



GOOD FRIDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Friday, April 22, 2011

William H. Wiggins, Jr., Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Emeritus Professor of African American and African Diaspora and Folklore and Ethnomusicology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

I. Historical Background and Documents

David Katski traces the historical origins and evolution of Good Friday in his essay “Origins, Rituals, and Traditions of Good Friday.” According to Katski, “As early as the first century, the Church set aside every Friday as a special day of prayer and fasting. It was not until the fourth century, however, that the Church began observing the Friday before Easter as the day associated

with the crucifixion of Christ. First called Holy or Great Friday by the Greek Church, the name ‘Good Friday’ was adopted by the Roman Church around the sixth or seventh century.”

Katski offers two origins for the name “Good Friday.” The first explanation argues that the phrase was coined by Christians living in what is now France and Germany, who called the day “Gute Freitag,” which means “good” or “holy” Friday. The second explanation theorizes that “God’s Friday,” the original name of the day, was changed to “good” Friday because some members of the Church believed the word “God” was too holy or sacred “to be spoken aloud.” Good Friday is observed annually between March 20 and April 23, the last Friday before Easter.¹

Stacey Floyd-Thomas, in her 2008 African American Lectionary cultural resource unit, explained the cultural significance of Good Friday for many African Americans:

Many African American Protestant congregations hold a worship service referred to as ‘The Seven Last Words,’ which commemorate Jesus’ life and death through the preaching of a series of short homilies consisting of the recitation and interpretation of Jesus’ last words. A similar liturgical tradition by black Catholics is the observance of the last day of Jesus’ life by retracing the scenes (referred to as ‘The Stations of the Cross’) that have been traditionally portrayed as the final journey that Jesus took on that Friday. Whether Protestant or Catholic, Good Friday commemorates and reminds us that Jesus was loving, diligent, and caring even to the end.²

II. The Impact of Good Friday on Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s ministry, writings, and sermons are filled with references to the significance of Good Friday and Jesus’ crucifixion on his life. For example, he was jailed on Good Friday in 1963. He acknowledges as much in his Letter From the Birmingham Jail when he wrote:

. . . I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.³

Four years later, April 30, 1967, Dr. King concluded a sermon entitled, “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” with this personal testimony:

Now it isn’t easy to stand up for truth and for justice. . . . Sometimes it means losing a job. . . means being abused and scorned. It may mean having a seven, eight-year-old child asking a daddy, ‘Why do you have to go to jail so much?’ And I’ve long since learned that to be a follower [of] Jesus Christ means taking up the cross. And my Bible tells me Good Friday comes before Easter. Before the crown we wear, there is the cross that we must bear. Let us bear it – bear it for truth, bear it for justice, and bear it for peace.⁴

III. Expressions of Good Friday in African American Folk Consciousness

A central truth shared by African American Christians is that Jesus’ crucifixion affirms our human worth. Because Jesus died for us, we are not inferior second-class citizens; because Jesus

died for us, we are somebody. Dr. King sounded this cultural truth in his Letter From the Birmingham Jail when he wrote:

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolence efforts as those of an extremist. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of “somebodyness” that they have adjusted to segregation. . . .⁵

Dr. King’s “somebodyness” is a recurring theme in African American folk consciousness. Reverend William Holmes Borders and Reverend Jesse Jackson both composed poems entitled “I Am Somebody.” Reverend Borders’s version, which was broadcast on “The Wings Over Jordan” radio show on January 10, 1943, is the older of the two poems.

Reverend Jesse Jackson’s version of “I Am Somebody” was recited on the PBS television program *Sesame Street* in 1971. According to the notes that accompanied the text of the poem, “This inspirational free verse poem was unparalleled with anything ever attempted on children’s television in content and delivery. The poem fulfilled *Sesame Street*’s initial curriculum for serving the underprivileged city youth, as well as offering cultural understanding. Kids of all races were scattered all over the *Sesame Street* set, on the street, benches, fire escapes, led by Jackson in the poem.”

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTB1h18bHIY>

I Am Somebody by Jesse Jackson

I Am
Somebody
I Am
Somebody
I May Be Poor
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Young
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be On Welfare
But I Am
Somebody
I May Be Small
But I Am
Somebody
I May Make A Mistake
But I Am
Somebody
My Clothes Are Different
My Face Is Different

My Hair Is Different
But I Am
Somebody
I Am Black
Brown
White
I Speak A Different Language
But I Must Be Respected
Protected
Never Rejected
I Am
God's Child
I Am
Somebody⁶

In "The Crucifixion," one of seven poems in James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, I am transported back to my youth whenever I hear or read this passage from Johnson's poem:

Up Golgotha's rugged road
I see my Jesus go.
I see him sink beneath the load.
I see my dropping Jesus sink.
And then they laid hold on Simon.
Black Simon, yes, black Simon;
They put the cross on Simon,
And Simon bore the cross.
On Calvary, on Calvary,
They crucified my Jesus.
They nailed him to the cruel tree,
And the hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.
The hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
The hammer!
Rang through Jerusalem's streets.⁷

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Gwendolin Sims Warren includes at least three African American songs of crucifixion in her anthology, *Ev'ry Time I Feel The Spirit: 101 Best Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the African American Church*. Two are Spirituals and one is a contemporary Gospel song. Mrs. Sims Warren wrote this brief description of the first Spiritual, "I Know It Was the Blood": "This song is still sung frequently in the African American church, especially after communion. It is a rejoicing, praising, dancing, shouting song of victory. It exemplifies the

Christian tradition of celebrating the Last Supper, a tradition established by Jesus and the disciples when they left the Upper Room after sharing the wine and bread together. The Bible teaches that when Jesus was on his way to the cross, he and the disciples went out from the Upper Room singing a hymn.”⁸

I Know It Was the Blood

I know it was the blood,
I know it was the blood,
I know it was the blood for me.
One day when I was lost
He died upon the cross.
I know it was the blood for me.

It was my Savior’s blood
It was my Savior’s blood
It was my Savior’s blood for me.

The blood came streaming down,
The blood came streaming down,
The blood came streaming down for me.

He suffered bled, and died,
He suffered bled, and died,
He suffered bled, and died for me.

I know He’s coming back,
I know He’s coming back,
I know He’s coming back for me.⁹

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0HgaurEQo0>

Mrs. Sims Warren, a church soloist and founder of “The Center for Worship and the Word, Inc., which presents the ministry of music through praise and worship,” has this special relationship to the second Spiritual, “Where You There?” “This song,” she wrote, “is especially meaningful to me. On Easter Sunday 1968, the Sunday immediately following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., I sang it at the Community Church in mid-Manhattan, where a civil rights advocate, the Reverend Donald Harrington, was pastor. As I sang this heartfelt song, NBC-TV filmed the service, trying to capture the grief of the nation in light of the shame of this incident. Martin Luther King, Jr. was truly a soldier of freedom, whose heart was to ‘set the captives free’ from poverty and injustice—regardless of race or social, cultural, or economic status.”¹⁰

Were You There?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (were you there?)
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree? . . .

Were you there when they pierced Him in the side? . . .

Were you there when the sun refused to shine? . . .

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? . . .

Were you there when they rolled the stone away? . . .

Did you know He is risen from
From the dead?

Did you know He is risen from
The dead?

Oh! Sometimes I want to shout,
'Glory, Glory, Glory!'

Did you know He is risen from the dead?¹¹

The single contemporary Gospel Song that Mrs. Sims selected was Andraé Crouch's "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power." Mr. Crouch, the son of Bishop Benjamin J. Crouch, the founder of the Christ Memorial Church of God in Christ in the San Fernando Valley of California, composed this song at the tender age of thirteen. CeCe and BeBe Winans sing "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power" in the following video. The Winans as a quartet were discovered by Crouch and out of that quartet CeCe and BeBe formed their own singing duo.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTdH1z2VYrg&feature=related>

The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power

The blood that Jesus shed for me
Way back on Calvary
The blood that gives me strength from day to day
It will never lose its power

Chorus

It reaches to the highest mountain,
It flows to the lowest valley.
The blood that gives me strength from day to day
It will never lose its power.

It soothes my doubts and calms my fears,
And it dries all my tears;

The blood that gives me strength from day to day
It will never lose its power.¹²

V. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

1. Engage the youth department of your church to present such Good Friday productions as: (1) a dramatic reading of James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Crucifixion" or (2) create an altar of Calvary based upon Scriptures and songs.

2. Host a DVD showing and/or reading of the scripts of such African American folk dramas as (1) "In the Rapture," an Indianapolis, Indiana religious drama; (2) "Heaven Bound," an Atlanta, Georgia religious reading; or (3) "The Blood of Jesus," a DVD of an African American religious drama filmed in Dallas, Texas for the young and mature adults. After the production discussion will center on the similarities and/or differences in how Good Friday is portrayed in these productions and the moment's Scriptures.

VI. Possible Sources for Church Bulletins and Other Uses

- <http://www.faithclipart.com/guide/Christian-Holidays/good-friday-significance.html>
- The Crucifixion recording: www.highbridgeaudio.com

Notes

* The drawing by Aaron Douglas is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is herein used with permission for educational purposes. The drawing was used by James Weldon Johnson in his book God's Trombones.

1. Katski, David. "Origins, Rituals, and Traditions of Good Friday." Online location: <http://www.faithclipart.com/guide/Christian-Holidays/good-friday-significance.html>

2. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey. "Good Friday (The Seven Last Words or Women of the Stations of the Cross)." Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=17> accessed 8 February 2011

3. King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." Ed. John Loughery. The Eloquent Essay: An Anthology of Classic & Creative Nonfiction. New York, NY: Persea Books, 2000. p. 58.

4. Ibid., p. 59.

5. King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam." Online location: <http://www.husseini.org/2007/01martin-luther-king-jr-why-i-am.html> accessed 8 February 2011

6. Jackson, Jesse. "I Am Somebody." Online location: http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/I_Am_-_Somebody accessed 8 February 2011

7. Johnson, James Weldon. "The Crucifixion." God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. Online location: www.highbridgeaudio.com accessed 8 February 2011

8. Sims Warren, Gwendolin, ed. Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. p. 6.

9. Ibid., p. 5.

10. Ibid., p. 99.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 275.