



## CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (BIRTH-AGE 12)

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, July 12, 2009**

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#### **I. Introduction**

Being open and available to hear the voice of God...

**Etymology-** “Avail” from the old French means “to be of use;” from “*vaill-*, [the] stem of *valoir*” or “be worth” from the Latin *valere*. In English, from 1451, the word “available” originally meant ‘valid, effective;’ sense of ‘at one’s disposal, capable of being availed of’” or, “ready for use or service at hand.”<sup>1</sup> The opposite meaning from 1549 is “unavailable” which means “ineffectual [or] incapable of being used.” (1855)<sup>2</sup>

In the text of the spiritual “Little David, Play on Your Harp,” we are reminded that young children are a part of the survival of the family. They have responsibilities and duties. In the case of David, he was a shepherd boy in charge of tending his family’s flock. He was there when his people were threatened by Goliath, and he answered the call and saved his people with the very instruments he had to protect the family’s flock of sheep from wolves.

### **Little David Play on Your Harp**

Little David play on your harp, hallelu hallelu  
Little David play on your harp, hallelu  
Little David was a shepherd boy,  
He killed Goliath and he shouted for joy.<sup>3</sup>

Children's Sunday is a time when a congregation comes together in celebration of the children within its membership. These occasions serve as a monitor of the health of the future of the congregation. Vital questions for any congregation are: How many children are being supported by how many adults in the church? How varied are the programs offered by the congregation? What percentage of the congregation's resources, finances, time, facilities, and programs are allocated for the nurturance and support of young children? Also, how many assignments do children carry out on a regular basis as supportive members of the congregational family?

Without strong programs in support of families, the growth of the congregation will be greatly impeded. Families with young children are drawn to churches with strong year round ministries of support and multiple activities for our future leaders of the church and the community. Those programs must support our children to develop; but, the lesson of Samuel suggests that we must be sure that our children are actively carrying out their assignments as a part of a working family based congregation. Then Children's Sunday becomes a celebration, a witness and a time of great joy and gratitude for those who are through their offerings moving toward the day when they will be the strength of the congregation.

## **II. Children Hearing God**

Our scripture for this lectionary unit (1 Samuel 3:1-10) brings us to another related issue. As adults, as teachers, as parents, we often see ourselves as the channel through which our children learn about the church, about God, and about the Christ. However, in this story, God speaks directly to young Samuel. Initially, Samuel does not "know" the voice of God. He thinks that it is his teacher, the Prophet Eli, who has called him.

What is the contemporary noise in our day-to-day culture that obscures children and their teachers and guardians from sorting out the call of God from the noise in the atmosphere? This lectionary moment is designed to spotlight children who are twelve and under. It is not clear how old Samuel was when he was called by the voice of God, some say he was about 12 or a little older. One of the key lessons of this scripture deals with "knowing" the voice of God. Samuel did not know the voice of God; he thought it was the Prophet Eli whom he served who spoke to him. Initially, the Prophet Eli did not know that God was speaking to the child Samuel. He only knew that he (Eli) had not called Samuel, and he sent Samuel away twice before understanding that it was the very voice of God calling to this child servant. He then instructed Samuel to answer when he was called again, recognizing that it was the voice of God.

*"When God calls me, I will answer."  
When God calls me, I will answer  
When God calls me, I will answer  
I'll be somewhere listening for my name*

*Chorus:*

*Oh I'll be somewhere listening, I'll be somewhere listening  
I'll be somewhere listening for my name, oh for my name...*

*If my heart is right, when God calls me  
If my heart is right, I will answer  
If my heart is right, when God calls me  
I'll be somewhere listening for my name...*

*If I live right, when God calls me...<sup>4</sup>*

**(A) Sojourner Truth as the child, Isabella, sent to God by her mother:**

In her slave narrative, the woman we know as Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree, tells us that after work her mother would sit down and gather her remaining children (remaining because the other children had been sold by the planter who claimed them as property) and tell them of the only Being who could aide and protect them.

*My children, there is a God who hears and sees you. When you are beaten or cruelly treated, or fall into any troubles, you must ask help of him and he will always help you.*

Her mother would sometimes cry out and groan and would look up at the stars and say that the same stars that shine down on us are shining down on her children who had been sold away from them.<sup>5</sup>

As a child, Isabella was told by her mother that God lived in the sky and that she could talk to God and tell God everything and anything about what and how she was and what she needed. For this mother, this was necessary because the system of slavery allowed parents no say over their children. And Ma Bett daily lived with the pain of witnessing the selling of several of her children. In one instance, Sojourner recounts that when her brother was sold his parents were forced to catch him so he could be put in the wagon to never be seen again. Ma Bett taught her children that they could not really count on anybody but God.

Taking this to heart, the girl Isabella had things to tell God that needed not to be heard by her master. When she looked in the sky, she felt that God was a long ways off. So she would go to the stream where the water made a loud noise and she would say her prayers to God out loud so God could hear, but others could not. In relating this story late in her life, Sojourner testified that when she prayed to God he would answer. She was born in Dutch speaking New York and was farmed out to work for an English family. Isabella did not understand English, and she suffered severe punishment because she did not always understand what was being said to her and how to respond accordingly. In desperation, Isabella went out to a place where she could not be heard and in a loud voice called out to God, telling God about her situation and asking him to help her. A few days later, her father came and got her and she was placed in a different situation. This is only one of several stories that made the child fiercely believe that God could see and hear her and was her only constant.<sup>6</sup>

### **African American Spiritual**

It's me, it's me, it's me oh Lord  
Standing in the need of prayer (2x)  
Not my sister, not my brother but it's me O Lord  
Standing in the need of prayer...  
...not my mother, not my father...<sup>7</sup>

### **(B) Rev. Charles Albert Tindley, as a child caught between**

The great Methodist Minister, and one of the founding fathers of gospel music, Reverend Charles Albert Tindley was born to a free mother and slave father in Berlin, Maryland, in 1851. Tindley's mother, Hester Miller Tindley, died soon after his birth and he was reared by her sister, his aunt, Caroline Miller Robbins, until he was old enough to be hired out and he returned to his father to live. Of this experience, Tindley wrote:

*It therefore became my lot to be 'hired out' wherever father could place me. The people with whom I lived were not all good. Some of them were very cruel to me. I was not permitted to have a book or go to church. I used to find bits of newspaper on the roadside and put them in my bosom (for I had no pockets), in order to study the ABCs from them. During the day I would gather pine knots, and lying flat on my stomach to prevent being seen by anyone who might still be about, would, with the coals mark all the words I could make out on these bits of newspaper. I continued in this way, and without any teacher, until I could read the Bible almost without stopping to spell the words.<sup>8</sup>*

There is the story of the young Tindley deciding one Sunday morning that he really wanted to go to church. He had no shoes, his clothes were ragged and soiled, but, determined to go, he cleaned his feet as best he could and walked to the small black Methodist church. The pastor asked if any of the children could read the Bible. Tindley alone, though uncomfortable with his appearance, raised his hands. When he was called forward, the members started whispering about his appearance; that is, until he began to read. When he had finished, those who had whispered were then praising and thanking God for the barefoot boy who would go on to become one of the greatest preachers and sacred music composers of the early twentieth-century and the builder of a ten-thousand (10,000) member church that now bears his name, Tindley Temple. He died July 26, 1933 at age eighty-two.

### **African American Spiritual**

Little boy? How old are you?  
Little boy? How old are you?  
Little boy? How old are you?  
Sir, I'm only twelve years old.

This song has been sung as a spiritual arranged for solo voice and piano by Roland Hayes. It is sung as a gospel song by Bishop Samuel Kelsey. It was recorded by Leadbelly and blues pianist Skip James. It is the story of the young boy Jesus who came before his elders in the Temple and

astounded them with his questions and his knowledge. This song reminds us that, within our tradition, there is awareness that wisdom and knowledge can also come from young children.

### **(C) Rev. Jared Sawyer, age eleven**

Rev. Jared Sawyer is a licensed minister at the Center Hill Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. He is eleven years old. Of his call, he relates that it came to him in a dream when he was six. When he told his mother, she said okay, but he felt that she did not believe him; and, she relates that in fact that was the case. Of those who might not be sure about his call, Rev. Sawyer asks, “Don’t look at my stature, don’t look at my age, think about the words that come out of my mouth.” In the years since he first heard the call and shared that with his mother, she has become a believer as are many others who have heard him preach.<sup>9</sup>

### **III. Conclusion**

#### **African American Spiritual**

Hear the lambs a-crying  
Hear the lambs a-crying  
Hear the lambs a-crying  
Oh shepherd –feed-a my sheep

In the text of this spiritual, we are called to listen for the sound of the “crying lambs;” there is the idea that “to hear the cry of the lamb” is at the same time a call to shepherd. It was the practice in biblical times that those who took care of the sheep herds were young in age, yet they carried a large responsibility for their family as they tended their flock. The text of the spiritual clearly expresses the concept that the call to shepherd is connected with hearing the sounds of distress. Since it was often the young who tended flocks, it can also be extrapolated that children are nurtured most effectively if they are integrated into a community by providing service to their family and their community.

As we gather on Children’s Sunday, we have a very special and sacred opportunity to be nurtured by the offerings of those within our congregation who are our future. “Let the children come and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>10</sup>

#### **Notes**

1. “Avail.” Online Etymology Dictionary. 2001. Online location: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=avail&searchmode=none> accessed 15 March 2009
2. “Unavailable.” Online Etymology Dictionary. 2001. Online location: <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=unavailable&searchmode=none> accessed 15 March 2009
3. “David Play on Your Harp.” Traditional
4. “I’ll Be Listening for My Name.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #560

5. Gilbert, Olive, and Frances W. Titus. Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century; with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life." Battle Creek, MI: The Author, 1878. pp. 17-18, and 58; see also, Gilbert, Olive, and Sojourner Truth. Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Bondswoman of Olden Time: With a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her "Book of Life." The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-century Black Women writers. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.
6. Ibid.
7. "Standing in the Need of Prayer." African American Heritage Hymnal. #441
8. Tindley, Charles Albert. A Book of Sermons. Philadelphia, PA: The Author, 1932; see also, Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Searching for Tindley." We'll Understand It Better By and By: Pioneering African American Gospel Composers. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992. pp. 37-52.
9. "Metro Atlanta Boy Embraces Both the Playground and the Pulpit." My Fox Atlanta. 07 Nov 2008. Online location: [http://www.myfoatlanta.com/dpp/news/Metro\\_Atlanta\\_Boy\\_Embraces\\_Both\\_the\\_Playground\\_and\\_the\\_Pulpit](http://www.myfoatlanta.com/dpp/news/Metro_Atlanta_Boy_Embraces_Both_the_Playground_and_the_Pulpit) accessed 15 March 2009; see also, Jared on YouTube. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMJ2OCZipxs> accessed 15 March 2009
10. This is a paraphrase of Matthew 19:4, KJV.