WOMEN'S DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, September 14, 2008

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"If I perish, I perish…"
Esther 4:16

I. Historical Notes on the Founder of Women's Day

She was born Nannie Helen Burroughs on May 2, 1879 in Orange, Virginia to John and Jennie (Poindexter) Burroughs. Her mother moved her two daughters to Washington, D.C. so they could get an education. Nannie Helen Burroughs was a member of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church. The church and literary society of her high school nurtured her oratorical talents, and she was also mentored by two of the city's leading African American women of the day, Mary Church Terrell and Anna J. Cooper. In spite of her associations and credentials, Burroughs, who was dark-skinned, found difficulties getting employment equal to her training within Washington, D.C.'s black community. She finally acquired employment in a clerical position in Philadelphia. Relocating there, she met, and also worked with, Reverend Lewis G. Jordan, pastor of Union Baptist Church and an officer of the National Baptist Convention (NBC)* Foreign Mission Board. When Reverend Jordan moved to Louisville, Kentucky, Burroughs also relocated and he remained a mentor to her, and her work, for the rest of his life.

Burroughs was in the founding group of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. Four years later, at the annual conference of the National Baptist Convention held in Richmond, Virginia, Nannie Helen Burroughs spoke on the theme "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping." She gave voice to the righteous discontent of women within the black Baptist church who had been working to form a national organization. This speech was key to the formation of the largest black women's organization in America—the Women's Convention Auxiliary to the NBC. Burroughs was elected corresponding secretary. In her first year, Burroughs worked 365 days, traveled 22,125 miles, delivered 215 speeches, organized 12 societies, wrote 9,235 letters and received 4,820. In 1903, she reported that the Women's Convention of the NBC had nearly one million members and, in 1907, reported the membership to be 1.5 million.[1]

Burroughs's idea for a National Woman's Day was for each participating church, on the same Sunday, to have a program devoted to the women of the congregation. This observance was to be an organizing tool to have local congregations come to terms with the role and support, or "raising up," of the women within their membership, as well as to raise funds for foreign mission work. Burroughs advocated sending a portion of funds raised to the Women's Convention Auxiliary for foreign mission support, especially in Africa. With a vigorous "how-to" campaign, Burroughs was pleased at the response to the call. However, ten years after the start of National Women's Day, she grew critical of the manner in which the observance had shifted. In her view, Women's Day had become focused on fundraising, with all of the funds staying with the local church rather than a portion coming to the National Women's organization for support of foreign mission work. Further, it neglected to help women "KNOW and GROW." Burroughs was sometimes ridiculed as she spoke out and organized in the struggle for women's rights, anti-lynching laws, desegregation and industrial education for black women and girls. She led the Women's Convention for more than 60 years and was considered an organizational genius—a religious leader, educator, political organizer, and civil rights activist.[2]

II. The Scriptural Reference for this Day on the Calendar

Women's Day is a day when the congregation focuses its attention on the role and contribution of women within the church. The service is led by women, and the center is the Women's Day speaker. The scripture for this lectionary moment calls our attention to the story of Esther, who answered a call to make a presentation before the king that would put her life at risk.

Lection Scripture – Esther 4:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)
(v. 10) Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, (v. 11) "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law--all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." (v. 12) When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, (v. 13) Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. (v. 14) For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (v. 15) Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, (v. 16) "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." (v. 17) Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Personal Introduction to Esther
I first learned of Queen Esther from a sermon by my father. When Reverend Jesse Johnson preached the story of Esther, he began with Mordecai, her guardian, who took her before the king just as she was touching the edges of her young womanhood. It was Mordecai's hope that the king would find favor in this beautiful woman-child. The king did find favor in Esther, and she was moved into his court of women. I can still remember the way my father made real the horrific conditions under which the Hebrews labored. The conditions intensified and led their leader, Mordecai, to reach out to Esther, and remind her of who she was, and call upon her to plead the case of her people before the king. Thinking about it today, it seems as though Mordecai was aware that, in the future, the Hebrews would have need of a force within the highest level of power in the land, and so he successfully planted a sleeper cell. To this day, I think of Queen Esther as one who responded to a call that would have her walk into a space that could mean the loss of her life. As she moved to respond, she asked her people to sacrifice and spiritually go with her. And as she went she said, "*If I perish, I perish.*"

III. Personal Remembrance: Women as Builders of the Church

As we consider a day set aside for honoring the women of the church, my mind is flooded with so many images. Right now, in many seminaries women outnumber men. Increasingly, we find congregations led by co-partners, husbands and wives, who are ministers. We also see congregations turning to women as their pastors after long histories of keeping women out of the pulpit: hallelujah!

For three summers during the early 1980s, I spent several weeks in southwest Georgia during revival season, recording services in local rural churches. My main support and guide was my mother, Beatrice Wise Johnson. She loved it because she had reached the age where she did not drive alone at night, so missed attending evening revival meetings. One evening, arriving early enough to set up my equipment, I witnessed a moment that opened a window in my thinking about women and the place of church in their lives. When we arrived, there were two women in the church. They were elders, and they talked about how they were doing. I remember one laughing and saying, "Well I done got to the place where I don't sit down in the chair," and the other joined her, "I fall down." They were in the church and they were laughing and talking as if they were on their front porch. I realized that by being there early, I had entered a different space in the ownership and care and building of the church. These were the women who came early to prepare something they had a part in creating for every service; they cleaned and mopped the floors, they washed, starched and ironed the white pulpit cloths. They washed the pitchers and glasses and made sure they were filled with water (no ice). This place was their house, and they worked in a steady rhythm to take care of it. I sat there thinking about the fact that, in my life, women had always outnumbered men in the church. And, although in many denominations women were kept out of the pulpit, it was the pulpit that they had cleaned and prepared for the ministers who for years were key to the force that kept them out of that place.

IV. Maria Stewart, 19th Century Leader

Maria Stewart was the first American-born woman to break the taboo against women participating with men in public political dialogues, a taboo shared by black and white communities alike. William Lloyd Garrison published all four of her speeches in the Liberator. Stewart also published,

during her brief public speaking tour, two pamphlets: Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation upon Which We Must Build (1831) and Meditations from the Pen of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart (1832). In her speeches, she spoke directly to black people, men and women and children; she spoke also to those who were white, in power, and who subjugated groups of people because of their race. She called for the highest moral standards within a black community that assumed responsibility for its development and advancement—no matter how challenging and dangerous the territory:

> Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect…. Never will virtue, knowledge and true politeness begin to flow, till the pure principles of religion and morality are put into force.[3]

Publishing an enlarged edition of Meditations in 1879, she wrote of her beginnings:

> I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1803; was left an orphan at five years of age; was bound out in a clergyman's family' had the seeds of piety and virtue early sown in my mind' but was deprived of the advantages of education, though my soul thirsted for knowledge. Left them at 15 years of age; attended Sabbath Schools until I was 20; in 1826, was married to James W. Stewart; was left a widow in 1829; was, as I humbly hope and trust, brought the knowledge of the truth, as it is in Jesus, in 1830, in 1831, made a public profession of my faith in Christ.
>
> From the moment I experienced the change, I felt a strong desire, with the help and assistance of God, to devote the remainder of my days to piety and virtue, and now possess that spirit of independence, that, were I called upon, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the cause of God and my brethren.
>
> What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise Deborah, to be a mother and a judge in Israel? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Come said the woman of Samaria, and see a man that hath told me all things that ever I did, is not this the Christ? In the 13th century, a young lady of Bologna, devoted herself to study of the Latin Language, and of the Laws. At the age of 23, she pronounced a funeral oration in Latin, in the great church of Bologna.[4] And to be admitted as an orator, she had neither need of indulgence on account of her youth or her sex. At the age of 26, she took the degree of Doctor of Laws, and began publicly to expound the Institutions of Justinian. At the age of 30, her great reputation raised her to a chair, where she taught the law to a prodigious concourse of scholars from all nations….
>
> What if such women as here described should rise among our sable race? And it is not impossible. For it is not the color of the skin that makes the man or the woman, but the principle formed in the soul...[5]

Stewart's conversion opened a determination for her to dedicate her voice and life to her race. She was profoundly affected by the strange and mysterious death in 1830 of David Walker, who wrote and published the militant anti-slavery pamphlet, David Walker's Appeal. Stewart, as did many others, considered Walker a martyr and felt that she would carry on that work in her public speaking.

> Many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs; for I am firmly persuaded, that the God in whom I trust is able to protect me from the rage and malice of mine enemies, and from them that will rise up against me and if there is no other way for me to escape, he is able to take me to himself, as he did the most noble, fearless, and undaunted David Walker.[6]

"If I perish, I perish…"

V. Harriet Tubman: Moses of Her People

As Maria Stewart labored through her voice in the struggle for freedom and dignity, Harriet Ross Tubman labored on the ground against the institution of slavery. She escaped from slavery and returned again and again to free those of us who were ready to run. During the Civil War, she served as a Union spy and nurse. Her success was such that there was a dead or alive warrant on her head.

"If I perish, I perish…"

My elementary school teacher told us that this was a Harriet Tubman song. She told me that she was a conductor on the Underground Railroad leading our people to freedom during slavery. She told me that Harriet Tubman carried a gun and said she would shoot anyone who, out of fear, wanted to change their mind–turn around and go back into slavery. She told me that Harriet Tubman never lost a passenger. "Wade in the Water" was one of the songs she used to push our people forward when we hesitated.

Wade in the water, wade in the water children
Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water…[7]

She was born Harriet Ross, a nineteenth century child, born into slavery in 1819 or 1820 in Dorchester County, Maryland. Harriet began work as a young child and was raised under harsh conditions, subjected to severe whippings that, at times, left her near death. At the age of 12, she was seriously injured by a blow to the head, inflicted by a white overseer when she got in the way and refused to assist in holding a man who was attempting to escape. For the rest of her life, she suffered from blackout spells. At the age of 25, she married John Tubman, a free African American. Five years later, fearing she would be sold south, she made her escape. As she recovered from a long illness, a deeper religious spirit seemed to take possession of her than she had ever experienced before. She literally "prayed without ceasing." "Pears like, I prayed all de time."[8] Harriet Tubman is our most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad. She delivered slaves to and through supporters such as the Quaker Thomas Garrett in Delaware, and William Brown in Philadelphia, until 1850, when the Fugitive Slave Law, which required law enforcement officers to assist in returning escaped slaves to their previous owners and worse, granted them the power to deputize citizens to assist in the capture of those who had stolen themselves from slavery was enacted.

> For I had reasoned this out in my mind, there were one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man could take me alive, I would fight as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me.[9]

Harriet used songs for signaling when returning to a band of slaves she had left hidden while she scouted areas to make sure they were safe and to find persons who helped her along the stops on the Underground Railroad. One song she used says:

Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go
When Israel was in Egypt land, let my people go
Oppressed so hard she could not stand, let my people go
You can hinder me here, but you cannot there
There's a God in heaven and He answers prayer.[10]

Harriet Tubman died in 1913 in the twentieth century.

"If I perish, I perish…"

VI. Ida B. Wells Barnett

Ida B. Wells Barnett was an African American journalist, anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, women's rights advocate, speaker, and a champion of social and political justice for African Americans. Ida B. Wells Barnett was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi on July 16, 1862, six months before the Emancipation Proclamation freed all of the slaves in the Confederate states. Her father, James, was actively interested in politics and in helping to provide educational opportunities for the liberated slaves and for his own eight children. Ida's father was a trustee of Rust College operated by the Freedmen, and she received her basic education from Rust. When her parents and some of her siblings died from yellow fever, Ida became the caretaker for her remaining brothers and sisters. Although she was not, she convinced school officials that she was 18 and gained a teaching job. She eventually gained jobs for her older brothers and sisters and then moved to Memphis with the younger children of the family. She gained another teaching job, and eventually continued her education at Fisk University.

In 1884, Ida Wells was dragged from a first-class car to the Jim-crow section of a train. She sued and at the lower court level won her case, but the decision was overturned. This was a turning point in her maturation as a freedom fighter and made her more determined than ever to fight racial injustice.

In 1887, Ida became a staff reporter and part owner of the Memphis Free Speech and Headlight, later renamed The Free Speech. She also continued to work as a teacher. She wrote articles critical of the sordid treatment received by blacks in schools and she was fired from her teaching job.

In 1892, three of Wells's friends, who were successful businessmen in Memphis, were killed and their businesses destroyed by whites. The Free Speech ran a scathing editorial about the murders in which Wells harshly rebuked the white community. An angry mob of whites broke into her newspaper office and destroyed it, and vowed to kill her if they found her. Wells, at the time of the destruction of her press, was out of town and was urged by friends not to return to Memphis. She became a journalist "in exile," writing under the pen name "Iola" for the New York Age and other African American newspapers. With fury and passion, she, more than any writer of her generation, attacked lynching and violence against Africans Americans. She went on speaking tours in the northeastern states and England to encourage people to speak out against lynching. In 1892, she

wrote and published the first well-documented pamphlets on lynching: Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Horrors, and A Red Record in (1895).

In 1895, Ida moved to Chicago and married Frederick Barnett. They co-owned a newspaper for a brief period. From Chicago, Ida became a suffragette and also attended the meeting to organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. She opened a settlement house in Chicago for young men and women and fought against school segregation in Chicago. After she died the Ida Wells Barnett Public Housing Project was named in her honor.[11]

"If I perish, I perish…"

VII. Fannie Lou Hamer

"I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." These words of Fannie Lou Hamer symbolized the fire and intensity she brought to her work as a leader and organizer in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement. She was born to Jim and Ella Townsend on October 6, 1917 in Montgomery County, Mississippi; her family moved to Sunflower County when she was age two. She began working in the cotton fields at the age of six with the other members of her family on the W.D. Marlow plantation. In spite of very severe conditions, Fannie Lou Hamer was taught to have pride in herself by her mother: "Sometimes when things were so bad and I'd start thinking maybe it would be better if we were White. My mother insisted that we should be proud to be black, telling us, 'Nobody will respect you unless you stand up for yourself'."[12]

Growing up believing in God and being taught not to hate, Mrs. Hamer discovered that there were many things "dead wrong" with the lives of blacks and whites in Mississippi. "I used to think… let me have a chance, and whatever this is…I'm gonna do somethin' about it."[12] When she became committed to register to vote, she had been working as timekeeper on a plantation for 20 years. Fannie Lou Hamer was jailed and beaten for her efforts to register to vote, and her family was evicted from the plantation. These reprisals only intensified her determination to be a part of changing Mississippi. After several attempts, she became a registered voter and the field secretary for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Fannie Lou Hamer was an activist and a cultural leader who assumed major responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the environment within which those who struggled for freedom lived and worked. During the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, she was constantly in great danger; she operated in the open, above ground, helping to build community-based local movements that confronted the political system of Mississippi that was organized to keep its black citizens subjugated. When Mrs. Hamer found her voice as a fighter, she became the transmitter of the culture of that struggle. Her work as an organizer was grounded in her own testimony. She called and urged others to join in battling racism, poverty, and injustice. A natural and fearless community leader, master orator, and song leader, she used her stories and songs to nurture the air we breathed as fighters. And she often spoke to us from the pulpits of the courageous congregations in Mississippi that opened their doors to the Movement. One of her songs was:

Walk with me, my Lord, walk with me
Walk with me, my Lord, walk with me
While I'm on this tedious journey
I want Jesus to walk with me.

Make a way for me, now Lord, make a way for me…
Be my friend, now Lord, be my friend…[13]

During the summer of 1963 in Greenwood Mississippi, Fannie Lou Hamer stood at the lectern in a pulpit. She read a scripture and quoted the lines of a hymn and gave the speech for the night. She began:

> From the fourth chapter of St. Luke, beginning at the 18th verse: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them who are bruised, to preach the acceptable day of the Lord."
>
> Now the time has come, that was Christ's purpose on earth, and we only been getting by paving our way to hell, but the time is out! When Simon Cyrene was helping Christ to bear his cross up the hill, he said, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me."

When Mrs. Hamer finished quoting that hymn, I realized that Simon of Cyrene had not said those particular words, but she used the text of the hymn and the story of Simon helping Christ carry the cross to suggest to her neighbors that they could do no less. She then added:

> It is not easy out there. We just got to make up our minds and face it folks, and if I can face the issue, you can too!
>
> It's a funny thing since I started working for Christ—it's kinda like in the 23rd Psalm, He said, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou annointeth my head with oil; and my cup runnest over," and I have walked through the shadows of death, because it was on the tenth of September in 1962 when they shot 16 times in a house—and it wasn't a foot over the bed where my head would have been, but you see that night, I wasn't there. Don't you see what God can do? Quit running around trying to dodge death, because this book says, "He that seeketh to save his life is gonna lose it anyhow**."**[14]

And if I perish, I perish…

VIII. The Civil Rights Movement and the African American Pulpit

The Civil Rights Movement was the first time I personally witnessed, time and again, women stepping out of that foundational caretaking sustaining place and speaking from the pulpit when there was a congregation, and it was not Women's Day. It must be noted that during early observances of Women's Day, in many churches, Women's Day speakers could not speak from the pulpit, they had to speak from the floor below the pulpit.

In the first mass meeting at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, November 25, 1961, three women were among those who came to the pulpit to speak: Irene Asbury had been Dean of Students at Albany State College and had resigned after her support for actions by the Student Government when the administration, which was hostile to the activist student leaders, refused to meet with her. She was an organizing leader of the Albany Movement organization, and spoke of her determination and

readiness to be a part of the new struggle. Evelyn Toney and Bertha Gober also spoke. They were college students who were among five arrested at the Trailway Bus station. It was the first time I had heard a personal account of a jail cell experience, and I thought of the sermon my father had preached about Paul and Silas. I thought about it a lot more when I had my own jail cell and stockade experience a few weeks later.

I understood that things had changed, these were Protestant Churches and it was 1961 and 1963 and most congregations operated from the perspective that the pulpit was reserved for men. And here was a movement that, in a sense, swept away that practice for a moment. The people who spoke from the pulpit were the people who were clearest about what they were doing and why they were doing it and for me, it was an amazing new day. Gender and age roles shifted as leadership was redefined

Notes

*The National Baptist Convention is now known as the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.

1. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. “Nannie Helen Burroughs.” Hine, Ed. Darlene Clark, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub, 1993. pp 201-204.
2. Ibid.
3. Stewart, Maria. Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings. Ed. Loewenberg, Bert James, and Ruth Bogin. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976. pp 183-200.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Wade In the Water. Negro Spiritual.
7. Bradford, Sarah H. Harriet Tubman, The Moses of Her People. New York: Corinth Books, 1962. p. 29.
8. Ibid.
9. Let My People Go. Negro Spiritual.
10. Hendricks, Wanda. “Ida Bell Wells-Barnett.” Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia. Ed. Hine, Darlene Clark, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub, 1993. pp. 1242-1246.
11. Reagon, Bernice Johnson. “Women as Cultural Carriers: Fannie Lou Hamer.” Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965. Ed. Crawford, Vicki L., Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods. Black women in United States History, v. 16. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Pub, 1990.
12. Ibid.
13. Walk With Me Lord.Negro Spiritual
14. Fannie Lou Hamer at mass meeting, Greenwood Mississippi, 1963, Moses Moon Collection, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Archive Center, Washington, D.C.