



CELEBRATION OF BLACK HISTORY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. The History of Celebrating Black History

The celebration of black history is both a necessary corrective to the exclusion and misrepresentation of blacks in American history and an affirmation of black life passed on from one generation to the next. Contrary to the timeline of many 19th and early 20th century textbooks, black history is much more than a shallow overview of the conditions of slavery and the emancipation of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Yet African and African American contributions to history have often been denied, ignored, devalued, or purposefully hidden and attributed to Europeans and EuroAmericans. The need to reverse historical mis-education and set the record straight on the historical, cultural, scientific, political and social achievements of ethnic African and African American peoples has been a main thrust behind the celebration of black history.

Prior to the first recorded arrival of twenty involuntary African laborers to the North American British settler colony of Jamestown, Virginia on August 20, 1619, our black ancestors participated in civilizations on the continent of Africa, such as the Yoruba, Akan, Bakongo,

Benin, Wolof, Mandinka, Mende, Dogon, Dahomey, and the Mali Empire, that were sophisticated cultures with extensive histories, creative arts, politics, religions, social hierarchies, and ethnic groupings.¹ There is historical evidence that Africans had traveled to the Americas several times prior to the European Enlightenment and the establishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.² With the onset of the financially profitable trans-Atlantic slave trade, slavery soon became legalized in the British colonies of North America. Through forced migration, the Middle Passage, and the African Diaspora, the ancestors of African Americans survived extreme hardship to become a vital part of the landscape transformation and the creation of society and cultures of the Americas.

In the 20th century, a leading figure in the celebration of black history is Carter G. Woodson. Trained as a historian and earning his doctorate from Harvard University in 1912, Woodson went on to teach at Howard University and become a co-founder, along with Jesse E. Moreland, of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, known today as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Woodson believed that the history of African Americans was also American history and that the inclusion of truthful scientific facts concerning black achievements would work to change race relations for the better.

In 1926, Negro History Week was established, and Woodson's efforts to popularize the recognition and study of African American contributions to the Americas and to world history paid off. Fifty years later, in 1976, the celebration of black history would expand to encompass the entire month of February. Although Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois are prominent persons in the emergence of black historiography and the study of black life, there are many other women and men whose work and tenacity contributed to the success of black history as an academic field of study and the public popularity of black history celebrations. Arthur A. Schomburg, Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Letitia Woods Brown, John Hope Franklin, Lorraine A. Williams, Lorenzo Greene, John Henrik Clarke, and many other persons and organizations have also made valuable contributions to the celebration and study of black history.

II. Songs that Speaks to the Moment

“Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” also known as the Negro National Anthem, is a song penned by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. Originally composed in 1900 for a celebration of President Abraham Lincoln’s birthday in Jacksonville, Florida, Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing has become a song that represents the struggles, triumphs, and future hopes of African American peoples. It was later adopted as the official song of the NAACP.³ “We’ve Come a Long Way,” tells of the arduous yet triumphant journey of black folk in America.

Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet,
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

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, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou Who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou Who hast by Thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee.
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.⁴

We've Come A Mighty Long Way

We've come a long way, Lord
A might-y long way
We've come a long way, Lord

Chorus

A might-y long way,
We've born our bur-dens in the heat of the day,
But we know the Lord has made the Way,
We've come a long way, Lord,
A migh-ty long way

Verse

I've been in the val-ley and I prayed night and day,
I've been in the val-ley and I prayed night and day
I've been in the val-ley and I prayed night and day,
And I know the Lord has made the way
We've come a long way Lord,
A might-y long way.

I've had hard tri-als each and ev-'ry day.
I've had hard tri-als each and ev-'ry day

I've had hard trials each and ev-'ry day,
But I know the Lord has made the Way
We've come a long way Lord,
A mighty long way.⁵

III. Celebrating Black Heritage and History

Celebrating black history is about giving thanks and remembering how blacks have “come a mighty long way.” The progress of the black community in spite of the terrors of Diaspora from our homelands on the continent of Africa, the brutality of slavery, the horrors of inequality, discrimination, and lynching during the Jim Crow era, the disgrace of legal racial segregation, and current struggles against racism and injustice is nothing short of phenomenal. Resistance to the oppression and non-recognition of the humanity of black peoples was present even at the beginning of the establishment of the United States of America. Some Euro-American Christians, such as the Quakers, rejected American slavery as it became an accepted economic practice. Resisters risked their lives to participate in slave revolts, the Underground Railroad, and to push for abolition and emancipation of enslaved Africans. After Emancipation, the establishment of black independent churches, black schools and universities, and civic organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League were vital to the re-envisioning of race relations and progress in black achievement.

When we celebrate black history, we not only recall where we have been as a people and what we have been able to accomplish in the face of adversity, we also take time to tell our stories and hand off the wisdom of our elders to the next generation. Celebrating black history is not just about our past, it is also about our present history in the making. There have been recent debates on how black history celebrations, like many other holidays, have become overly commercial and lost the power of their meaning. This has made February in particular a month when homage is given to black achievements and resulted in black history being largely ignored the rest of the year. **One way to offset this effect is to incorporate black history moments throughout the liturgical year through music, dance, readings, performances, church luncheons and dinners, and themed church and civic activities.**

IV. Catchin' Sense of Being Black and Proud

Music, movies, art, poetry, and informal conversations are indispensable means by which young people can get excited about their heritage and history. My childhood memories are full of lively conversations with my great-grandmother and my aunts and uncles. As a child, I loved sitting at the table during holidays and family reunions, getting peach cobbler from my uncle and then asking for a taste of lemon meringue pie an hour later from my grandmother, and listening to stories from my family on their life experiences and their thoughts on black life and social change over the years. Their stories fed my imagination of what black life had been under legal racial segregation, the significance of the *Brown v. Board of Education* legal case in dismantling segregation, and the adversity and physical risks of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements. I also remember black history celebrations at school; the hallways and classrooms filled with posters of pioneering African Americans, and teachers and librarians encouraged us to

read the biographies of black achievers. These conversations and images were very important in my formative years in helping me to “catch sense” of what it means to be a black person in the United States and the heavy price exacted for black survival, freedom, equality, dignity, and achievement. Watching movies like Alex Haley’s *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* presented me with more opportunities to ask the community elders questions and inspired me to go do more research on black history independently. I also remember being inspired by artists such as painter Romare Bearden, poet Gwendolyn Brooks, musical genius Stevie Wonder, and jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald.

I also encountered racism, discrimination, and racially motivated conflicts as a young person. Although some of my teachers were very purposeful in affirming my potential as a black child, others were constantly anxious, unhelpful, or accusatory when I outperformed some of the white students in class. These teachers were suspicious of any black child that disproved their hidden assumptions concerning the intellectual capacities of black children. There were white friends at school who suddenly told me we could no longer be friends because their parents advised them to not befriend blacks. Because of my academic performance I was sometimes ostracized by my black friends because getting good grades was “a white thing.” Fortunately for me, I was surrounded by family and professionals that encouraged me, listened to me, and assisted me in growing into my potential. This encouragement, however, still does not happen for many black children today.

Can you feel a brand new day? Celebrations of black history invite us to re-imagine the possibilities of blacks as a people, the United States as a country, and Africa as a continent. Any of these themes - people, purpose, or place - can be used as a basis for a sermon, group discussion, or bible study. For example, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech is a reflection on a new day of national potential and an invitation to work towards social justice. King’s speech is also a calling to improve relationships between people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and human relationships with all of God’s creation. As African Americans continue their journey toward inclusiveness and equality, our faithful remembrance and recognition of our past history lays the foundation for a better future. We are the generations that our foremothers and forefathers prayed for, endured for, died for. Let us celebrate black heritage and history, “lest we forget” who we are, where we came from, and where we hope to go!

V. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment

The following information is provided to assist preachers, Christian Educators, worship leaders, students, and community organizations in celebrating black history.

When churches and organizations celebrate black history, there are so many diverse and spirit-filled activities and events that happen! Many churches organize a “Young, Gifted, and Black” youth showcase that includes choir performances, readings, dance, poetry, artwork, youth reflections and dedications to black trailblazers. Other programs highlight invited speakers from a variety of professions including business persons, educators, religious leaders, lawyers, doctors, scientists and inventors as well as public servants, politicians, writers, artists, and community activists. In the order of worship/bulletin place “Black First” facts or “On this Day in Black History” listings of historical events. Dramatic presentations of historical events often help

to contextualize moments in black history for adults and youth. In recent years, services that feature a choir or jazz vespers performances of hymns and spirituals from the Civil Rights movement have become popular. Some of the best stories from black history are told by our “living books;” our griots, elders, historians, librarians, genealogists, and elders. We need to recognize that the contributions of the many add to the richness and well-being of the whole. Include each generation during your Black History Celebration.

A. Audio Visual Aids

Sights: Display pictures of black historical figures, significant African leaders, and maps of the continent of Africa in prominent places throughout the church.

Sounds: Take this opportunity to teach the entire congregation all of the stanzas of the song “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Singing spirituals or freedom songs is also encouraged.

Touch: Plan a hands-on activity, such as creating a collage of one person or a group of people that have helped to resist racism and work towards social justice for people of all backgrounds. Arts, crafts, and games that incorporate black history themes and images also appeal to tactile learners. Some may even be interested in re-enacting a scene from black history; let families engage history through imagination!

Tastes: Many of the foods that Americans eat, such as yams, okra, black-eyed peas, rice, and watermelons were transported from Africa to the Americas. Taste them and find out more about foods and foodways that journeyed with our African foreparents to the Americas.

B. Online Resources for the Classroom

The History Channel’s website offers short video clips that are helpful to illustrate historical periods in the African American experience in the United States. Titles of the videos include “Origins of Slavery”, “Abolition and the Underground Railroad”, “W.E.B. Dubois and the Niagara Movement”, and “Freedom March” with another section of videos that trace the life of President Barack Obama. The History Channel Black History Month videos can be found at Online location: <http://www.history.com/content/blackhistory/video> accessed 30 October 2009

CSPAN offers online primary sources from the Civil Rights movement, including audio clips of a 1964 phone call between Martin Luther King, Jr. and President Lyndon B. Johnson, a 1963 debate on racism with James Baldwin followed by remarks from Malcolm X, a 1969 interview of Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, and a 1969 interview with labor organizer A. Phillip Randolph. C-SPAN in the Classroom. Online location: http://www.c-span.org/classroom/govt/civilrights_leaders.asp accessed 30 October 2009

C. Videos

1. Whispers of Angels: A Story of the Underground Railroad. (2004) Baker, Sharon K., Edward Asner, Blair Underwood, Ozzie Jones, Ayoka Dorsey, and Frank Baker. United States: Janson Media, 2004.
2. The Road to Brown: The Untold Story of the Man Who Killed Jim Crow. (1990) Elwood, William A., Mykola Kulish, Steven A. Jones, and Darryl Cox. San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel [distributor], 1990.
3. American Experience: Malcolm X: Make It Plain. (1994) Orlando Bagwell, director. PBS Home Video.
4. American Experience: Citizen King. (2004) Orlando Bagwell and Noland Walker, directors. PBS Home Video.
5. Mahalia Jackson: Got To Tell It. (2008) Terkel, Studs, and Jules Victor Schwerin. St. Louis, Mo: Phoenix Films & Video, 1990s
6. Landmarks of Faith: The Heritage of African-American Worship. (1999) Sackett, Schuyler. Thousand Oaks, CA: Distributed by Goldhil Video..
7. The Tuskegee Airmen. (2003) PBS Home Video.
8. Four Little Girls. (1997) Lee, Spike, director, Sam Pollard, Bill Cosby, Walter Cronkite, Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Coretta Scott King, George C. Wallace, Ellen Kuras, and Terence Blanchard. New York: HBO Home Video.

VI. General Online Resources for Black History

1. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Online location: <http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html> accessed 30 October 2009
2. National Museum of African American History and Culture – The Smithsonian Institution. Online location: <http://nmaahc.si.edu/> accessed 30 October 2009
3. AfriGeneas - African American and African Ancestored Genealogy. Online location: <http://www.afrigeneas.com/> accessed 30 October 2009
4. African American Registry – An African American History Website. Online location: <http://www.aaregistry.com/> accessed 30 October 2009
5. African American History at About.com. Online location: <http://afroamhistory.about.com/> accessed 30 October 2009
6. Biographies and Free Resources for Black History Month from Gale-Thomson. Online location: http://www.gale.cengage.com/free_resources/bhm/index.htm accessed 30 October 2009. This website from Gale-Thomson provides biographies of 70 noted African Americans, including U.S. President Barack H. Obama, George Washington Carver, Maya Angelou, Thurgood Marshall, Harriet Ross Tubman, Rosa Parks, Medgar Evers, and Shirley Chisholm. Also available are a number of free resources, including a U.S. black history timeline and a black history quiz. Events from the timeline can be placed in your church order of worship/bulletin throughout the month of February and throughout the year.

VII. Black History Books

1. Hine, Darlene Clark, Ed. Black Women in United States History. Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Pub., 1990.
2. Dubois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folks. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007.
3. Franklin, John Hope. From Slavery to Freedom: a History of Negro Americans. 6th ed. New York, NY: Knopf, 1988.
4. Franklin, John Hope, and Loren Schweninger. Runaway Slave: Rebels on the Plantation. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
5. Harding, Vincent, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Earl Lewis. "We Changed the World: African Americans, 1945-1970." The Young Oxford History of African Americans. v. 9. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997.
6. Lincoln, Eric C., and Lawrence H. Mamiya. The Black Church in the African-American Experience. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990.
7. Raboteau, Albert J. Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.
8. Woodson, Carter G. The Mis-education of the Negro. New York, NY: AMS Press, 1977.

Notes

1. Walker, Sheila. S., Ed. African Roots, American Cultures: African in the Creation of the Americas. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.
2. Van Sertima, Ivan. They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America. New York: Random House, 1976.
3. Bond, Julian, and Sondra K. Wilson, Ed. Lift Every Voice and Sing: a Celebration of the Negro National Anthem. New York: Random House, 2000.
4. "Lift Every Voice and Sing." By James Weldon Johnson
5. "We've Come a Long Way." Negro Spiritual