



MEN'S DAY CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, October 27, 2013

J.C. Howard, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Youth and Young Adult Pastor, Mt. Bethel Baptist Church, Ft. Lauderdale, FL

Lection – Hebrew 13:8-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

I. Historical Background

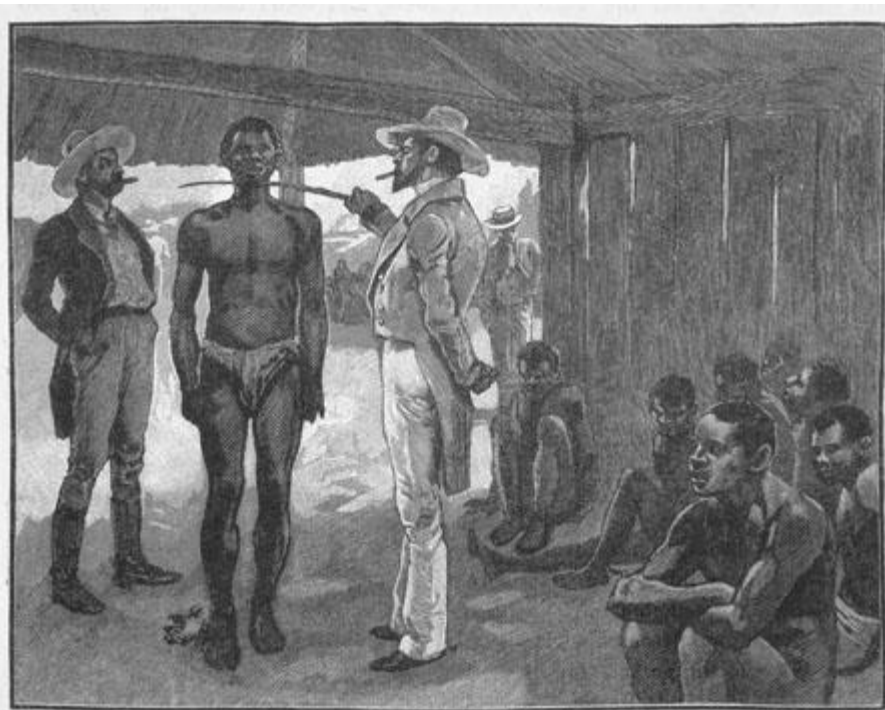
In regards to Men's Day celebrations, we must understand that this call for men, particularly in the black church, to gather, fellowship, be recognized for communal uplift, and be celebrated, is a rare occasion, for Men's Day often only comes around once a year, and typically it is explicitly relegated to the four walls of the Church. Although the occasion is rare, it is joyous in that there is power in the coming together and celebration of black men who stand up in and for the church.

Traditionally, Men's Day was a time on the liturgical calendar set aside to highlight and celebrate the men of a particular congregation who are faithful congregants and model citizens in society. In many churches, Men's Day has evolved into a worship service that celebrates all males and is open to men throughout the community. What makes this day so special is its necessity. Nowhere beyond the church can black men count on a consistent hallmark of celebration for them because of the love/hate relationship society has with black males. I shall explore this later in this cultural resource.

Today's lectionary Scripture calls our attention to men who are forced to dwell in a strange land. Dwelling as foreigners, these men are subject to dual attention. First, as foreigners, it is easy to be scrutinized and marginalized because of one's cultural customs and physical appearance. Second, they draw attention because they may or may not have particular resources and gifts. The need to extract the talents and resources from the foreigner by the natives is easy to read into today's text. There lie the identifying contours of the text and of black men in American culture.

II. Viewing the Black Male Body

From 1619, the time of the first Africans arriving in Jamestown, Virginia, to today, the black male has been relegated to a showcase. Blacks in America were and are constantly put on display. The era of the auction blocks was a time when many blacks were "oiled up and conditioned" for sale.



An enslaved man on an auction block being inspected for sale.

Treated as chattel, their bodies were evaluated for hard labor. It was their physical prowess that was most desired. As many historians have pointed out, neither whites nor Native Americans could withstand the physical and climate challenges of toiling the land and producing harvests as well as Africans did. Whites and Native Americans died in the hundreds of thousands from disease and physical labor. Yet Africans and their descendants in the Americans had the physical fortitude to withstand the vacillating weather conditions, as well as the labor forced upon them.

Though unsettling, but not unexpected, black physicality is still preyed upon today. Two of America's three most popular sports are dominated by black bodies. Millions of fans around the world tune into basketball games and football games to see the leagues' biggest stars—most of whom are black—battle for championship glory. Billions of dollars are generated by franchise owners and the NFL/NBA front offices because of the sheer star power of these athletes. Athletes including LeBron James, Kobe Bryant, Calvin Johnson, Ray Lewis, and Michael Vick are idolized for their athletic prowess. Yet these players are just pawns in a larger financial game. All the money these players make from contracts and endorsements (though not to be minimized) is minuscule in comparison to the money that is generated mainly for white men, due to the performance of these athletes. Furthermore, excluding LeBron James and Calvin Johnson, how ironic it is that the other three sport stars mentioned were at one point entangled in criminal court cases ranging from charges of dog fighting, to rape, to murder. White America loves the athletic ability of these black men but will not hesitate to associate them with criminal activity.



Kobe Bryant in 2003, as he proceeds to trial, facing charges of raping a white woman. The case was ultimately dropped but ruined Bryant's reputation for years. Nevertheless, because of his athletic ability, he was embraced again.



The world-famous **Ray Lewis** was once demonized for having been charged with murder in 2000. Although he is now viewed by many as a highly respected motivational team player, Super Bowl champion, and role model, he was once criminalized and looked upon as a menace to society.

The complexity of being black involves a deeper sociological issue of White America somehow divorcing the accomplishments, gifts, talents, and intellectual acumen of blacks from their skin color. This is to suggest that although the accomplishments stand out, and are celebrated, the black bodies associated with them still harbor hyper sexuality, criminality, and violence, albeit dormant.

Black men in our society continue to be foreigners in the land of the free and home of the brave. Although born here, our entire personhood is not accepted, and our challenge has been to remain faithful to God and to our families and communities, despite the institutional dehumanization of our bodies. The difficulty of living in America for the black male involves a common awareness that no matter how high one may climb on the social ladder, one is nevertheless dark, ostracized, and subject to ridicule at any moment. Even black men in strong socio-economic positions are in this position.

This process of dehumanization has driven some of our most intelligent and gifted black men from desiring citizenship in this country. Men like James Baldwin, Ernest Everett Just, and Marcus Garvey made it their mission to leave America because of the imaginary notion that America is the land of the free and all are in a position to pursue life, liberty, and happiness unfettered.



Prophetic and prolific writer **James Baldwin** left America and moved to France. His disdain for the oppression of blacks in America pushed him to move to Europe, where his work, race, and sexuality were no longer confined or condemned.

Men's Day in our churches creates a sacred space for black males to be celebrated for religious service and for simply being black men. Men's Day does not separate the bus driver from the lawyer or the janitor from the surgeon. It is a celebration of men, all men. No matter social status, income, or class, all men are celebrated for being men, black men. How beautiful it is to find a genuine display of appreciation for our brothers, unattached to ulterior motives of exploitation. The local church remains a strong incubator of human dignity when it comes to black men.

III. Songs and Poetry That Speak to the Moment

“Can't You Live Humble” is an African American spiritual that speaks to this liturgical moment. How else can a black man survive in oppressive America if he does not operate in humility? Not in submission, but in humility. Submission is the key to particular secular opportunities, but humility and praise are the keys to God's heart. This song speaks to the necessity of remaining humble in your relationship with God, though life can be extremely uncomfortable and unfair, particularly when you are in a foreign land.

Can't You Live Humble?

Can you live humble?
Praise King Jesus!
Can't you live humble?
To the dying Lamb

Lightning flashes
Thunders roll
Make me think
Of my poor soul

Everybody
Come here, please,
See me, Jesus,
On my knees
Come down here, and
Talk to me
Went away, and
Let me free¹

Black men can easily relate to the lyrics of the spiritual “Nobody Knows Who I Am.” Black men, whose identities are constantly put on public trial, must deal with the reality that the foreign land they inhabit knows little to nothing about them.

Nobody Knows Who I Am

O, nobody knows who I am, a-who I am, till the Judgment morning
Heaven bells a-ringing, the saints all singing
Heaven bells a-ringing in my soul
Want to go to Heaven
Want to go right
Want to go to Heaven
All dressed in white

O, nobody knows who I am, a-who I am, till the Judgment morning
Heaven bells a-ringing, the saints all singing
Heaven bells a-ringing in my soul
Don't want to stumble,
Don't want to fall
Want to go right
Want to be in Heaven
When the roll is called

O, nobody knows who I am, a-who I am, till the Judgment morning
Heaven bells a-ringing, the saints all singing
Heaven bells a-ringing in my soul
If you don't believe
That I've been redeemed
Follow me down
To Jordan's stream.²

African American writer Phillip McCullough Jr. penned a moving poem entitled “Forced Fertility.”³ McCullough speaks of the crude reality of America's birthing of the illegitimate son, the African American. America has exploited black Americans for our physical and intellectual labor while discarding our bodies and personhood. A part of industrial America is still being

built on the backs of blacks who are incarcerated; Michelle Alexander makes this point in her well-written book, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness.⁴

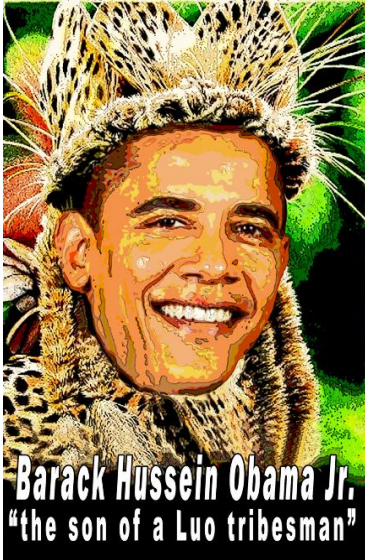
Forced Fertility

by Phillip McCullough Jr.

Like the great continent,
That is the origin of all mankind,
The mighty back
Seemed to spread for miles
Under the southern sun. The crack of the whip
Bore deep into the thick, black skin,
Causing blood to erupt from the depths
Of the most sacred and spiritual
Child of Earth.
The sweat which flowed
Across the backbone of this country
Settled deep within the sores,
And—like grease frying in a hot iron skillet—
The pain burned,
Causing undeserved tears.
This union
Seeped slowly into the soil
Of stolen, yet fertile grounds.
And from this forced fertility
This nation, called America, was born.

IV. Contemporary Reality

In 2008, the 44th President of these United States of America was then a junior senator out of Illinois running for the Presidential Office. Unlike any other President in the history of the country, he was ridiculed and questioned with accusations directly correlated to his race. During the campaign, President Obama was called the Anti-Christ and accused of being a non-citizen because of his African lineage. Due to the insurmountable pressure to address, not just race, but his race, his understanding of race relations, and his idea of a united nation, he was cornered by left- and right-wing groups alike into delivering a speech on the topics. Although then-Senator Obama masterfully spoke to the creative vision he had for a more perfect union, it is a tragedy that a presidential candidate had to succumb to defending himself on racial matters. Regardless of the leadership qualities, political astuteness, and superior intellect that Obama displayed during his campaign, he still had to defend himself because he was black.



Above is one of the pictures of Obama that was circulated by race-baiters and hate-mongers. Here is a speech that then-candidate Obama gave: YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsrGQzKmMCs>

Tim Wise, in his critically acclaimed text, Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama,⁵ suggested that America has now embraced what he calls Racism 2.0, which is a particular kind of racism that allows for exceptions. Wise contends that White America, because of its inability to use de facto means to suppress black Americans, has resolved to allow a certain amount of blacks in every field to pass through the ranks of super success. This method of control affords whites to place a number on how many blacks they allow into the higher class of society. The blacks who are moved into the high ranks may be unaware of such a move, but the goal is to lock them into assimilating in order that they will one day look back at their fellow brothers and sisters with disgust for not working as hard as they did to get to the top.

Men's Day in our churches have to move from being locked into liturgical traditionalism and move toward teaching black men how to better navigate the society in which they live. Yes, it is a true blessing to celebrate our black men, but how much greater it is to empower them? The best way that a young black boy can easily recognize his value in this country is if a strong black man tells him he is valued and shows him this is true. Programming for Men's Day celebrations can be designed to incorporate sessions before and after Men's Day that will resonate long after the celebration ends. These should be sessions of empowerment and enlightenment.

V. Mentorship: Teaching Black Boys How to Navigate Life in America

After spending a rich summer interning at the Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, I stumbled across a program they offered that produced lasting effects for its young boys and congregation at large. It is a "Rites of Passage" program. This mentoring program allows young black boys who have to face stiff cultural and societal challenges to be mentored by strong

black men who have proven to be solid examples of manhood and positive community leaders. For months, these mentors and mentees come together to discuss various topics and complete various projects. It is a time of transformation for the boys and the men.

Each Men's Day at Wheeler, the church celebrates by holding a Rites of Passage Graduation Ceremony, which, in essence is a representation of the boys moving from boyhood to manhood (in particular respects). The relationship between the mentee and mentor do not end at the ceremony. The mentors are commissioned to stand by a young boy until he graduates high school and moves into collegiate studies. These mentors not only show young black males how to tie a tie, balance a checkbook, and study, but also they show them the value of their worth as young black men.

All churches and the African American community must show our young men that their gifts and talents are only additions to the beauty of their personhood and character. Every church could benefit from such a ministry where there is long-term substance and support given and not merely a short-term celebration held. Men's Day can be much more than a day. It has the potential to evolve into a movement. However, it must begin with the black church uplifting black men and with black boys knowing they can count on the black men they see each Sunday.

VI. A Memorable Learning Moment

While attending a 'Men of Distinction' retreat in Boca Raton, Florida, the facilitator asked each man to write on a piece of paper one word in response to this question, "What object or things do you see yourself in, in the world?" I thought this was a rather strange question, so I decided to pay close attention to where the facilitator was headed with this group activity. After a few minutes, the facilitator returned and asked some of the brothers to share what they had written. I was especially impressed with three brothers who shared testimonials that I will not forget.

The first brother said he saw himself in the **trees**. When probed why, he went on to share how he was rooted, like a tree, in the earth, because all things and all humanity came from the earth. There is no one greater than another because of our commonality of creation. Furthermore, he suggested that the bark of a tree represents his strength and resilience not to yield to oppressive forces. He shared that the branches represent the extension of his family and friends, whom he cherishes deeply. Finally, the leaves represent his future. They are the sprouting of new ideas and ambitions he would like to one day achieve. He added that there was also fruit on his tree. His fruit were the deposits that he had obtained and aspired to drop into other people's lives.

Second, an older gentleman said he saw himself in the **Church**. He explained that the Church is the foundation on which the community should thrive. He contended that the local church is the place where love prevails and discrimination should not exist, that the Church stands as the one place where anybody should be able to go for empowerment, spiritual uplift, and consolation. He shared that he tried his best every day to live by those same principles, even in the face of bigotry and discrimination. He went on to say the Church is a beacon of hope in the world, and that like the Church does, he tries to encourage himself and his loved ones to keep hoping for better days.

Finally, a young brother stood up. He said, “**I see myself in all people.**” He went on to explain that there is no race that he has come in contact with that has not adopted characteristics of black culture. He said, “I’m not saying everyone I know or have seen acts black, but black culture is so permeated throughout society that I see it everywhere, whether it be style, dress, lingo, preaching, music or athletics, everyone loves the black way.”

The last young man shared something extremely meaningful to this moment. He pointed out that black culture is all around us. It has penetrated popular society so much that there is not a way to avoid it. Black contributions are indeed American contributions. Our bodies cannot be divorced from our influence on the culture. The former simple exercise also shows us the diversity of black thinking and being in the world. Black bodies can identify to all that which is beautiful about themselves and the country, even if those bodies are constantly victimized, criminalized, and ostracized. The black male identity stands for much more than the restrictive labels attached by society.

VII. New Norms

In his book The Heart of Whiteness Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege, Robert Jensen talks extensively about white fear.⁶ White fear is rooted in several things. One is that white folk fear blacks because they believe that if blacks have societal power, they will subject whites to the same methods of oppression to which whites have historically subjected blacks. Whites ignore and erase the contributions of black talent and black intelligence because they fear that if proper credit is given to black men and women, then blacks will also take over control in a variety of areas of society.

Although there may be a desire by some blacks for revenge for the lasting centuries of discrimination and oppression, this has not been the general sentiment of blacks in America. A part of breaking down the racist ideology of black males being gifted but inherently violent, hyper-sexual, and crime-prone is the ability to decentralize white fear of black domination. Men’s Day could serve as a catalyst to do so. Traditionally, Men’s Day in the black church involves a congregation, and sometimes sister or local churches in the area are invited to participate. Imagine what could happen if black churches constructed a culturally inclusive Men’s Day that was not restricted to black males, but celebrated all males. Men’s Day could transcend being a centralized black celebration and inaugurate a celebration that seeks to break down societal and ideological barriers. I believe there is no better place for that to happen than in church worship.

I am not saying that we should abandon holding celebrations for blacks only, but I am suggesting that to deracinate ideological pathologies such as those mentioned above, we must engage in more communal fellowship.



A Men's Day that incorporates a white and black congregation could be the first step toward mutual dialogue and understanding. Even as foreigners in our own home, black males must be willing to invite those outside into our space for the purpose of unearthing who we are at our very roots. This kind of worship celebration could inaugurate further dialogue and even fellowship between groups of people who often misunderstand one another. That could possibly lead to the city that the writer of Hebrews 11:11 was referring when he wrote, "For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

In his poem "Black! White! Church? Right!," Phillip McCullough Jr. is helpful in making the point that segregated worship is never what God intended.

Black! White! Church? Right!

by Phillip McCullough Jr.

Every Sunday, you hear the Good News
Among like-colored faces in the pews.
Does not your soul feel somewhat amiss
In your holy temple of monochrome bliss?
The Lord's church—a sanctuary of piety—
Has become a reflection of an ugly society.
Racism can be a subtle sin,
But it will cause you to lose your soul, my friend.
To God's will, are you truly committed?
Or by Satan's deceit, have you been outwitted?
The place where you strengthen your spiritual education
May be Satan's greatest tool to cause segregation.

Racial division lives within this worldly theocracy,
But the Lord may see it as shameless hypocrisy.
“A house divided, cannot stand.”
The principle is simple, yet the wisdom escapes man.⁷

VIII. A Communal Project

Rev. Dr. E. Dewey Smith Jr., pastor of the Greater Travelers Rest Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, has instituted a great initiative that I believe all churches that celebrate Men’s Day could adopt for positive lasting effects. On the weekend of his anniversary as pastor, instead of simply celebrating his commitment to the ministry with a big service for himself, the church dedicates that entire Saturday to community service all across metro Atlanta. Their gift to the pastor is service to God through serving the community. This not only blesses the community of the congregation, but it is a blessing to hundreds, even thousands of marginalized people throughout metro Atlanta.

Men’s Day does not have to be just a single worship service. It can be much bigger and more effective than that through a little strategic planning and creative thinking. Men’s Day could become an annual project for all the men and boys of a particular church to serve the community. That service project could take on an array of forms, but the project in and of itself is what will bind the men and boys to an image that is antithetical to notions of black bodies as locations of criminality and loathsomeness.

References

All pictures courtesy of <http://Bing.com>

Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. New York, NY: New Press, 2010.

Baldwin, James. Collected Essays. New York, NY: Library of America, 1997, 47–53.

Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York, NY: Dover Publication, Inc., 1994, 3–6.

Dyson, Michael E. Between God and Gangster Rap. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1972.

Jenson, Robert. The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege. San Francisco, CA: City of Light Publishing, 2005.

Wise, Tim. Between Barack and a Hard Place. San Francisco, CA: City of Light Publishing, 2009.

Zinn, Howard. A People's History of the United States 1491–Present. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003, 24–25.

Notes

1. Can't You Live Humble. Online location: http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/can_t_you_live_humble.htm (accessed 9 May 2013).

2. Nobody Knows Who I Am. Online location http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/nobody_knows_who_i_am.htm (accessed 9 May 2013).

3. McCullough, Phillip Jr. "Forced Fertility." Online location: <http://www.blackpoems.net/?p=29> (accessed 9 May 2013).

4. Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness (New York, NY: New Press, The Reprint edition, 2012).

5. Wise, Tim. Between Barack and a Hard Place (San Francisco, CA: City of Light Publishing, 2009), 112.

6. Jenson, Robert. The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege (San Francisco, CA: City of Light Publishing, 2005), 53–54.

7. McCullough, Phillip Jr. "Black! White! Church? Right!" Online location: <http://www.blackpoems.net/?p=29> (accessed 9 May 2013).