



ARTS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Exodus 35:30-35 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 30) Then Moses said to the Israelites: See the Lord has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; (v. 31) he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, (v. 32) to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, (v. 33) in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft (v. 34) And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. (v. 35) He has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Throughout the history of the African American experience, the role of the artist has been indispensable to the quest for freedom and human dignity. The artist speaks to those deep and fundamental hopes, fears, and dreams of the people, while providing social critique and prophetic imagination in a world often wrought with suffering and political subjugation. A great example of this is the poem “I have Known Rivers” which accompanies today’s lection material. It was written by Langston Hughes, one of the most brilliant writers in history.

It is often the artist, and in many ways artistic expression in general, that has the capacity to capture the heart of the people and cast powerful visions of revolutionary change, whether in families, local communities, or in wider social life in America and the world. The classic little book by James Weldon Johnson, entitled God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse (from “old negro preachers”), offers a magnificent image of the ways in which God, in God’s creation, comes to us as a God whose presence cannot be simply experienced through reason alone, but must be embodied, embraced, felt, heard, and seen with spiritual eyes.¹ Johnson chronicles one particular sermonic poem from an anonymous old time Negro preacher who said:

And God stepped out of space,
And he looked around and said:
I’m lonely—
I’ll make me a world.

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That’s good!²

Not only have black people embodied the power of artistic expression in understanding and living out our faith, artistic expression and creativity has always served as a critical method of resistance to racism and social injustice. From the deep and persistent echoes of spirituals during slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the emergence of jazz and bebop music in the early twentieth century, to socially conscious rap in the twentieth and twenty-first century, artistic imagination has aided black folks in their journey to lay claim to what Howard Thurman calls “somebodyness.” In spite of the racism, poverty, mass incarceration, health related disparities, black folks through faith in God and the power of self-expression have been resilient and thrived against the odds.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 35:30-35

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Artistic creativity and self-expression is perhaps as important today as it was for Moses' new community of liberated Israelites struggling to declare their freedom in the face of insurmountable challenges. Indeed, in a technocratic age, the ability to not only have an artistic imagination but to have concrete skills and training in which to express one's gifts is critical. Public education in recent years has increasingly focused on standardized testing or a kind of programming of sorts at the elementary, high school, and even college levels. What is most disturbing to me about these trends is the stripping away of artistic programs such as art and music, as well as skill oriented training such as auto mechanics, home economics, wood working, welding, electronic repair, and more. The time is at hand to reinterpret educational philosophy more akin to the biblical model we see in the ancient world of Moses. In the world of Moses, education and training was much more concerned with connecting the deepest yearnings of individuals with the needs of the community. Only by providing the creative space for individual aspiration and concern for the common good can we begin to stem the tide of negative forces at work to hinder the learning process of black people.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The historical and cultural context of this passage finds Moses profoundly engaged in the work of nation building, initiating a new social and economic system based on skilled labor, training, and inspiration. Aspects of this passage also appear in Exodus 31:1-11. It was most likely adapted by a redactor who comes later to perhaps add emphasis. At this point in the biblical narrative, the prophetic leader, Moses, is aged and searching for sustainability of the children of Israel. In Exodus 31, Yahweh tells Moses to appoint Bezalel and Oholiab to construct the "tabernacle" and the materials needed to carry out the rituals instituted in the Covenant. The primary theme echoed in Exodus 31 and again in Exodus 35, is the idea that with the Spirit of God, all human beings have artistic capacities. The artistry of God, with unlimited creative energies, overflows into the depths of humans and all of creation. As individuals and communities participate in the redemptive and transformative community of God, the more one becomes aware of their unique artistic skills and abilities.

Exodus v. 34 reinforces this theme by expressing the ways in which Bezalel and Oholiab are inspired by God to teach men who are living under the divine wisdom of God. Invoking a combination of divine inspiration and an understanding of the concrete social/religious needs of the community, the passage articulates a vision of vocational identity grounded in the spirit and wisdom of God. Exodus 35:35 indicates that the two leaders were filled with "ability to do every sort of work done by a craftsman or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue the weaver, even them that do any work, and of those that devise cunning work." All of the needs of the community could be met through the creativity, intellect, skill, and innovation present within the community. Moses, in this passage, is resistant to the notion that the people of Israel had to return to Egypt for their survival or flourishing in any way. God's power to inspire the imagination and spur creativity was all that was necessary to overcome many of the challenges they faced.

Celebration

This passage reminds us to celebrate the enormous creativity, innovation, imagination and visionary capacities at work in the African American experience. The Spirit of God or wisdom of God continually provides powerful resources to thrive and flourish under seemingly impossible circumstances. Through this biblical story, African American believers are invited to place whatever gifts, skills, or abilities they have in service to the redemptive work of God in the world. In the modern world of rigid compartmentalizations, distinctions, and competition, the passage affirms that God is working actively in all areas of our lives. Whether a person is a carpenter, lawyer, medical doctor, professor, janitor, painter, musician, politician, school teacher, barber, electrician, preacher, sanitation worker, or rapper, it is God who empowers us to do well whatever we do.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

The Divine Spirit (v. 31): which provides wisdom, strength, power, and intellect. This allows us to recognize the presence of God in all dimensions of human life;

Inspiration (v. 34): Too often in the educational process, we underestimate the significance of inspiration (or passion, motivation, stimulation, and encouragement). Here, we see that faith has the unique capacity to invoke inspiration as one seeks to live out and express their inherit gifts, and artistic expression; and

Sites (vv. 33-35) Artistic designs in gold and silver, embroidery in blue and purple, and crimson yarn.

III. Other Material for the Sermonic Moment

A. In The Covenant with Black America Edmund Gordon writes, “All schools that have been forced to cut music, visual arts, performing arts, and sports must have them restored. If government officials allocate substantive educational funding to all schools equally, then every child will have the opportunity to explore both creative and academic areas of interest. A truly educated child is not only proficient in math, science, history and English, but also in painting, piano, and a foreign language.”³

B. “Therefore, beauty and character accompany one another. The onisegun consistently claimed: ‘If a person...is good looking..., but his or her innermost self...is bad, they will still call him or her an immoral person... Whenever anybody does bad things, it means his or her inside self may be bad.’ The inside of an individual controlled the community’s determination of the individual’s beauty.”⁴

Notes

1. Johnson, James Weldon. God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1927
2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Gordon, Edmund. "Establishing a System of Public Education in Which All Children Achieve at High Levels and Reach Their Full Potential." The Covenant with Black America Ed. Tavis Smiley. Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2006. p. 41.
4. Hopkins, Dwight. Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005. p. 67.