Tharpe, Sister Rosetta. "I Want To Live So God Can Use Me." Rosetta Tharpe Complete Recorded Works, vol. 2, 1942-1944. Online location: <http://www.rhapsody.com/sister-rosetta-tharpe/sister-rosetta-tharpe-vol-2-1942-1944> accessed 1 May 2010