



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 6, 2010

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Lection - Joshua 1:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, (v. 2) "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all these people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. (v. 3) Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. (v. 4) From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. (v. 5) No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. (v. 6) Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. (v. 7) Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

A graduation celebration marks both accomplishment and promotion to another level. For the African American community graduations are a time of great celebration as they are symbolic of the survival and resilience of an entire people. They are particularly notable for our community after years of slavery, segregation and racism wherein our right to a quality education was denied. "Perhaps the single most extraordinary fact about the history of black intellectual and moral advancement is that achievements were made and progress occurred against the resistance of monumental odds – odds that no other

American immigrants faced in seeking to improve their lot.”¹ By the time our sons and daughters reach middle school, high school, college and post-baccalaureate graduation ceremonies, they have also overcome the many social, cultural, family and economic issues of our time. In many cases their achievement was made possible as a result of the love, encouragement and financial support supplied by the African American church.

At the Baccalaureate Service at my church, graduates are anointed with oil which is symbolic of the Holy Spirit who has strengthened, kept, comforted and upheld them along their journey. Graduates are presented with both a certificate and a gift. College students are given a picture of their church so that they may be reminded of their spiritual roots and the support system that is the Church. In addition to the awarding of various scholarships, this is the time when our graduates at all levels are reminded of their responsibility to give back to the God, parents, church and community that have given so freely to them. As educated African Americans, it is their obligation and duty to live a life of service and assistance to those in need.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Joshua 1:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Growing up in a family with twelve aunts and uncles and thirty-two first cousins on my paternal side, even the smallest of parties was a major event. At the celebration of a graduation (a major event), there were well-wishers aplenty offering words of encouragement as the graduate moved to the next level in education and life. On my maternal side, my graduation was particularly noted because I was the first to go to college. This is the case for many of our African American graduates still today; we are either first or second generation college graduates. Yet, my foreparents who did not have access to a college education laid the foundation upon which I would build and have the opportunity to gain advanced degrees.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In today's text, Joshua has reached a threshold in his life and is challenged by God to arise and go over the Jordan River. He has been the assistant to Moses but Moses is dead; Joshua has moved from assistant to leader. Now that he has graduated to this level, crossing the Jordan is his major examination for this phase of his life.

He has spent long arduous hours learning and honing the skills that he will need to help take the people of God to their next level. He had the grace of God but needed courage to accomplish this task because he and those he is led would face enemies, including their own doubt and dissension. The same is true for those who have become graduates. They had enemies to overcome; some were challenged to arise from illiteracy, poor self-esteem, poverty, negative and impoverished thinking. Others needed courage to arise over gang violence, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction and apathy to cross over their Jordan River into the promises of God. Courage is the mental and moral strength to venture out in the face of danger, fear and difficulty. Recently I read an anonymous entry

that said, “Courage in people is like a teabag. You never know their strength until they are in hot water.” Without a doubt it takes courage to stand in the midst of strange, violent, terrorist and war torn days to achieve one’s educational dreams.

Mary McLeod Bethune began Bethune-Cookman College with a few dollars in her pocket, a great dream in her heart and the courage to move toward the fulfillment of that dream despite the viciousness of racism. Her courage continues to pay dividends for our young people at the school she began. It took courage for yesterday, and it will take courage for tomorrow.

The Jordan River carries different significance than the Red Sea for the children of Israel. As Moses led Israel across the Red Sea he led them out of slavery. Joshua was now leading them into the Promised Land. In other words, all graduates need to be aware that their first graduation, though major and definitely worthy of celebration, is just the beginning of the wonderful and many splendored journey that God has prepared for them. Whatever the degree received, the resound must still be onward and upward, the best is yet to come.

We must also keep in mind that had there been no Moses, there would have been no Joshua. Although many of our ancestors did not have the opportunity to achieve a high school, college or post-graduate education, had it not been for their hard work, fervor and resilience, we would not have. Had there been no “bible bands,” women who traveled from house to house after the abolition of slavery, teaching our people to read and write, there would have been no Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Barack Obama.

If we do not arise and go beyond today’s accomplishments, we inhibit the possibilities and stifle the potential of those coming behind us.

Also important in this text is God’s admonition to Joshua to remember, in so many words, how to act; “being careful to act in accordance with all of the law that my servant Moses commanded you...so that you may be successful wherever you go.” (v. 7) In this verse, Joshua is told what we must tell all graduates. Wherever you go, remember how to act. In other words, do not allow education, new experiences, new relationships, etc., to change your belief in God, your belief in being a person of integrity and your belief in your community as a place of greatness. These are the laws Christian graduates follow. As we celebrate graduation it is imperative that we remember the past, take a moment to remember all that we have come through as a people and acknowledge where we are now. While we have come a mighty long way, we must be honest concerning the inequities that continue to exist and, more importantly, be focused on moving forward into the future. Regardless of how far we have come, there is still a great journey ahead.

Celebration

When Miriam crossed the Red Sea with her brother Moses, she picked up a tambourine and danced with the women. Indeed, her soul looked back and wondered how she made it

over and in turn she trained the children to dance. Graduation Services are a time of celebration. The tambourines should be picked up as we look back and wonder how we made it over. Before Joshua was able to lead the people over the Jordan River, it took time, teaching and testing. Great dreams are not fulfilled overnight; they take prayer, persistence and patience. On this day we celebrate the accomplishments of our graduates who have expended the energy to better themselves thereby making us all better. Thanks be to God.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: the voice of God speaking to Joshua (vv. 1-7); the sounds of travelers crossing rugged terrain (wilderness) and rivers;

Sights: the Jordan River being crossed (v. 2); the promised territory (v. 4); the wilderness, the great rivers; and the laws of God;

Remembrances: Joshua's remembrance of Moses and of the laws given to Moses by God; and

Emotions: Courage, fear, and strength.

Notes

1. Franklin, Robert M. Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 177.