



## MARTYR'S SUNDAY (ALL SAINTS DAY)

### CULTURAL RESOURCES

**Sunday, November 2, 2008**

**Freeman L. Palmer, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator**

Director of Finance and Administration, North Jersey Community Research Initiative

#### **I. Historical Background**

The Western Christian holiday of All Saints Day falls on November 1, followed by All Soul's Day on November 2. All Saints Day is a holy day of obligation in the Latin Rite Roman Catholic Church. The feast of All Saints, on its current date, is traced to the foundation by Pope Gregory III (731-741) of an oratory in St. Peter's for the relics "of the holy apostles and of all saints, martyrs and confessors, of all the just made perfect who are at rest throughout the world," with the day moved to November 1. The feast and celebration was extended four hundred years later to All Saints, with definitions ranging from beatification in the Catholic tradition to any faithful person, living or dead, in Pentecostal traditions. In the United Methodist Church, All Saints Day is on the first

Sunday in November. It is held to remember all those from the local church congregation who have passed away. Some other African American congregations follow the same custom.

Coincidentally this year, All Saints Sunday falls on November 1. **We choose on this day to take the day back to its origin to celebrate and reflect on the bravery and courage of our own Black martyrs.**

## **II. The Question of Martyrdom**

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Romans 8:35a, NRSV)

The above question is part of one the most powerful passages of writing in Scripture. Paul's answer to this question from his letter to the Romans describes, perhaps as no other, the meaning of martyrdom as it relates to faith. It is the one willing to sacrifice all for his or her faith who declares with him that:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39, NRSV)

We celebrate on this Martyr's Sunday our ancestors who refused to be separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus, the love that believed in feeding the hungry, including the marginalized, bringing forth justice and speaking truth to power regardless of the cost.

### **What is a Martyr?**

The word martyr comes from the Greek *martys* meaning "witness." The word was originally used in a legal sense as a person called to bear witness in a trial or other legal proceedings. In Scripture, the word appears in the King James Version of the Bible in Acts 22:20. Bearing witness in any sense during this time was not intended to lead to death. However, it was routine practice to torture witnesses, especially those from the lower socioeconomic classes, in order to elicit the truth from them during interrogation. It was during the early centuries when the meaning of the word was extended by Christians to describe a believer who was killed for maintaining his or her faith.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that martyrs during the time of the early church maintained their faith in Christ knowing that their belief would probably result in imminent death. They were not intentional about seeking death, but they knew that it was a real possibility. One hears this reflected in Dr. Martin Luther King's "Mountaintop Speech" delivered on April 3, 1968 where he says that "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."<sup>2</sup> These are the words of a martyr.

### III. The First Martyrs

I find it no small irony in this discussion of martyrs that I spent my formative Christian years in a church named after the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Acts tell of Stephen, “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:8), who, like Jesus, was charged with prophesying against the temple and the laws of religious tradition. Nonetheless, Stephen stood firm, preaching the gospel, and remained faithful to his death by stoning. He would be the first of many thousands of Christian martyrs who faced persecution, torture and death because they had the courage to confess their faith and live it during the time of Roman oppression.

History records Christian being martyred during the Protestant Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries for charges of heresy for their adherence to the teachings of Martin Luther and his colleagues. Among these martyrs were St. Rutilius, a North African Catholic bishop who was martyred sometime in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and African nuns who were killed during the reign of Huneric, king of the Vandals during the Byzantine Empire. While there is no definitive count of the number of Christian martyrs, the number is estimated to be an astounding seventy (70) million.<sup>3</sup>

### IV. Our Martyrs

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,  
'Til now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.  
--James Weldon Johnson - Lift Every Voice and Sing

Our martyrs, people who dedicated and gave their lives to our struggle for freedom and equality, are many. Our martyrs are named in our history books, such as Crispus Attucks, credited as one of the first martyrs of the American Revolution, and Nat Turner, slave and preacher whose rebellion in 1831 was inspired by a vision from God. There are many who are not named in history books. Our martyrs include those who helped Harriet Tubman guide slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Our martyrs include those who fought in the Union Army during the Civil War against slavery. Our martyrs include the 616 members of the all-Black 92nd Division (Buffalo soldiers) who fought against Nazi occupation in Italy in World War II while still facing discrimination at home.<sup>4</sup>

Our martyrs include those who were part of race riots in 1919 from Chicago, Illinois to Elaine, Arkansas as they protested racism, inflation, and unemployment. Claude McKay, one of the principal writers during the Harlem Renaissance, wrote the poem “If We Must Die” as part of his 1922 collection “Harlem Shadows.” It was written as a sonnet in response to these riots. This Jamaican-born poet speaks of dying with honor, dignity and nobility.

### **If We Must Die**

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
while round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die  
so that our precious blood may not be shed  
in vain; then even the monsters we defy  
shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe  
though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
and for their thousand blows deal one death blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

### **V. The Civil Rights Movement: A Time of Martyrdom**

We are soldiers  
In the army  
We've got to fight  
Although we have to cry  
We've got to hold up  
The blood stained banner  
We've got to hold it up  
Until we die.....<sup>5</sup>

At St. Stephen Baptist Church in Washington DC (now in Temple Hills MD), "We Are Soldiers" was one of the more popular songs sung at offering during my childhood. I distinctly remember the Gospel Chorus' version of the song, with Sister Helen Tyler doing the solo. However, all seven choirs at the church knew the song and often sang it. Although I did not realize it acutely at the time, this was a song of martyrdom sung during a time of martyrdom. My childhood was during the sixties, a time when many were marching, protesting, risking all, including life itself, in the struggle for freedom.

### **Harry T. Moore**

Freedom never descends on people  
It is always bought with a price  
--Harry T. Moore



**Harry T. Moore (1905-1951)**

The man who spoke these words was among the first martyrs of the modern Civil Rights movement. Harry T. Moore, a school teacher and high school principal from Titusville, Florida, told his classes about the importance of voting. He was also an active and tireless participant in the NAACP, instrumental in winning a suit tried by NAACP attorney (and future Supreme Court Justice) Thurgood Marshall, addressing pay disparities between black and white teachers in 1937. He served as an educator before losing his job in 1946 because of his involvement in “political activities.” Later, Moore campaigned on behalf of the “Groveland Four,” youths accused (with dubious evidence) of raping a white woman in 1949. One was shot to death in a manhunt, two were sentenced to death, and the last, a 16 year-old, was sentenced to life in prison. Moore later found himself at odds with the NAACP as he protested against the organization’s intention to raise dues. Ostracized by the NAACP, he nonetheless continued in the struggle for the rights of Negroes until he was killed in an explosion at his home on Christmas night 1951. Although he lived in relative obscurity, Moore’s death sparked national and international protests, including protests registered at the United Nations. A memorial service and rally at Madison Square Garden featured a eulogy by Jackie Robinson and the following verse was written and read by Langston Hughes:

Florida means land of flowers.  
It was on a Christmas night  
in the state named for the flowers  
men came bearing dynamite  
It could not be in Jesus’ name  
beneath the bedroom floor  
on Christmas night the killers  
hid the bomb for Harry Moore. <sup>6</sup>

The life and death of Harry T. Moore was virtually unknown until his case was reopened in 1991, after which he became the subject of both a book and a PBS documentary narrated by Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, “Freedom Never Dies.” <sup>7</sup>

More martyrs would follow after the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956, and they would be lauded in word and song. On June 12, 1963, NAACP activist and community organizer Medgar Evers was killed by an assassin's bullet. Two years later, Malcolm X was killed in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. One of the most moving moments in African-American film is Spike Lee's depiction of Malcolm's death and funeral in his film Malcolm X. In the movie, Ossie Davis reprises the eulogy he gave at the Faith Temple Church of God in Christ in 1965, while scenes from Malcolm's life and times culminate in a montage of school children declaring proudly, "I am Malcolm X!"

### **Four Little Girls**

Come round by my side and I'll sing you a song.  
I'll sing it so softly, it'll do no one wrong.  
On Birmingham Sunday the blood ran like wine,  
and the choirs kept singing of freedom.  
On Birmingham Sunday a noise shook the ground.  
and people all over the earth turned around.  
For no one recalled a more cowardly sound.  
And the choirs kept singing of freedom.<sup>8</sup>

The year before Malcolm X's death produced four unlikely Black martyrs. Cynthia Wesley, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, all aged 14 and Denise McNair, aged 11, attended Sunday School on September 15, 1963 at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. They were on their way to the church's basement after a sermon entitled "The Love That Forgives" when a bomb exploded at 10:22 a.m. killing them and wounding twenty-two others. These four little girls would be martyrs, counted as heroes in the struggle for justice. Although one family requested a smaller, private service, a large public service for three of the girls with 8,000 mourners included a eulogy from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **Eulogy for the Martyred Children - September 18, 1963 Birmingham, Alabama**

This afternoon we gather in the quiet of this sanctuary to pay our last tribute of respect to these beautiful children of God. They entered the stage of history just a few years ago, and in the brief years that they were privileged to act on this mortal stage, they played their parts exceedingly well. Now the curtain falls; they move through the exit; the drama of their earthly life comes to a close. They are now committed back to that eternity from which they came.

These children—unoffending, innocent, and beautiful—were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity. Yet they died nobly. They are the martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.

And so this afternoon in a real sense they have something to say to each of us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has

remained silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. They have something to say to every politician [*Audience:*] (*Yeah*) who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. They have something to say to a federal government that has compromised with the undemocratic practices of southern Dixiecrats (*Yeah*) and the blatant hypocrisy of right-wing northern Republicans. (*Speak*) They have something to say to every Negro (*Yeah*) who has passively accepted the evil system of segregation and who has stood on the sidelines in a mighty struggle for justice. They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. (*Mmm*) They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.<sup>9</sup>

## VI. The Importance of Martyrdom Today

Am I a soldier of the cross,  
a follower of the Lamb?  
And shall I fear to own His cause  
Or blush to speak His name?<sup>10</sup>

Martyr's Sunday (All Saints Day) is not only a time to celebrate these and other ancestors in our faith, it is also time to take up the gauntlet that they have handed to us. A favorite verse from the book of Hebrews says, "therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1)." Interestingly, the writer makes this conclusion at the end of the great "faith chapter," where s/he speaks of those who were stoned to death, sawn in two, and killed by the sword (Hebrews 11:37b).

Not only is this a time for celebration and remembrance, it is also a time for reflection and challenge. We are losing many of our young to senseless killing, notably Sean Bell and Amadou Diallo. Last year, Chicago was the scene of several murders targeting gay African American men; violence against others surely is not what our freedom fighting foreparents gave their lives to protect. The question that Paul raised in the book of Romans still holds almost two millennia later. Who indeed will separate us from the love of Christ? Are we willing, as we remember our martyrs, to run the race that is set before us, willing to sacrifice all, to bring forth God's reign of love, peace and justice for us and for all people?

Sure I must fight if I would reign;  
Increase my courage Lord;  
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain  
supported by Thy word.<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

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3. White, Matthew. Online Historical Atlas of the Twentieth Century. Citing to World Christian Encyclopedia (2001) <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstatv.htm#Martyrs>
4. "Military Assignments." Buffalo Soldier National Museum. Online at: <http://www.buffalosoldiermuseum.com/militaryhistory.html> accessed 20 June 2008; See also, "An African American's Vietnam War: Emotional Personal Account Marks Black History Month." Historic Camden County Online at: <http://historiccamdencounty.com/ccnews04.shtml> accessed 20 June 2008
5. We Are Soldiers. Traditional Gospel hymn
6. Browning, Michael. "Forgotten civil-rights martyr a hero again. New book and buildings renew interest." The Palm Beach Post. 6 September 1999. Online at: <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/141.html>, accessed 20 June 2008.
7. Freedom Never Dies The Legacy of Harry T. Moore. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, 2000; Companion site with teacher's guide Public Broadcasting Service. Freedom Never Dies The Legacy of Harry T. Moore. U.S.: Documentary Institute, 2000. Online at: <http://www.pbs.org/harrymoore/> accessed 20 June 2008.
8. Malcolm X. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Albert Hall, and Al Freeman. 1992. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000; See also "Birmingham Sunday." Digital Tradition. Online location: <http://sniff.numachi.com/pages/tiBIRMSUN;ttFLSEBRDE.html> accessed 20 June 2008
9. King, Martin Luther. "Eulogy for the Martyred Children." A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1986. p. 221
10. Am I a Soldier of the Cross. By Isaac Watts
11. Ibid.

## **Resources**

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- Zinn, Howard, and Anthony Arnove. Voices of a People's History of the United States. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004.

### Websites

- “Biography of Malcolm X.” Africa Within. This site is an excellent lead for resources concerning the life of Malcolm X. Online at: [http://www.africawithin.com/malcolmx/malcolm\\_bio.htm](http://www.africawithin.com/malcolmx/malcolm_bio.htm) accessed 20 June 2008.
- “Martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement-- Memorial Service: A Full Measure of Truth and Justice.” Black Mississippi. Contains a well-researched list of well and not-so-well-known martyrs from the Civil Rights movement. Online at: <http://www.blackmississippi.com/indexarticle.html?page=main&id=-1&grid=&fid=1136> accessed 20 June 2008.
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- Buffalo Soldiers National Museum. Website containing information and resources on the Buffalo soldiers. Online at: <http://www.buffalosoldiermuseum.com> accessed 20 June 2008.
- Harry T. Moore Homesite. Contains information as well as shared memories from family and friends concerning of Harry T. Moore. Online at: <http://www.nbbd.com/godo/moore/>

### Films

- Malcolm X. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Albert Hall, and Al Freeman. 1992. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.
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