



CHOIR ANNIVERSARY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 19, 2008

E. Dewey Smith, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Pastor, Greater Travelers Rest Baptist Church, Decatur, GA

Lection – Psalm 150:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

- (v. 1) Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!
- (v. 2) Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
- (v. 3) Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
- (v. 4) Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
- (v. 5) Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

(v. 6) Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The anniversary of the choir has a very significant place within the context of most African American churches. Throughout the vast history of African American worship music has played a vital role. An old adage states, “Music has charms to soothe the savage beast.” From the days of the beastly savagery of slavery to the ills that accompany this post-modern age, African American congregations have been soothed and enriched by the musical compositions of its choirs. The African American church has long been a haven of hope, with the music ministry a pivotal component of shaping the atmosphere in that haven.

Although the preaching of the Word is the heart of a worship service, the elevated posture of the choir and other members of the music ministry, and the expectation of most parishioners that they will hear powerful, energetic, comforting and uplifting music, confirms that a church service is woefully inadequate without quality music. Additionally, since many Bible study, Sunday School, and related Bible and theological training classes are now nearly empty in many churches, in addition to the sermon, today’s choirs provide much of the theology that is transmitted to those who attend church. The role of the choir is now as important as ever.

The Choir Anniversary is an annual event that gives the community an opportunity to tangibly show its appreciation to the music ministry for its yearly commitment. Often during the Choir Anniversary, guest choirs, soloists, quartets, duets and musicians (and modernly, mime and liturgical dance ministries) are invited to participate, celebrate, and articulate the overwhelming importance the music ministry has within the African American religious experience.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 150:1-6

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Currently, American society has a decidedly secular tone despite the pronouncement by most Americans that they believe in God. Misogyny, violence, materialism, and the degradation of women are inundating contemporary culture. Promiscuity, greed, and incarceration are now not as frowned upon as they once were and are, in fact, now celebrated within segments of African American society. The music industry is capitalizing on this movement toward secular degeneration and music that lacks messages of social conscience, decency or the ability to effect social change. The majority of secular music now focuses on personal gratification and does little to transform or enlighten the mind.

Sadly, gospel is also being pulled in a secular direction and is taking on characteristics of the secular music industry. The sacred music that once shaped African American faith, and was even instrumental in some theological catechisms, is airing less and less on so-

called Christian radio. Today, an overwhelming amount of gospel music lacks Christian doctrine and sound biblical theology. More and more, modern church music focuses only on the human condition and does not point listeners to a transcendent reality. The lack of God-centered music lessens the ability of congregants to hope for a brighter day, to see beyond the immediate, and to behold the vastness of the Creator.

An understanding of, and a focus upon, Psalm 150 can help impel churches to desire music from their choirs, which can reverse some of the negative influences that are infiltrating church worship, and help create a more God-focused worship environment. Those choirs that each Sunday, through rain, sleet or snow seek to generate such an environment through their music, are to be celebrated on this day and appreciated throughout the year.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Book of Psalms consists of the praises of God's people throughout the ages. In fact, the Hebrew word for "Psalms" means "praise;" thus, it is no surprise that the last five chapters in the book of Psalms (146-150) are a "Hallelujah Chorus" to our God. Each of these final Psalms begins and ends with the exclamation, "Praise the Lord" or, in Hebrew, "hallelujah," putting the focus on God where it should be. Though life may not be what it ought to be, Psalm 150 calls us to declare "hallelujah" anyhow.

Psalm 150 is known by many as the consummate doxology of the Psalms. The lyrics are broad, yet succinct, and were used in the temple as well as in daily prayers by the ancient Jews. It may not be as descriptive as some other Psalms, but it prescribes a way of being before God for all people at all times. It is a symphonic hymn that focuses on the greatness of God. The exhortation to praise this Great God is multifaceted. It includes where praise can occur (the sanctuary and in the firmament); why praise is to be given (because of God's deeds and God's greatness); how praise can be offered (on instruments and through dance); and who or what should give praise (all who have breath are to give it). Nothing and no one is excluded from this call to "total praise."

This Psalm begins with a mandate to offer God praise. In vv.1-3, the worshipper who enters the temple is compelled to acknowledge the awesomeness of God's presence, power, and position. When one enters the house of God, a reverential response is required from every worshipper because of God's "surpassing greatness." As choirs sing to give praise to God because of his greatness, it should be done in reverence, not as performance or to spotlight the gifts of persons. Such humble praise is contagious and can encourage others to respond verbally and non-verbally with a "hallelujah" in "total praise." God is great so we say, "hallelujah" with our hands. God is great so we say, "hallelujah" with our feet. God is great so we say, "hallelujah" with our voices. Sing on choir until everything that has breath praises the Lord.

Psalm 150 even shows us that the use of instruments in worship is alright too (vv.3-5). Hallelujah! Just as Moses' song of victory (Exodus 15) and David's appointment of Levites (I Chronicles 16:4-7) were collaborations of singing and music, this Psalm is a

paradigm for vocal and instrumental partnership in “total praise.” Before God, humans and instruments cannot help but praise God. They unite in praise of God, because anything that has breath should praise the Lord. Anywhere, anytime, with anything, praise the Lord! You may not have the instruments mentioned here, but your life can be an instrument of praise.

This is why the psalmist concludes the Psalm in the way he does, with a closing summons—“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” All who have been empowered with life by the Creator are given the clarion call to praise God. Every celestial and terrestrial creature is summoned to utilize their voice, by forming a majestic chorus. Sing choir! The purpose of this chorale must be to acknowledge and proclaim God’s awesomeness, because praising God is never an option for choirs or any Christian. God is the only One who deserves our total praise. Hallelujah!

Celebration

We celebrate and praise, in every manner possible, our God to whom we owe our very existence. We sing praises, because of God’s creation, intervention, and preservation. The very existence of God provides sufficient impetus for our praise. God has done great things for us! The mighty deeds of our Creator cannot be matched. The monumental greatness of God cannot be surpassed. To God be the glory for all great things that have been done. Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Life may not be what it ought to be, but say “hallelujah” anyhow, because God is good and God is great. Let the sopranos sing of God’s sovereignty. Altos , give a crescendo of adoration. Tenors, triumphantly declare the “marching on” of Elohim’s truth. Basses, belt out with power your testimony of the blessings of our Redeemer. Every worshipper, vocalist, and musician posture your hearts as though the Creator of the Universe is your only audience. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The sanctuary (v.1); the firmament - the space that hovers over the earth (v.1); the joyful expressions of worship through the dancing of Jerusalem temple dwellers (v.4); the trumpet – the instrument that suggests a message is about to be delivered (v.3); and

Sounds: The trumpet – as it gives the sound of victory (v.3); the lute and harp – providing comforting sounds of tranquility, representations of God’s peace (v.3); the tambourine – a universal symbol of celebration; strings and pipes –which can be seen as instruments that show the juxtaposition of divine tenderness and mighty power (v.4); clanging cymbals and loud clashing cymbals – reminders of the exuberance and intensity of worship (v.5) and all with breath praising God (v.6).