



THANKSGIVING LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, November 21, 2010 and or Thursday, November 25, 2010

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Lection – Psalm 92:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; (v. 2) to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, (v. 3) to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. (v. 4) For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Because of our history of enslavement and oppression in this land, African Americans have found it expedient to take the American experience and filter it through an African understanding of God and life. Only in this way could they begin to make sense of life, to find meaning in life, and to enjoy life. See John S. Mbiti's classic, Introduction to African Religion, for a detailed explanation of African traditional religions and how the African understanding of God enabled Africans enslaved in America to survive and overcome in America.

Nowhere is this African American perspective of God more clearly seen than at Thanksgiving. As a civil holiday, Thanksgiving was established to thank God for allowing the Pilgrims to find and conquer America. For our oppressed fore-mothers and fore-fathers, Thanksgiving became a time of celebration for another reason altogether. For them, Thanksgiving was a moment of somber and sober reflection on the goodness of the Lord despite their circumstance.

While they were enslaved and oppressed, in reflection on God and their circumstance, they concluded that at least they had life and it was worth celebrating. They wisely recognized that even though they did not have houses or land, fine clothes or jewelry, the knowledge of what God had done for them and what meager possessions they did have was worth celebrating and thanking God for especially after 1863 when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Thanksgiving calls us to slow our pace, to put on hold for a moment our pursuit of things, and to engage in a moment of reflection on God's goodness.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 92:1-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

At this writing, our nation is slowly making an economic resurgence from what has been characterized as the worst economic disaster since the Great Depression.

The automobile industry (the Big 3: General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler) which was the economic lifeblood of Detroit and the state of Michigan (where I live and pastor) had to be saved from the brink of collapse with a substantial financial subsidy from the government just to stay afloat.

People of all races and levels on the socio-economic spectrum have lost their jobs and their homes to foreclosure and many cannot afford basic health and dental care. The unemployment rate in the city of Detroit hovers around 49 to 50%, depending upon whom you ask. The economic tsunami has had a devastating impact on the quality of life in our city and on the ministries of our churches. The root cause of this bleak situation we have been told is greed.

The pursuit of riches and more "bling," especially by corporate robber barons, has caused us to lose respect for life and the humanity of others. This craving for more is causing us

to lose our souls. As a new trend in too many instances, our net worth is being equated with our anointing. We're becoming more self-centered and less concerned and compassion towards others.

A moment of somber and sober reflection would help us realize that we cannot limit God's blessings to material things alone. Health and strength, family and friends, the ability to work and play, are only a few of God's blessings that all too often we take for granted. Let's be thankful for what we have and not get caught up in confusing the measure of our souls with the measure of our stuff.

Part Two: The Biblical Commentary

Entitled by some, "A Song for the Sabbath Day," Psalm 92 has a clear liturgical function of focusing the minds of worshippers on the goodness of God and evoking from them their praise for that divine goodness.

Divided into three parts, verses 1-4, 5-8, and 9-15, the first section (verses 1-4) exults in praise and thanksgiving to God for divine mighty works. The Sabbath Day was holy unto God. Early in their history, God said to Israel, "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8 NRSV). As the centerpiece around which their worship life evolved, it called the people to cease their labor in the pasture and in the field and gather at the Temple to focus individual and collective attention on the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Worship was a moment of somber and sober reflection on God. Brueggemann says that Israel's "worship was world making." Their praise was not just for things that had been done, but for what was in process and yet to be. For us, Thanksgiving can be world making if we use it as a moment to pause and thank God for victories and challenges past and the amazing future that stands before us if we keep God ever before us.

The Psalmist begins, "It is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord." Why is this so? Because it gives us our proper focus in life and the right perspective. Without God as our focus and praise and thanksgiving as our natural response to thoughts of the Divine, our vision can become blurred. We can place our attention on things that do not feed our souls or the souls of others. And, as a result, we will surely become confused about what is most important in life. We may gain the whole world and lose our souls.

In reflecting on God, whose love is "steadfast in the morning," and who is faithful by night," the Psalmist is inspired ". . . to sing praises to your name, O Most High. . . to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre" (vv. 1-3). As African Americans, music has been the main medium through which we have rendered our praise and thanksgiving to God who acted in justice on our behalf. "Pharaoh's army got drowned, O Mary don't you weep." Early in our existence in America we grabbed hold to the belief that no matter what enslavers and bigots told us, God loved us and God was faithful to deliver us. With certainty in these beliefs we could sing amazing music in this strange land.

Reflection on God's goodness to him or her created in the Psalmist a song that only the soul can sing. Some melodies cannot be set to score. They do not have words because true recognition of God's movement in our lives defies speech. Words cannot always express the emotions of our soul whether in suffering or celebration for overcoming. Chants, shouts of glory, utterings that cannot be articulated or understood often punctuate the worship of African Americans. It is in those profound moments of somber and sober reflection on God, a music is produced that can neither be scored nor spoken. It can only be experienced.

"For you, Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy" (v. 4). The Sabbath was a time to remember the goodness and greatness of God. Specifically what this Psalmist remembers, we are not told. And could it be that this author intentionally does not outline specific works of God. Perhaps he or she wanted those hearing or reading the Psalm to reflect upon their individual and unique experience with God. There are some works of God that are common to all of us and for which we are all thankful: life, salvation, provision, protection, etc. But each of us has had our own personal experience with God, and out of it has come some works that we alone can celebrate. Also, if we really take the time to ponder our lives in their entirety, we realize, regardless of circumstances at a given moment, how much for which we can be thankful. The lack of specificity by the Psalmist leaves room for all of the acts of God to be considered; our thankfulness should be immeasurable.

For African Americans, the power of our praise is in remembering what God has done for us. One song says, "Oh, Oh, what He's done for me. Oh, Oh, what He's done for me. Oh, Oh, what He's done for me. I never shall forget what He's done for me."

Celebration

This text reminds us that thinking and thanking go hand in hand. When I think about the goodness of God and all that God has done for me, my soul cries out thank you! When we survey our lives as a people and as individuals, we have more to shout about than pout about; more to praise God for than complain about. This Psalm reminds us that it is a good thing to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to the name of the One who still rules heaven and earth. This is our testimony; this is our hope.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: Singing, joyous instrumental music and testimonies of God's goodness.

III. One Possible Outline for this Text for a Thanksgiving Sermon

Allow the Spirit and your context to fill in the specifics of this outline.

Title: Even in These Times I'm Thankful

I. It's Good to Give Thanks to God

- a.
- b.
- c.

II. I'm Thankful God's Love is Steadfast and that God is Faithful

- a.
- b.
- c.

III. Why God's Works Make Us Glad

- a.
- b.
- c.

Celebration: At the works of your hands, I sing for joy. That's how I express my thankfulness.

IV. Resources to Consult

1. Booth, Charles, E. Bridging the Breach: Evangelical Thought and Liberation in the African-American Preaching Tradition. Chicago, IL: Urban Ministries, 2000.
2. Brueggemann, Walter. Israel's Praise. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, Urban Ministries, Chicago, IL: 1988.
3. Thurman, Howard. Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death. Richmond, CA: Friends United Press, 1975.