



AFRICAN HERITAGE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 12, 2012

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Lection – Psalm 68:28-31 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 28) Summon Your Might, O God; Show your strength, O God, as you have done for us before. (v. 29) Because of your temple at Jerusalem, Kings bear gifts to you. (v. 30) Rebuke the wild animals that live among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples. Trample under foot those who lust after tribute; scatter the peoples who delight in war. (v. 31) Let bronze be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hand to God.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Africans in the Diaspora (in general) and Africans in the Black Atlantic (in particular) have a long history which predates the Transatlantic Slave Trade.¹ African Christians in the three Americas have a highly textured “story” that starts in Acts 2, runs through Acts 8 in Ethiopia in the first century C.E., and is exponentially accelerated by Baptisms in Luanda in the 17th Century C.E. (1619) before the Jamestown Settlement saw Angolans for the first time.

God who loves this world started the creation of this world on the continent of Africa², breathed into African nostrils God’s *ruach* (the breath of life), and humans first became living souls (*nephesh*) made in the image of God somewhere between modern-day Zimbabwe and Addis Ababa. Paleontology, archaeology, and cultural anthropology all attest to this theological truth.

God has given us the precious gift of life. What we do with God’s gift is the most important fact in all of our lives as believers. When we treasure God’s gift, we honor God. When we honor God, we see all human beings as gifts of God. When we treat all humans as gifts of God, we care for them and we care for the earth that God created.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 68:28-31

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

From my elementary school days and my friendship with two Liberian classmates (Ingrid and Margaret), through my family’s lifelong involvement in the Lott Carey Foreign Mission Convention³ and my family’s lifelong investment in Virginia Union University (where I did the first three and one-half years of my undergraduate work), I have been immersed in the study of and exposure to African people, African culture, African religions, and African history. In my early twenties, however, Malcolm X’s words about Africans born in the Diaspora convicted me in a life-changing way. Malcolm asked the question, “*If a cat crawls into the oven and has kittens, do you call those kittens ‘biscuits?’*” The way El Hajj Malik El Shabazz forced me to come to grips with the fact that I was an African born in the “oven” of Diaspora (and not a biscuit) forced me to rethink the faith that was delivered to me by my parents, my grandparents, and my people. It also caused me to look at life through a different lens! My two degrees from Howard University and my extensive work with Dr. John Lovell⁴ pulled me into the fascinating world of African Sacred Music and the sacred music of Africans in the Atlantic Diaspora.

African Heritage Sunday for me, therefore, is an important moment, a sacred moment, and a day for celebrating the musical traditions of both the biblical people of faith and the African people of faith. The Scripture focus for this day is taken from one of the sacred songs of the people of faith, and this particular song points to the resilience of a people under oppression whose faith is in a liberating God and not in a subjugating government.

Just the word “Ethiopian” (*Aethiop*) stands as a reminder of Greek oppression. Oppressors have an insane, insatiable, and arrogant desire to rename or change the names of the people and places they subjugate. What the indigenous people call themselves, their country, or their towns means nothing to the oppressors who capture, colonize, and subjugate those peoples and those places.

Renaming is a part of imperial ideology and methodology. In the empire of the oppressors, you *are* what the empire says you are. When the oppressor conquers you, you are no longer Hadassah. You are renamed “Esther.” You are no longer Azariah, Hananiah, or Mishael. You are renamed “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.”

When the oppressor conquers you, you are no longer Seminole, Apache, Creek, Choctaw, Comanche, Cheyenne, Navajo, Hopi, Arawak, or Arapahoe. You are renamed “Indian.” You are no longer Fanti, Akan, Ashanti, Fulani, Ibo, Yoruba, Ibibio, Zulu, or Xhosa. You are renamed “Negro.” You are no longer Kunta Kinte.⁵ You are renamed “Toby.”

And for the Greek conquerors, the Hellenic Imperialists, KMT (“the land of the Blacks”) was renamed “Egypt!” (*Aegyptos*), and Nubians and Cushites are renamed “*Aethiop*” (black-skinned or burnt skin)!

That may be how the Greek empire sees Black people. That may be how the European Imperialists define darker people. That may be how the oppressor renames, defines, and confines the oppressed; but this song of triumph—Psalm 68—breaks forth and breaks *through* the bonds of the oppressor’s definitions and points to a power that is greater than any and all oppressors.

Cush does not submit to Greece. Cush submits to God!

Africans recognize and realize that ultimate power is not in the hands of an oppressive government. Ultimate power is in the hands of an omnipotent God! Africans express this belief (in West Africa) through the Akan Adinkra symbol *Gye Nyame*. (“There is none greater than God.”) In other words, Cush submits to God and God alone.

Africans express the same belief (in South Africa) through the Zulu philosophy of *Ubuntu*. (“*Ummtu, ngumntu, ngbantw*.”⁶) We have no existence apart from the reality of and the “breath” of God (Ntu). Cush submits only to God!

Africans in the United States of America Diaspora, while in bondage to a seemingly unbeatable oppressor, expressed the same faith when they sang:

*Over my head, I hear music in the air...
Over my head, I see trouble in the air...
There **must** be a God somewhere!*

Cush submits only to God!

When they sang:

*Before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in my grave
And go home to my God and be free*

they were expressing the same faith. Cush submits only to God!

Cush and Nubia (Ethiopians) stretch forth their hands to the only One who can deliver them and that is the One who made them. (“*It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves.*”⁷) The stretching forth of hands is both a sign of praise and a sign of prayer.

The same theological truth and homiletic point of departure is heard in the songs sung by contemporary Africans in Diaspora:

*Father, I stretch my hand to Thee
No other help I know.
If Thou withdraw Thyself from me,
O wither could I go?*

Cush stretches forth her hand. Nubia stretches forth her hand. The “burnt skin,” black-skinned children of God submit only to God and seek God’s deliverance from any and all human subjugation, which is why they sang (similar to what they sing here in Psalm 68):

*Free at last! Free at last!
Thank God Almighty
We’re free at last!*

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Psalm numbered 68 in the “Hymnbook of Israel” is a song of praise and a song of thanksgiving. It is in many ways a song that is, in James Weldon Johnson’s words, “*full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.*” It is a song about faith in God that is sung by a people under oppression.

Dr. Jerome Ross, Professor of Hebrew Bible, reminds us that every word written between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21 was written under one of six different kinds of oppression—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, or Roman oppression.⁸

Psalm 137 was written under Babylonian oppression (“*By the waters of Babylon...*”) yet it points to and is addressed to YHWH who is greater than the oppressor. The Hallel songs (Psalms 113–118) are songs of praise and thanksgiving which point to and remind the worshippers of the awesome acts of an eternal, faithful God in spite of the

overwhelming temporal reality of a powerful oppressive foreign government. God’s victory over the enemy is celebrated in song regardless of which of Ross’s six periods of oppression the people of faith found themselves in.

The same is true of Psalm 68. The song starts off praising God for what God has done in the past (“*the faith that the dark past has taught us*”); and the song calls on God to do the same thing in the present that God has done in the past (“*Let God rise up, let God’s enemies be scattered!*”). It is a song of hope sung in the face of seeming hopelessness (oppression) reminiscent once again of James Weldon Johnson’s words—“*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us!*”

In this song of praise and thanksgiving to God, God’s power is extolled, and as the scene of triumphal celebration is described, included in that celebration is the presentation of expensive bronze from Egypt (Africa, the “land of the Blacks”—KMT) and the praise (and prayers) of Nubia or Cush—“Ethiopia” stretching out its hands to God. All of God’s creation and all those created by God join in the celebration of the Omnipotent One who is victorious over any power or people who dare try to oppress other people.

Celebration

Where the ideologies of white supremacy, Eurocentrism, white racism, and the “white man’s burden”⁹ in the modern period have excluded Africans and African-descended people, subjugated them, segregated them, looked down on them, and/or taught them to look down on themselves, or even hate themselves, this song (“*full of the faith*”) teaches us that Blacks are seen by the biblical writers not only as praisers of God and persons who pray to God (stretching forth their hands), but they are also seen as persons who submit *only* to God!

Nubians do not bow to oppressive governments who rename them and try to make them bow at the altar of subservience. Nubians bow only to the Omnipotent God who made them in God’s image, made them equal to all others made in God’s image, and made them to worship God and God alone.

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- Contrast and compare how we are programmed to see others who are different as deficient as opposed to the way God values differences.

We see “Ethiopian”—black-skinned, burnt skin—as deficient. God sees “Ethiopians” as different, but not deficient.¹⁰

We see anyone who is “other” as deficient. Whites see Black as deficient. Mainline Christians see Pentecostals as deficient. Heterosexuals see homosexuals as deficient, etc., etc.

- God uses an Ethiopian to rescue Jeremiah. God uses an Ethiopian to create the *falashim*. God uses a converted Ethiopian Jew to take Christianity into “Black Africa” 300 years before Europeans converted to Christianity. (Constantine the Emperor of Rome converted to Christianity in the 4th century!)
- See Chann Berry’s and Bill Duke’s “Dark Girls”¹¹
- Examine folk sayings that are designed to program self-hatred:
If you’re white, you’re right.
If you’re yellow, you’re mellow.
If you’re brown, stick around;
But if you’re black, stay back.”
- See John Henrik Clarke’s The Boy Who Painted Christ Black.

Jesus teaches us to “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Compare how Christ teaches us to love ourselves while the culture teaches us to hate ourselves!

Notes

1. See Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America. New York, NY: Random house Trade Paperbacks, 2003.
2. See Cheikh Anta Diop, African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality? Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1989.
3. Lott Carey was the first African American missionary to be sent back to the West Coast of Africa in the early 1820s. His mission work was in the country of Liberia. The Foreign Mission Convention that is named after him works primarily in Liberia, Haiti, and India.
4. See John Lovell, Black Song: The Forge and the Flame: The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1986.
5. Kunta Kinte (also known as Toby Waller) is the central character of the novel Roots: The Saga of an American Family by Alex Haley.
6. The Zulu sentence “*Ummtu, ngumntu, ngbantw*” is translated “An individual can only be fully human by being in community with other human beings.” The key concept is embodied in the words (including *ubuntu*) which have as their last three letters “*ntu*,” which is the “breath of God!” Without God’s breath, individuals would not be alive. Without the breath of God, an individual can never be fully human. Without the breath of God, we cannot be a people made in the image of God!

7. Psalm 100.

8. See Jerome Ross, “The Cultural Affinity Between the Ancient Yahwists and the African Americans: A Hermeneutic for Homiletics” in Born to Preach: Essays in Honor of the Ministry of Henry and Ella Mitchell. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000.

9. “The White Man’s Burden” is a poem by Rudyard Kipling. The term was used by Imperialists within the United States to justify Imperialism as a policy. The term came to epitomize the understanding that the “burden” that white people had was to lift people of color up to *their* level! Wikipedia says that “*The White Man’s Burden*” ... *because of its theme and title..., has become emblematic both of Eurocentric racism and of Western aspirations to dominate the developing world.*

10. See Janice Hale-Benson, Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles. See also the author’s sermon, “Ain’t Nobody Right But Us” in What Makes You So Strong? Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

11. See “Dark Girls’ Documentary,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=otyiofu1w08 or see the official Dark Girls movie website at www.officialdarkgirlsmovie.com.