



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 23, 2008

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Lection - Revelation. 1:17-18 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, (v. 18) and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.’

Suggested Scriptures in addition to the text; Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-7, Luke 24:1-12, Acts 2;24, and I Corinthians 15:1-11, 50-58.

Also see the Other Sermonic Suggestions section of this commentary for a different homiletical approach for use of the lection text.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Resurrection/Easter and Christmas are the most universal celebrations in Christendom. The term “Resurrection” appears in the New Testament some forty times and the word “Easter” only once in Acts 12:4, as an incorrect translation for Passover. Biblically, the word Resurrection is preferred, whereas the word Easter has a traditional usage. The word Easter has adaptability to commercial and/or marketing forces. However, Easter comes to us through suffering, sacrifice and service. It does not come by way of shopping malls, sales and supermarkets.

In the African American religious experience Resurrection (Easter) is a powerful and enduring presence from generation to generation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central event and

experience in the Christian faith. Without this event and experience the Jesus reality in history becomes a short lived Broadway tragedy. It becomes a movement born in excitement and perishes in bereavement. The Resurrection/Easter Celebration brings to an oppressed people a boundless universe of hope and victory.

Resurrection is at the core of the African American religious experience. Resurrection is our enduring hope. It is the eternal flame that cannot be put out. More than 500 years of oppression, slavery, apartheid, injustice, genocide, massacres and holocausts have not been able to extinguish this eternal flame. In the midst of crisis after crisis, terror after bleeding terror, and stony road after stony road, we have proclaimed, “**Victory, Victory, Victory.**”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Rev. 1:17-18

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In my childhood days in LaGrange, Georgia, Troup County, Easter was a special celebration – new life, hope and assurance after a long winter of agony and struggle. We came to Easter Sunday after having cast away our worn-out shoes and patched and re-stitched garments wearing new outfits and new uniforms. We came prepared for the speech, recitation and short poem affirming a resurrection reality that no one could successfully veto.

Nature kissed our Easter/Resurrection moment with dogwood, myrtle, honeysuckle and dozens of other blossoms. All of these were accented by birds, bees, beetles and butterflies. Our pained and frostbitten life was renewed and transformed by God-given survival, heavenly-inspired revival and Christ-centered arrival.

I can still see a little boy or a little girl having been pushed from the platform of humanity into the alley of three-fifths of a person coming to the stage of Alpha and Omega. Here we are standing in the presence of the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, declaring to us: “I was dead, and see I am alive forever and ever.”

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The text from Revelation 1:17-18 is chosen as a Resurrection/Easter focus. In preparation for preaching from this text one must look at its historical context. What was the Roman Empire like in the latter half of the first century C.E.? Who were some of the Emperors? Why did they lynch, burn, imprison and persecute the followers of Jesus? What was the status of the Christian community in the first century? Why was this small company of Jesus Christ’s disciples such a threat to an empire of power and military might?

Why did the violent armies of Rome fail against the non-violent army of Jesus Christ? Why was Rome so afraid of people who would not kill, steal, hate, bear false witness or seek revenge against their oppressors? The Christians had no weapons of mass destruction. They were not overt or covert terrorists. They had no weapon but love. Their greatest testimony was Easter/Resurrection: A living Jesus who is alive forever and ever.

The Patmos pastor has a mystical and transformative experience while in the agony of exile. The living Christ puts his hand on the prophet of Patmos. This is the miraculous experience of an exiled apostle on a lonely isle sentenced to hard labor in the company of convicts both innocent and guilty. In such a place and circumstance, Easter breaks forth unrestrained by the trivialities

of bunnies, jelly beans and commercialism. John's testimony stretched across the mighty waters of the Mediterranean and landed in the ports of Palestine; and was shared in Judea, Samaria, Antioch, Egypt, and Damascus.

On that tortuous Isle of Patmos, John experienced Easter/Resurrection, and I think his fellow prisoners and prison guards must have been baffled, as were those who visited the empty tomb in that early morning of new life and victory.

Howard Thurman in one of his books of sermonic meditations titled: The Growing Edge tells us:

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;
All around us life is dying and life is being born.
The fruit ripens on the tree;
The roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth.
Against the time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.
Such is the growing edge.¹

Resurrection teaches us some basic and enduring lessons out of which emerge everlasting victories...

Victory Number One: Death is not the worst thing that can come to a human being. Our ancestors understood this with great insight and foresight. Some things are worse than death: slavery; oppression; daily dehumanization to name but a few. When I was a boy in the country I learned the worst thing you can do to birds is not to kill them but clip their wings and bruise their tongues. To leave birds in a state of agony where they can neither sing nor fly is worse than death. To rob the birds of their bird integrity is worse than death. However, to reclaim the song and reclaim wholeness with a new song, a new body and a new life is resurrection. Victory Number One is victory over the threat of death.

I'm so glad death can't do me no harm.
I'm so glad I got my religion in time.²

Victory Number Two: This victory is to understand the limitations of death. If we understand the limitations of death we can continue to be creative, productive and redemptive in the face of death. I see an indelible connection between an Isle of Patmos and Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was nominated by righteousness in prison to become President of a New South Africa. I see a mystical and historical connection between the experience and writing of John, the Apostle, Mandela, Immaculée Ilibagiza's (for whom the meaning of Easter can be seen in Immaculée's personal story, Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust,³ and in Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter From the Birmingham Jail.⁴ From time to time it is good and advisable to read and reread Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter From the Birmingham Jail.⁵ This letter was written during the Easter/Resurrection season of 1963. It has outlived the jailers, the police, the police dogs, the commissioners, the governor and the laws of American apartheid. Most of Nelson Mandela's autobiography⁶ was written on Robben Island during Mandela's unjust imprisonment. Dr. King and Mandela were productive in the face of death. Each won a Nobel Peace Prize while under the threat of death. When it appeared that they were crushed by the crisis of the moment they came forth as a vision and voice of an era.

When the Roman Empire thought Jesus was dead because they had lynched him and buried him, he placed his right hand upon the pastor, prophet and apostle and said: "I was dead—I am alive forever and ever (Rev. 1:18)."

Victory Number Three: The cemetery is too small, the grave is too narrow and time is too temporary to hold, control, or contain amazing grace, the power of unconditional love and the mystery of eternal life. This is the meaning of Easter. This is the meaning of Resurrection. This is the meaning of life in Christ, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain”⁷ said Paul. Ask our spiritual ancestors: Does Jesus live? And they will say:

They crucified my savior
And nailed him to the cross
They crucified my Savior
And nailed him to the cross
And the Lord shall bear my spirit home.
He arose, He arose, He arose from the dead,
And the Lord shall bear my spirit home.⁸

Celebration

Ask the exiled Patmos Island pastor and prophet, what is Easter? What is the meaning of Resurrection, and he will answer:

“He touched me with his right hand.
He told me, `Do not be afraid.
I am the first and the last and the living one.
I was dead, and see,
I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys to Death and Hades.”

Easter is victory. Resurrection is victory. Jesus Christ is victory. In Christ we have victory over oppression, hate, sin, racism, fear, war, death, and Hades.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The landscape of the Isle of Patmos; the appearance (unshaven and in dirty clothes) of John on a deserted island; the smiling face of God, the mighty feet of God; the comforting right hand of God; and

Sounds: The sound of John fearfully falling before the feet of God and the reassuring voice of God.

Other Sermonic Suggestions

One could also meditate upon Revelation 1: 17-18 in this manner:

“When I saw him...”

- Sight
- Insight
- Foresight

“I fell at his feet as though dead...”

- Worship
- Meditation
- Total surrender

“He placed his right hand upon me saying, do not be afraid...”

- Affirmation
- Transformation
- Empowerment

“I am the first and the last...”

- I am hope before history
- Hope in history
- Hope beyond history

“I am the living one...”

- Emperors, prime ministers and presidents fade away.
- Governments perish.
- They do not come back in three days alive forever and ever – an unending hallelujah.
- They do not come back with the keys of Death and Hades.
- They do not return with all power, giving power to the weak and powerless. This is what Easter is and does.

Notes

- 1) Thurman, Howard. The Growing Edge. New York, NY: Harper, 1956. p. 180.
- 2) “I’m So Glad.” Negro Spiritual. Online location: <http://www.hymnsite.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2151> accessed 19 February 2007
- 3) Ilibagiza, Immaculée, and Steve Erwin. Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust, Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2006.
- 4) King, Martin Luther. Letter from the Birmingham Jail. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1994.
- 5) Ibid.
- 6) Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1994.
- 7) Philippians 1:21
- 8) Nix, Verolga, and Cleveland, J. Jefferson, eds. “Does Jesus Live.” Songs of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981, p.168.

Additional Suggested Reading List

The meaning of Easter is deep in the soul of Sally Thomas and her family as told in John Hope Franklin’s and Loren’s Schweninger’s book, In Search of the Promised Land: A Black Family and the Old South. New narratives in American history. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006.

King, Martin Luther. The Trumpet of Conscience. Massey lectures, 1967. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1968.

Robinson, Randall. An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, from Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President. New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2007.

Taylor, Gardner C., and Edward L. Taylor. The Words of Gardner Taylor. Vol. I. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999. 6 vols, Ch. 31.

Taylor, Gardner C., and Edward L. Taylor. The Words of Gardner Taylor. Vol. 6. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999. 6 vols, Ch. 24.

Thurman, Howard. The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death: Being the Ingersoll Lecture on the Immortality of Man, 1947. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Divinity School, 1947. See also: Thurman, Howard. Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975. (Originally separate books, but now in a single volume; Deep River was copyrighted in 1945 and 1955 and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death in 1947.)