



CHOIR ANNIVERSARY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, August 8, 2010

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Lection – Habakkuk 3:17-19 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, (v. 18) yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. (v.19) God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The importance of music in the history of the Black Church is indisputable. Even noted scholar W.E.B. Dubois names music as one of the three key elements of slave religion along with “the Preacher...and the Frenzy.”¹ Moreover, music was the soul of the Civil Rights movement in the United States and still plays a significant part in nurturing the spiritual life of many congregations. Music has enabled African

Americans to “git over” in life. In particular, this Choir Anniversary Sunday acknowledges the critical role of church choirs and gives thanks to God for their ministry of music. “Ministry” is the key term here because it signals that what the choir does is for God and that their role is to lead others to God through the vehicle of music.

Choirs should guide others to God so what V. Michael McKay urges is right: “Instead of transforming the choir loft into a stage, let us acknowledge the stage that God sets for each of our visits. That stage is set with possibilities for the broken to be mended, the sick to be healed, those drowning to be rescued, and the lost to be saved.”² Choirs should point others to this God, not to themselves, no matter how difficult this might be in an age when gospel music is a big “bling bling” business.

Just the presence of a choir implies that God deserves to be praised. The existence of choirs also implies that there is always a reason to praise God and sing to God. The choir represents who we are created to be—worshippers. They signify the importance of praise of God and, on this Sunday, there is lots of musical praise goin’ up. On this Sunday, choirs are thanked for their ministry, but we are also reminded of the choir’s vocation or call to lead others to rejoice in the Lord no matter the circumstances of life. All hell may be breaking loose, but the choir is still called to rejoice and lead others to rejoice in the Lord always.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Habakkuk 3:17-19

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As a child, Christian education came through music in the home of my parents, the Rev. W. Byron Powery and Mrs. Emmittie V. Powery. There was always a song bubbling up as we gathered for family prayer in our home. All of us (my four siblings and parents) were in the Sanctified Choir and sang a harmony, most of the time in tune. We knew the power of song so we “[sang] ‘til the power of the Lord [came] down.” Our choral melodies were invocations for God to come and meet us because we realized that without God, we would be nothing. The important role of music in my upbringing represents the historical legacy of the enslaved who used songs as melodious weapons against oppression. To sing was to live and not to sing was to die. Singing was life and this indeed has been true for me. But not just any songs will do. The songs with deep meaning are about God and to God. The hymn of my life has been God—God when I’m up and God when I’m down.

When the ten year old daughter of one of my brothers died a few years ago, my family was down. But a song became a powerful testimony in the face of death. As the casket was lowered into the grave, my brother, his wife, and two other daughters, rose out of their seats and walked over to the grave as the casket was lowered. Out of the silence, my brother began to sing, as others joined in, “Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down, here I am to say that you’re my God....” This was a song of praise to God even when death had stolen his baby girl. Though life will never be the same again for them and us, that song declared, like Habakkuk, “yet I will rejoice.”

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

When one takes into account the historical backdrop of the words of the prophet Habakkuk, one may be shocked by his profession, “yet I will rejoice in the Lord.” There is actually nothing to rejoice about on the surface of his existence. The Chaldeans, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, have risen to power and invade Israel (Habakkuk 1:6). Their goal is to do violence (Habakkuk 1:9). But, Habakkuk faithfully waits for God’s retribution against the invaders (Habakkuk 3:16). His is a quiet faith of trust in the face of all kinds of earthly odds. And as he waits, he is anxious, trembles, and quivers (v. 16). Waiting for God to intervene in any situation is not for the fainthearted. All he can do is pray and chapter three is just that—a prayer, perhaps even a psalm that was used in worship in the Jerusalem temple. At least Habakkuk speaks with God and does not forsake God in hard times for it is in hard times, when one really needs to pray “knee-bowed and body-bent.”³

Habakkuk struggles with what it means for God to be righteous even though he and his people experience evil. There is no room in this setting for an empty prosperity gospel because there is no prosperity happening here. No fig tree blossoming, no fruit on the vines, no production from the olives, no food in the fields, no flock or herds of animals in the stalls. Life could not get much worse. No flourishing in sight at all in the foreseen future. Habakkuk was not in a contemporary inner city but he knew what it meant to live in the “hood.” To wonder where the next meal will come from, how one will pay the bills, wondering whether one’s odds in life will ever change, wondering if opportunities to prosper will ever come, “trembling” because of anticipated violence. This was definitely a “nobody knows the troubles I see” kind of experience. If the fig tree, a symbol of peace and prosperity (1 Kings 4:25), was not going to blossom, this meant only pain in the picture, a seemingly cursed life.⁴

Yet, Habakkuk declares “I will rejoice in the Lord.” Even when there is no obvious provision, he rejoices in God, the God of “my salvation.” In the face of many obstacles, the One with whom rests our salvation, our shalom, is still present, giving strength, causing us to go higher, to rise above the depths of despair. This means that even if I have nothing, I will praise and rejoice in God. Job said, “Though he slay me, yet will I praise him” (Job 1:4-5). This “yet” sort of praise is not dependent on provision from God. This “yet” of rejoicing is based on who God is; both our salvation and our strength. Praise is a sign of trust in God even when all existential hell is breaking loose. Praise is an act of faith and, as Prathia Hall preached, “Faith is not faith until it is tested in the crucible of struggle and the fiery trials of life.”⁵ Real rejoicing resounds amid the ruins of our existence. The reality of ruins is not erased by one’s rejoicing.

God provides strength and salvation in the midst of sorrow and suffering. Suffering is not removed but divine strength comes in the midst of pain and hard times. Habakkuk, whose name comes from a Hebrew root meaning “embrace,” calls us to embrace reality and God simultaneously. Both are real but the transition that points to hope has to do with God, just as the movement of this passage reveals as it goes from the depths of despair to the heights of life. We can rejoice because “God, the Lord, is my strength” and “my salvation.” God is the reason for any hope in the middle of hellish circumstances. When God is pronounced in this passage, Habakkuk’s tone shifts to hope and trust in God. God is the fulcrum of our hopeful future; our melody while in misery. This is a testimony, a confession. To say that “my feet [will become] like the feet of a deer” suggests his trust in an on-time God (cf. Psalm 18:33). Habakkuk is not fantasizing. He’s keepin’ it real for every believer. He’s a true believer of hope in God so he can rejoice always.

This prayer to God may relate to many different people but Habakkuk has his focus on the music leaders, the choirs of our world, when this passage ends with “to the leader: with stringed instruments.” Of all the segments of the Church, musicians are called to lead others in the “yet” of praise and not worry about “producing nationally recognized, award-winning recording choirs.”⁶ We acknowledge that life is tough but in the midst of rough-side-of-the-mountain living, we are still called to the “yet” of our doxological vocation because of God. No food on the table, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. No clothes on my back, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. No shelter over my head, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Husband or wife done cheat on me, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Employer laid me off, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Cancer in my body, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Nothing seems to be going right, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice through music and sing that God is a big God, even bigger than my own turmoil, and that in the end, with God’s help and strength, I will rise above the circumstances of my life as I rejoice in God, the Lord.

Celebration

Nothing seems to be going right but I can still rejoice because of God. God saves and God is my strength. I might be low right now but God will lift me high in the future.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The flock and herd which are elsewhere; hear the silence of the absence of the flock or herd; listen to Habakkuk’s praise;

Sights: The fig tree without blossoms, the fruitless vines, and the barren fields; see deer jumping; see human feet becoming like deer’s feet; and

Textures: The coarse fig tree with no blossoms and the empty, prickly, vines.

III. Other Suggestions

- See Prathia Hall’s Sermon “When Faith Trembles” at Online location: http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hall_4318.htm accessed 16 December 2009. This sermon is on this same passage.
- Another resource that may be helpful in thinking about music in the African American Church is Melva Costen’s In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

Notes

1. Du Bois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Folk. 1903. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1969. p. 211.

2. McKay, V. Michael. "Indicted." Readings in African American Church Music and Worship. James Abbingtion, Ed. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. p. 381. McKay offers a strong critique of music ministries that have become more about prestige and performance, rather than the presence of God.
3. Johnson, James Weldon. "Listen, Lord: A Prayer." The Black Poets. Dudley Randall, Ed. New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1971. pp. 41-42.
4. A fig tree that did not bear figs was cursed by Jesus in Matthew 21:18-19 perhaps as a metaphor of the destruction of the Temple.
5. Hall, Prathia. "When Faith Trembles." Online location: http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hall_4318.htm accessed 16 December 2009
6. McKay, V. Michael. "Indicted." Readings in African American Church Music and Worship. James Abbingtion, Ed. p. 379.