

THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CYCLE

ANTI-DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 28, 2013

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Lection – Malachi 2:13-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) And this you do as well: You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. (v. 14) You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (v. 15) Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. (v. 16) For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Thirteen years ago, Domestic Violence Sabbath Observance (DVSO) was established by The Black Church and Domestic Violence Institute. The DVSO includes services intended to educate congregations and honor survivors of domestic violence. While there are churches that observe this Sabbath, all too often there is a continued silence or at minimum cursory consideration of domestic violence in churches. However, when we take into account that incidents of domestic violence tend to rise in the hours following Sunday morning church services, that 25% of Christian homes witness abuse of some kind, and that more than 50% of pastors in a survey said that women should be willing to “tolerate some level of violence” because it is better than divorce,¹ it is clear that churches in general and African American churches in particular and their leadership cannot afford to ignore or gloss over issues of domestic violence. Proper exegesis and interpretation of the Scriptures is needed in order God’s righteousness be manifest. Additionally, Anti-Domestic Violence Day is the time when churches intentionally acknowledge our collective and individual responsibility to support and honor survivors of domestic violence. It is also the occasion when we discuss ways to end domestic violence, safeguard victims, and remember those who have been maimed or killed at the hands of their abusers.

III. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

On Thursday, March 7, 2013, President Barak H. Obama reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), signing it into law with added protections and resources. The law, which was first established in 1994, is intended to protect women from domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking while it also allows the federal government to spend money to treat victims and prosecute offenders.

Even as we celebrate the passage of this law, the National Violence Against Women survey indicates that almost 1 in 3 African American females has been subject to intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence includes rape, physical assault, or stalking.²

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The text, written after the Babylonian exile in the period of 539–332 BCE, closes out the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) for Christianity. For Christians, Malachi serves as a transition between the Bible’s Old and New Testaments, while in Jewish Bibles, Malachi acts as “the seal of the Prophets,” including the minor and major prophets. Malachi, whether the proper name of a prophet or a title meaning “my messenger,” continued in the prophetic tradition of the prophet Zechariah as the book “introduced new perspectives for his time and the generations to come.” It is from this vantage point that we consider the text of Malachi 2:13-16.

And this you do as well: You cover the LORD’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor at your hand. (v. 13)

Malachi declares that though an offering is made to the Lord, it is neither appreciated nor acceptable to God, which elicits strong emotion from the giver.

You ask, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. (v. 14)

The Lord's rejection of the offering engenders a question of why. It is as if the one who gives the offering expects that because he has kept the law and brings an offering to the Lord, that the Lord is obligated to accept it. Malachi prefigures Jesus in that his response to the giver of the offering suggests that keeping of the law is more than a matter of rudimentary action. Rather God still determines the conditions under which God will determine if an offering is worthy.

Malachi informs the giver of the offering that God has witnessed the relationship between the man and his wife and sees that the man has broken fellowship with his wife as well as his covenant by being unfaithful. Returning to God's role as a witness, by invoking the covenant, God reminds the man that though it appears he has been unfaithful only to his wife, he has also been unfaithful to God, as the covenant is between God, the man, and his wife.

Also, some versions of this text equate the man's faithlessness to dealing with his wife treacherously, that this unfaithfulness has been a deliberate act of betrayal toward not only her but also the covenant, rendering him unpredictable and unstable. These are often precursors to violence.

Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. (v. 15)

God desires for the man and his wife to have children who will honor God and keep God's covenant. God intimates that it is God and God alone who created the man and the woman both in flesh and spirit. Therefore, take heed to all of God's creation. Honor the marriage covenant by taking responsibility and guarding the flesh and spirit from faithlessness. For by dishonoring the marriage covenant, it jeopardizes the creation of Godly offspring who act faithfully and without the blemish of violence.

For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one's garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless. (v. 16)

This verse is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, in Hebrew, there is no first-person pronoun. In other words, God does not refer to God's self as I. Thus, to maintain the integrity of the prophetic nature of the text, "*says the LORD, the God of Israel*" is retained in order to assure that it is *God's* covenant that is being challenged by the man's unfaithfulness.

The second problem with the first portion of this verse where the Lord declares that God hates divorce is that it has often been used to keep women trapped in relationships and marriages that are dangerous and abusive. What is missed and/or avoided is the context of God's declaration.

By following the earlier verses explaining the covenant that the man has broken by his unfaithfulness, God suggests divorce might be a consideration.

In addition to hating divorce, God also declares his hatred for covering one's self with violence. God, in essence, equates violence with divorce, which is the result of faithlessness. This violence takes the form of brutality whether in word or deed. While garment acts as a metaphor for his wife, thus he overwhelms or covers his wife with violence. As well, his divorce and violence are seen as the result of not having guarded one's flesh and spirit from treachery of deliberate faithlessness. Again, God requires accountability for the marriage, which cannot be traded for violence, betrayal, instability, or faithlessness, for God remains a witness.

Challenge

Often batterers abuse in secret and threaten their victim with further violence if she tells what has happened. Malachi reminds us that God is a witness. As God witnesses the relationship between the man and wife, challenging the man to take heed to himself, God also witnesses what we do or do not do in order to hold the abuser accountable, to protect the victim, and to stop further violence.

In the African American Church's desire to put forth an image of respectability, we must remember that just as God witnesses between a husband and wife, God also witnesses each time the community of faith dismisses, shames, ignores, or avoids incidents of domestic violence. As God calls for an end to domestic violence, God is also calling the community to take heed of itself; for if we continue on this path we too cover ourselves with violence and put our relationship to God at risk of rejection.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: A man groaning and wailing as tears fall from his eyes (v. 13);

Sights: A man full of sorrow (vv. 13-14); a confused man whose offering to God has been rejected (v. 14); a woman dejected, abused, and feeling isolated and hopeless (v.14); God standing as witness and judge (vv. 14-15).

III. Additional Suggestions/Resources for Preaching and Teaching

Historically, domestic violence has been defined as a women's issue, an issue cutting across every socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic category. The benefit of defining it as a women's issue has allowed for the gathering of information about the victims as well as has taught us how to best protect them. However, in limiting domestic violence to a women's issue, men, the predominant perpetrators/batterers, are often left out of the process that leads toward solution. The Malachi text provides an example of not only protecting the victim of spousal abuse, including the children, but also holding the abuser accountable. God's prophet Malachi addresses the perpetrator directly, letting him know "I see you and what you do. I will not accept your

offerings to me, as I know of the violence that you visit upon your wife and the destruction that it brings for the community. Remember and honor your covenant, says the LORD.”

1 John 4:20 declares: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sister, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” The Malachi text is the epitome of this New Testament Scripture, as God challenges the husband’s show of love for a God he cannot see and the violence toward his wife whom he can see.

General Statistics on Domestic Violence:

- According to the U.S. Department of Justice, 1 in 4 U.S. women will experience intimate partner violence¹
- Approximately 4.8 million intimate partner rapes and physical assaults are perpetrated against U.S. women annually.³
- According to the U.S. Surgeon General, domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to American women.
- Young women between ages 16–24 have a higher incidence of partner violence than any other age group.
- Nearly 1 in 5 teenage girls who have been in a relationship said a boyfriend threatened violence or self-harm if presented with a breakup.⁴

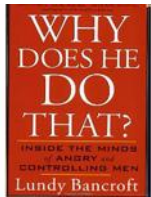
Resources for Research, Pastoral Care, Teaching, Preaching, and Social Justice

Recordings/Webinars/Videos for Training

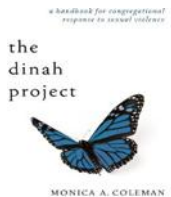
- Faith Trust Institute is a national, multi-faith, multicultural training and education organization with global reach working to end sexual and domestic violence. Online location: <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org>
Sampling of Free Webinars from the Faith Trust Institute
 - Safe Congregations and Risk Reduction: A Starter Kit
 - Men Stopping Violence: Because We Have Daughters
 - Kids Exposed to Domestic Violence: How Can Faith Leaders Respond?
 - Roundtable: Community Based Intervention for Batterers and the Role of Faith Communities
- Excerpt from DVD “Wings Like a Dove: Healing for the Abused Christian Woman.”
Online location:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO9Ih0ugzu0&list=UUnRviVBa4TZC1q6olZ6xXRg>
- “How to Preach about Domestic Violence” by Elizabeth J.A. Siwo-Okundi M.Div., Th.M. Online location:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixIrvpstPoQ&feature=share&list=UUnRviVBa4TZC1q6olZ6xXRg>

- “What Faith Communities Should Be Doing to Prevent Gender Based Oppression and Violence” by Rev. Sharon Ellis Davis, Ph.D. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9jZNXIMT2w>
- “Sexual Abuse in the Black Church: An Historical Perspective Toward Practical Solutions” by Rev. Sharon Ellis Davis and Rev. K. Ray Hill. Online location: <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/training/events/701A0000000XyFeIAK>
- “Prophetic and Moral Role of the Church in Gender Based Militarized Violence by Uniformed Police Personnel, e.g. Armed Forces, Police, Prison Guards, Police Force, etc.” by Rev. Sharon Ellis Davis, Ph.D. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lW2SOYEFsQ&list=UUnRviVBa4TZC1q6olZ6xXRg>

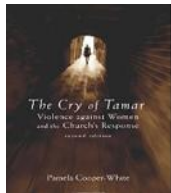
Books



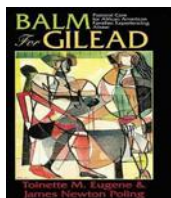
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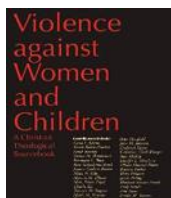
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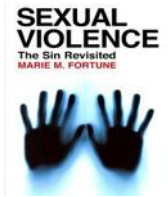
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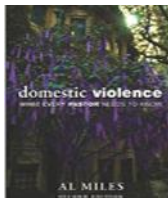
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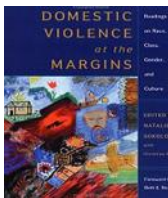
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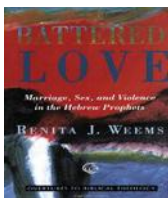
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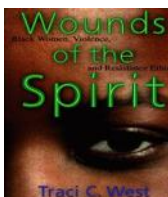
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Notes

1. <http://www.religiontoday.com/news/domestic-violence-within-the-church-the-ugly-truth-11602500.html> (accessed 6 February 2013).
2. <http://www.womenshealth.gov/minority-health/african-americans/violence.cfm> (accessed 6 February 2013).
3. Extent, Nature and Consequence of Intimate Partner Violence Research Report
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4. 2000 National Violence Against Women Survey, National Institute of Justice & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.