



A SERVICE OF HEALING (For those suffering emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Christopher B. Davis, Guest Cultural Resource Commentator

Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Memphis Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN

I. History

Today, the Lectionary focuses its lens on healing. Special attention is given to those suffering from emotional distress, grief, divorce, and physical ailments. While unfolding Jeremiah's lament, the Lectionary highlights his request for healing and his assurance that, when God honors his request, he indeed will be healed. Jeremiah exhibits not a scintilla of doubt. His assurance is as deep as his need for healing. Here, Jeremiah evidences an emphatic belief in God's ability and power to heal him. Embedded in Jeremiah's assurance are deep streams of confidence, faith, and trust that appear to be rooted in his personal knowledge of God.

This assurance, confidence, faith and trust are not alien to the black church. This same assurance was evidenced when black slaves sang:

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel?
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel?
An' why not everyman?¹

Elements of that same assurance were also there when black slaves encouraged each other to risk their lives to make a run for freedom by singing:

Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, children,
God's a-gonna trouble the

Water.²

This slave assurance, like Jeremiah's assurance, was not routine in any manner. Jeremiah exhibited a readiness for healing; and, the black slaves who sang those songs exhibited a readiness for freedom—healing of their condition of bondage and inhumanity. Each displayed an unwavering faith in God's ability and power to make them whole again.

One need not have spent any significant time in the black church to have been there long enough to hear the congregation sing "*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine ...*" Many are the preachers and pulpiteers who creatively speak of the differences between insurance and assurance, but what is assurance? In the most simple of understandings, assurance is freedom from doubt; belief in one's self and his or her abilities. But, for many people, African Americans in particular, assurance speaks to a binding commitment to do or to give or to refrain from something. It is the hope of being healed from racial injustice, social inequality, and economic disparity. Throughout our history, African Americans have desired, sought after, and even died for this illusive idea that we call assurance.

Among the many features which distinguish the people of God, there is one that seems more particularly to shine forth; and that is, that however distressed their minds may be, however low they may sink, they can accept no help nor deliverance but that which comes from God and God alone. Jeremiah, in today's text, knows intimately what it is to desire assurance -- some measure of hope that healing and deliverance would come. In Jeremiah 17:14, the verb "to heal" is parallel to the verb "to deliver." It can imply healing from illness, but it can mean more than simply curing an illness. The greater implication is "to make whole." The appearance in parallel of these two words (*heal* and *deliver*) provide a stronger image than either word alone. Healing is more an internal concept; whereas, delivering is more external. The petition of verse 14 is for wholeness within and liberation from external troubles. To this end, African Americans and Jeremiah can sing in concert, "*Heal me and I will be healed, save me and I will be saved.*"

These words of assurance are broad enough to hold the hopes of those who are suffering from emotional distress, grief, problems related to divorce, and those bound by physical ailments. They are strong enough to deliver even the most wounded soul—they speak a universal truth that heralds the omnipotence of God.

II. Songs of Assurance

One great source of hope, healing and assurance for African Americans has always been music. It could be argued that Scripture is its only equal in terms of being an effective balm for the most horrible of maladies. One need only hear the first lines of "Blessed Assurance" to be filled with the hope of forthcoming help. In the second selection, we are pointed toward the help that was promised and provided at "The Old Rugged Cross." Even more recent generations, who have been accused of having no appreciation for hymns, are communicating through their music that they also have this holy assurance. So, this section concludes with a current song, "I Am Healed."

Blessed Assurance

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Refrain:

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels, descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

(Refrain)

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

(Refrain).³

The Old Rugged Cross

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame;
and I love that old cross where the dearest and best
for a world of lost sinners was slain.

Refrain:

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it some day for a crown.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
has a wondrous attraction for me;
for the dear Lamb of God left his glory above
to bear it to dark Calvary.

(Refrain)

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,

a wondrous beauty I see,
for 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
to pardon and sanctify me.

(Refrain)

To that old rugged cross I will ever be true,
its shame and reproach gladly bear;
then he'll call me some day to my home far away,
where his glory forever I'll share.

(Refrain).⁴

I Am Healed

I've got a story to tell you,
'Bout some things that I've been through,
But I'm healed, Oh I'm Healed!

Had some ups and some downs,
Level to the ground,
But I'm healed, Oh I'm Healed!

Had to wrestle all night long,
Wonderin' what went wrong,
But I'm healed, Oh I'm Healed!

Had some sunshine, some rain,
Heartache and some pain,
I'm healed, Oh I'm Healed!

My God has touched me, delivered,
He set my soul free!
My heart is mended, I'm whole again,
No chains are holding me!
Got my liberty I am Healed!
I am Healed, I'm Healed Today!

May have some scars I am Healed,
Circumstances, I'm still Healed,
Disappointments, I am Healed,
repeat once

O-O-Oh
I Am Healed! (3X)

With His stripes I am Healed!
Repeat once.⁵

III. Additional Sources of Assurance

Additional sources of hope, healing, and assurance for African Americans can be found in black poetry and literature. They are replete with lessons of belief, courage, faith, strength and resistance. All of these can be essential ingredients for any recipe of healing and wholeness. The writer, Margaret Walker Alexander, recognized the importance of black belief to the African American experience, when she wrote:

Neither the slavers' whip nor the lynchers' rope nor
the bayonet could kill our black belief. In our hunger
we beheld the welcome table and in our nakedness
the glory of a long white robe. We have been believers
in the new Jerusalem.⁶

In a similar manner, Lorraine Hansberry recognized the importance of black belief in an all-powerful God who has the power to perform miracles, when she wrote the following exchange between her mother and daughter characters in her play, A Raisin in the Sun:

Beneatha: Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one Idea I don't accept. It's not important ... There simply is no blasted God—There is only man and it is he who makes miracles!⁷

After powerfully slapping her daughter across the face, causing her to retreat in silence, the mother character in Miss Hansberry's play responds with:

Mama: Now—you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God ...
In my mother's house there is still God.⁸

Bowing to her mother's demand, Beneatha repeats:

Beneatha: In my mother's house there is still God.

Regardless of what her daughter thought, the mother in this play had the knowledge and assurance of Jeremiah and of her foreparents: there is a God. She believed her God would heal her family's housing situation and deliver them to a New Jerusalem—a new promised land.

In another instance, Langston Hughes' poem, "Song to a Negro Wash-woman," presents an example of how black faith can lift one above his/her immediate circumstances to a place of joy, expectation, and promise. Hughes writes:

I've seen you singing, wash-woman ...
And I've seen you in church on Sunday

morning singing, praising your Jesus
because some day you're going to sit
on the right hand side of the Son of God
and forget you ever were a wash-woman.
And the aching back ... will be unremembered then.⁹

Each of the foregoing cultural resources, drawn from a vast body of African American musical and literary genres, can not only shed light on and make relevant Jeremiah's lesson of assurance to African American congregants; they can serve as instruments of healing for those who are seeking spiritual remedies for their conditions.

IV. A Memorable Learning Moment

I was raised in rural Eastern Arkansas by my maternal grandmother, Caldonia Easter Lonnbell Hampton Lewis Yancy. I simply called her Big Mama. We knew poverty up close and personal, as did most people who grew up in this community. Thus, learning how to cut corners and save costs was as much a part of one's education as learning the ABC's.

Our home was heated by butane gas, and the challenge each year was to make one tank of gas last all winter. So to that end, each night when it was time to go to bed, Big Mama would not only turn off the heater, but she would blow out the pilot light. After all, it required gas just to keep the pilot light burning. Now, prior to doing so, she would have my brother and I get in the bed and wait for her to come into the room to cover us for the night. This was a ritual that he and I grew to despise. It entailed our getting in whatever position we planned to stay in for the remainder of the night. Once positioned, she would cover us with a sheet, a 2 blankets, 3 homemade quilts, and finally a spread (what we now refer to as a comforter). The idea was to keep us warm as the house cooled *over in the night*.

Well, he and I had no thoughts of over in the night. We just knew, at that moment, it was hot and we wanted relief. So, in order to relieve our discomfort, we would kick and pull, kick and pull, until we had managed to remove most of the covers. Well, as she knew and I'm sure you're imagining, it did indeed get cold over in the night. Now, while we had sense enough to kick out, we did not have sense enough to re-cover. Thus, we faced two alternatives: stay cold or cry out to Big Mama for help. Having completely robbed one another from any and all body heat, the only thing left was to cry out to Big Mama.

After several cold infused cries, it wouldn't be long before we could hear her walking stick hitting the floor. The next thing we would hear would be her threats of "beating" us for kicking the covers on the floor, but the great joy was that all the while she was threatening, she was also *re-covering*.

Now, one would think that after a time or two, I would make the connection between covering and dropping temperatures, but as a child I never seemed to quite make the connection. However, with each passing year and each subsequent cry for help, I could

always count on the sound of the walking stick hitting the floor, the threats of a “beating” and the assurance of her re-covering me for the night. God provides each of us with the same assurance and the knowledge that helps for each of our healing needs is only a prayer away.

V. Healing Service Aids

Each church’s healing service should be designed to address and match the needs of the congregants and community members who will attend the service. The following suggestions might prove helpful in designing healing services:

1. Develop and circulate a survey form to capture the desires and needs of potential healing service attendants. Design the survey so that the responses do not identify the respondents;
2. Consider holding the healing service in an area of the church or community (even outside) where participants can engage in exercise activities. Design an exercise or breathing component into the healing service program;
3. Design a musical component to complement the service. The music should be varied, including upbeat music to accompany the exercise component. However, the program should also include a component of music that is not utilized on Sunday mornings—songs and music that engender self-reflection, release and relaxation. See today’s lectionary worship unit for suggested music;
4. Consider including a professionally guided meditation and/or a period of participant silence, where no words are spoken;
5. Design a diverse and varied prayer component for the healing program: individual prayers, group prayers, couple prayers, silent prayers, spoken prayers, etc.; and
6. Design an exercise for participants to write out their prayer requests and place them in a cauldron or other container. This will symbolize freeing themselves from the requests and turning them over to God. At the end of the service the requests should be burned or otherwise destroyed.

VI. Conclusion

Most often, healing results from intentional work. It can also come about through reflection, prayer work, changes in individual habits, exercise, meditation and execution of strategies developed in conjunction with medical professionals. For Christians, the exercise of personal and corporate faith in the assurance and power of God are essential components of any healing plan. The Lectionary’s placement of healing services on the Church’s liturgical calendar sends a strong message to pastors, music ministers, lay leaders and congregants that this is important work for the Christian community. It is what Christ did; it is what Christ does; and, it is what Christ expects of his Church.

Notes

1. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay. *Negro Spiritual*. The Norton

1. Anthology of African American Literature. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. p. 10.
2. Ibid., p. 8.
3. "Blessed Assurance." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. p. 508.
4. "The Old Rugged Cross." African American Heritage Hymnal. p. 244.
5. Lawrence, Donald. "Healed." I Speak Life. New York, NY: Zomba Recordings LLC., 2004.
6. Harper, Frances E. W. "Woman's Political Future." World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. 20 May 1893. Online location: <http://www.voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/civil/harper1893int.htm> accessed 2 March 2010
7. Collier, Eugenia W. , and Richard A. Long. Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989. p. 438.
8. Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. New York, NY: Signet Books, 1958. p. 51.
9. Ibid., p. 8.
10. Collier, Eugenia W. , and Richard A. Long. Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry. p. 372.