



GOOD FRIDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History Section

From a secular perspective, Friday normally signals an end to a workweek for many Americans. However, there is a Friday celebrated by Christians worldwide that signals both an ending and beginning -- Good Friday. On this Friday before Easter, Christians enter into a mode of remembrance—actively considering the suffering afflicted upon the character and body of Jesus by members of humanity. They remember how Jesus was severely beaten and nailed to a cross, mocked by chief priests, elders, and scribes; even the criminals hanging on adjacent crosses ridiculed Jesus. On Good Friday, Christians

attune their ears to the last words of Jesus as blood saturated the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Given the gruesomeness, the injustice, the blood-thirsty mob at the crucifixion, why use a positive descriptor like “good” to describe the suffering of Jesus? As stated earlier, this day represents an ending, specifically through the crucifixion of Jesus. However, this day is “good” because Jesus’ death signaled the beginning of “new” life, a resurrected life endowed with “getting up power.” Thus, to non-Christians, use of the phrase Good Friday in connection with a crucifixion may seem like a glaring contradiction, but to the millions of Christians of all ethnicities, the Friday before Easter celebrates the redemptive power captured in the suffering of Jesus.

II. A True Story

“Niggers, go home! Niggers go back where you belong!”¹ Despite these words, the young woman moves towards the side entrance of Central High School, each step fueled with her acknowledging that it was indeed her turn to carry the banner. Although she had no idea what awaited her on the other side of the massive doors, she assured herself that it had to be better than the hostile outside activities. However, her hopes were shattered by a loud scream, “They’re in here! Oh, God, the niggers are in here!”² This announcement seemed to set into motion a string of events—mothers of white students spitting in her face and chasing her across campus—on her first day of school. One day down, many more to go. The many more days included injuries due to propelling firecrackers, physical trip ups in the hallways, tennis rackets across the back, punches, slaps, and a push down a flight of stairs with little intervention from teachers or administrators.

Through it all, Melba Pattillo Beals, one of nine students to participate in the integration of Little Rock’s public high schools, remembered her Grandma India’s words, “If you have to depend on yourself for strength, you will not make it. But if you depend on God’s strength, you will make.”³ Although she continued to shed many tears, these words allowed her to press through her first term at Central High School.

Unlike Jesus, Beals’ tribulations did not last a day but an entire school year, but like Jesus, her Good Friday served as a catalyst for change. Her courageous struggle aided an unleashing of an energetic movement in the United States for the apprehension of equal rights and opportunities by African Americans in particular and people of color in general. In short, Beal sees her Good Friday experiences at Central as horrific but inevitable, for she states, “We headed down a path from which there was no turning back, because when we thought of the alternatives, the only option was living behind fences of segregation and passing on that legacy to our children.”⁴

III. Defining Good Friday

The following short story by Kimberley J. Hawkins illustrates how a person comes to define Good Friday based upon their personal experiences:

Good Friday

A breeze swept through the veranda just right, making it as cool as it was inside. My grandmother's huge white porch wrapped around the entire house. Sunlight filtered in through the paneless windows as a ceiling fan whirled quietly above four rocking chairs. Lena, my grandmother sat in her favorite chair slowly rocking back and forth, watching me intently as I leaned against a huge moss-laden cypress and daydreamed. "What you doin' all that daydreaming for girl, you need to get your heads out of the clouds and keep your feet on the ground." I nod in compliance, not really sure what she means. "I was thinking," I replied. She responded, "The cycle of life doesn't allow much time for deep thought, you need to focus on what's in front of you because before you know it, it'll all be gone." "All what will be gone?" I asked curiously. She looked at me and smiled. "I won't always be here you know, the Lord's been knockin' on my door for quite some time now, and, one day I'm going to have to let Him in." Just then, my mother, Misty, sits in the rocker next to me and sighs and responds, "You're not gonna die Momma; one day we'll all just sit in these rockers and fade away."

For the first time in my life I see a longing in my grandmother's eyes that I have never seen before. I could tell that even though her "bucket list" wasn't long or elaborate, it was important for her to finish. I decided right then I would finish it for her if she decided to answer the door for the Lord.

When she excused herself and disappeared inside the house, I asked my mom if she really believed that we're just gonna fade away. While smiling she responds, "Yes baby, I do." She seemed so sure of it, so hopeful. I believed her. On that day I believed that she would never die, but slowly fade away in that rocker. She didn't. Just as her eyes began to close involuntarily, she stole one last look at me before passing into what I have to believe is the next life. She died the Monday after Easter. After I had heard at least three or four sermons in a row about life, death, and rebirth my pastor preached about sacrifice and thanksgiving, Mary's loss and lament and God's sovereignty. I replay those sermons about rebirth in my head now. Good Friday means something different to me now. It's personal. I hold on to the hope of rebirth. If on this day Christ received the gift of rebirth, and we have been promised the same, then my mother is not gone forever. Just relocated.⁵

V. Songs for This Lectionary Moment

The songs for this lectionary moment run the gamut of human emotions. A sense of sadness combined with sweet remembrance saturates the lyrical field of "I See a Crimson Stream" while a sense of hopefulness graces the chords of the second song, "He Will Remember Me." Good Friday, as a time of remembrance, adoration, and a re-affirmation of life, finds voice in the last song, "Just for Me."

I See a Crimson Stream

On Calv'ry's hill of sorrow
Where sin's demands were paid,
And rays of hope for tomorrow
Across our path were laid.

Chorus

I see a crimson stream of blood, stream of blood.
It flows from Calvary, Calvary.
Its waves which reach the throne of God, throne of God,
Are sweeping over me, over me.

Today no condemnation
Abides to turn away
My soul from salvation, he's in my heart to stay.

(Repeat Chorus)

When gloom and sadness whisper
You've sinned, no use to pray,
I look away to Jesus, and he tells me to say. (Repeat Chorus)

And when we reach the portal
Where life forever reigns, the ransomed host's grand finale,
Will be this glad refrain.

(Repeat Chorus)⁶

He Will Remember Me

When on the cross of Calv'ry the Lord was crucified;
The mob stood 'round about him and mocked until he died.
Two thieves were nailed beside him to share the agony,
But one of them cried out to him, "O Lord remember me."

Chorus

Will the Lord remember me when I am called to Go?
When I have crossed death's chilly sea, will his love show?
Oh, yes, he heard my feeble cries, from bondage set me free.
And when I reach the pearly gates, he will remember me.
O, what a shame to kill him there on that rugged cross;
But such a death was needed to rescue all the lost.
His blood was made a ransom to set the captives free,
I know that I'm included, and he will remember me.

(Repeat Chorus)

At His dear feet I'm kneeling, my sins I now confess;
I bow in deep repentance, my soul he'll surely bless.
My blinded eyes he opens so that the light I see,
And when I reach the pearly gates, he will remember me.

(Repeat Chorus)⁷

Just For Me

Just for me,
Just for me,
Just for me,
Just for me.

They pierced him in his side.

He hung his head and died.

He did all that just for me.

Oh, what a shame to kill him, as he hung on that rugged cross.

His death was surely needed to save this world from being lost.

My blinded eyes were open so that I might see.

He did that just for me.⁸

VI. A Ritual That Seeks to Make Suffering Redemptive

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7ll3tj3PdA>

Rituals possess the ability to create a space for the manifestation of healing—defined by Stephanie Mitchem as “activities and ideas that aim to balance and renew life.” Such a notion of ritualistic healing can be attested to in the “Remembrance for the Ancestors” ritual, initiated in 1989 at Coney Island, Brooklyn, and it now occurs annually each June in Georgia, California, and Florida. Although there is some variation, the guiding premise of this ritual is the same -- honoring ancestors of African descent. Ancestors who perished in the seas of the Middle Passage along with those such as Malcolm X and Franz Fanon are remembered and celebrated through dancing, chanting, drumming, and the pouring of libations. This ritual not only serves as a way to pay homage to those who lost their lives, but it also seeks to engage life as experienced in black bodies in order to usher in some sense of continuity and balance and ultimately transformation. In other words, this ritual aims to celebrate the deaths of our ancestors while we learn from their experiences. In this way, their deaths are not in vain; in fact, they become redemptive if we learn the lessons well.

The ritual was inspired by the words of Toni Cade Bambara:

I know we must reclaim those bones in the Atlantic Ocean. Do you know that there is not a plaque, a memorial, a day, a ritual, or an hour – that is erected in memorial to those one hundred million bodies in the Atlantic Ocean? All those African bones in the briny deep. All those people who said “no” and jumped ship.

All those people who tried to figure out a way to steer, to navigate amongst the sharks. We don't call upon that power. We don't call upon those spirits. We don't celebrate those ancestors. We don't have a marker, an expression, a song that we use to acknowledge them. We have nothing to indicate that those are Our People and they mattered! We willingly self-administer knockout drops. More horrendous is the fact that we don't tap into the ancestral presence in those waters.⁹

In short, remembrance rituals, whether clothed in remembering ancestors in June or recollecting the cross of Jesus on Good Friday, embrace the past through healing acts in the present. We must not forget the anguish and the strength of our ancestors. And we must not forget the suffering of our Savior during the crucifixion coupled with his rightful claim as the ultimate over comer, which is why we celebrate Good Friday. Both cleared a path for us so that we can march triumphantly toward all that is healing. Let us remember all of this on this Good Friday.

Notes

1. Beals, Melba Pattillo. Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High. New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1994. p. 48.
2. Ibid., p. 109.
3. Ibid., p. 295.
4. Ibid., p. 310.
5. Hawkins, Kimberley R. "Good Friday."
6. "I See a Crimson Stream." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #268
7. "He Will Remember Me." Lift Every Voice and Sing II: An African American Hymnal. New York, NY: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1993. pp. 34-35.
8. "Just For Me." African American Heritage Hymnal. #231
9. Bambara, Toni Cade. The Salt Eaters. New York, NY: Vintage Press, 1992.