



CULTURAL RESOURCES

Friday, December 25, 2009

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I. Introduction

It all went down like this:

A sister named Mary was to be married to a brother whose name was Joseph. It was Joseph, you see, who was a descendant of Abraham. It turned out that Mary was already pregnant, and Joseph wasn't happy about it--especially since the child wasn't his.

But Joseph was a pretty cool brother. Although he coulda dissed the sister big time and had her sent away, he decided that Mary was an all right sister (although she did have a big problem). For her sake, he decided that he wasn't gonna tell everybody her business.

So while he sat and thought about how he would send Mary away without everybody knowin what was happenin', an angel of the Almighty stood before him. "Brother Man, don't do this thing you're thinking. Believe me when I tell you, the kid Mary is carrying is a holy kid. Just like a brother named Isaiah said a long time ago, 'A virgin will get pregnant, though not by any brother, and when the kid is born his name shall be called Immanuel,' which is the name of the Almighty Hissself!"

And Joseph went, “That’s pretty hip.” Without another word, he married the sister, Mary, and when the kid was born they called the little brother Jesus.¹

In Matthew’s gospel, recounted above by P.K. McCary, the angel comes to Joseph at the precipice of a fateful decision regarding his fiancée and the unnamed child who is not his own. The angel encourages Joseph to take Mary as his wife and to name the child Jesus. The gospel states that the birth of this child fulfills a prophecy concerning a virgin and a child named Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” On this and every Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Savior. And, in that birth, we celebrate God’s presence with us - past, present, and future.

II. What Is In a Name?

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
And shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us
Ooh God with us, I’m calling you Father
Hallelujah, I love you Heavenly Father
Come on, come on, come on and see about me
Praise your name
Thank you Lord
Emmanuel²

In the Jewish tradition, the naming of a person was not merely a label or a convenient means of distinguishing one’s identity. Names were significant and many spoke to the destiny of persons. This tradition is abundant in Scripture in examples such as Jacob, which means “He takes by the heel or struggler with God” (Genesis 25:26), (Jacob wrestled with an angel sent by God); Moses means “I drew him from the water” (Exodus 2:10) (Moses’ mother put him in a basket and placed him on a riverbank to save him from being murdered. He was found by an Egyptian woman and reared by Egyptian royalty); and Samuel means “I have asked him of the Lord” (I Samuel 1:20). Samuel’s mother asked God for a son after she had been barren many years and then gave the boy Samuel back to God to do God’s work.

The name Emmanuel is a combination of two Hebrew words אֱל (’*El*, meaning “God”) and עִמָּנוּ (*Immānū*, meaning “with us”). In Matthew’s gospel, the angel tells Joseph to name the child Jesus from the Hebrew יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (*Yehoshua*), a relatively common name at the time, but there is special significance added to this name given that “Jesus will save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21).” However, Matthew speaks to a future time when “they shall call him Emmanuel.” In the view of biblical scholar M. Eugene Boring, Matthew’s probable meaning of Emmanuel is “that God will constitute in him the one who represents the continuing divine presence among the people of God.”³

III. God with Us: Historical Perspective

For many African Americans, the meaning of Emmanuel constitutes particular causes for celebration at Christmas. Jesus has been the one who has been “with us,” representing the

continuous presence of God and the experiences of God's deliverance throughout our history. During slavery, plantation owners imparted to our ancestors a Jesus who was not present in their situation, but one who promised "pie in the sky in the sweet by and by." But the Jesus the slaves knew was far different than the one presented by the slave owners. Our ancestors saw Jesus much in the same light as Matthew. For the slaves, it was Jesus who was with them in their plight and who promised salvation from the oppression of slavery in the here and now of their situation, not in a far off future.

A Christmas tradition that gave slaves some relief from their oppressive conditions was the celebration of the Johnkankus (also called the Christmas Masquerade). This tradition, popular on the eastern coast of North Carolina and in other parts of the South, is considered by historians as one of, if not the earliest, African American Christmas traditions in the United States. Johnkankus, originating in West Africa, was named after a powerful African chieftain named John Conny. Slaves brought this tradition to America, where they made costumes from rags and hand me downs from slave owners. The slaves topped these ensembles with masks of animals made from recycled materials. On Christmas morning, children and adults would look out for the arrival of the Johnkankus with his (or sometimes her) entourage of musicians.

The coming of the Johnkankus was time for celebration, with slave owners and slaves alike lining the roads, singing and dancing as the procession continued. A hat would be passed around for donations of rum, and sometimes the celebration would end at the home of the slave owners. Although the Johnkankus was celebrated by both slave owners and the enslaved, songs, such as the following, served as a reminder that Christmas was yet one more chance to remind slave owners of the importance of equality:

*Christmas comes but once a year
Ho rang du rango
Everyone should have a share
Ho rang du rang⁴*

The celebration of the Johnkankus died out in the United States as African Americans tried to disassociate themselves with traditions of slavery. However, the tradition continued in white communities until the early 1890s, and is still a tradition in parts of the Caribbean.⁵

IV. Theological and Cultural Approaches to Christmas

After the Emancipation Proclamation, our ancestors in both the North and South possessed the opportunity to celebrate Christmas free from the demands of slave owners. Although they experienced some progress during the post war reconstruction era, Jim Crow laws were passed near the turn of the century which reinforced institutional racism and disenfranchisement. During this time, W.E.B. DuBois was a young man on his way to being a distinguished figure in African American history. Not only was he the author of classics such as Souls of Black Folk, DuBois wrote a series of seventy-one short prayers between 1909 and 1910 for students in elementary schools and those at Atlanta

University. The following, from Prayers for Dark People, is a Christmas prayer that calls Jesus forth as a source of inner spiritual strength for his people:

Christmas Prayer

O Thou Incarnate Word of God to man, make us this Christmas night to realize Thy truth: we are not Christian because we profess Thy name and celebrate the ceremonies and idly reiterate the prayers of the church, but only in so far and we really comprehend and follow the Christ spirit- we must be poor and not rich, meek and not proud, merciful and not oppressors, peaceful and not warlike or quarrelsome. For the sake of the righteousness of our cause we must bow to persecution and reviling, and again and again turn the stricken cheek to the striker, and above all the cause of our neighbor must be dearer to us dearer than our own cause. This is Christianity. God help us all to be Christians. Amen.⁶

Dr. Dubois' Christmas prayer called forth a Jesus emblematic of his time and theological belief. For DuBois and many African Americans, it was important to follow the Jesus who was lowly, meek, and mild. Followers of this Jesus would be safe from racially motivated violence and, in the minds of some, not upset the status quo.

Over forty years later, in his masterpiece Jesus and the Disinherited, Howard Thurman presented a much different Jesus. By identifying Jesus as a poor Jew, Thurman saw Jesus as one who came to help the disinherited withstand and resist oppression. This presentation of Jesus had a profound effect on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He read Jesus and the Disinherited, and it was in his possession at the time of his assassination. Dr. Thurman, one of my favorite theologians, wrote the following meditation that tells of the abiding presence of God in his daily life and ministry. This day could be Christmas or any day:

God is present with me this day.

God is present with me in the midst of my anxieties. I affirm in my own heart and mind the reality of His presence. He makes immediately available to me the strength of His goodness, the reassurance of His wisdom and the heartiness of His courage. My anxieties are real; they are the result of a variety of experiences, some of which I understand, some of which I do not understand. One thing I know concerning my anxieties: they are real to me. Sometimes they seem more real than the presence of God. When this happens, they dominate my mood and possess my thoughts. The presence of God does not always deliver me from anxiety but it always delivers me from anxieties. Little by little, I am beginning to understand that deliverance from anxiety means fundamental growth in spiritual character and awareness. It becomes a quality of being, emerging from deep within giving to all the dimensions of experience a vast immunity against being anxious. A ground of calm underlies experiences whatever may be the tempestuous character of events. This calm is the manifestation in the life of the active, dynamic Presence of God.⁷

God is present with me this day.

During the Civil Rights era and beyond, Jesus came to represent to us the presence of God not only as the source of hope in our individual faith journey but, as with our ancestors, our companion in the struggle for social justice and equality. Our congregations never lost sight of Jesus as the One whom, in the words of the hymnist, “knows all about our struggles” and is the one who will “guide us till the day is done.”⁸ We still see this Jesus today. He is God with us, savior, deliverer and the Messiah described by Matthew in his recounting of the Christmas story.

V. The Spirit of Christmas Past: A Personal Reflection



The painting, Christmas Morning Breakfast by Horace Pippin, is a visual image that evokes for me fond memories of Christmases past. Christmas seasons in my youth were spent in Washington, D.C., at my childhood church (St. Stephen Baptist, now in Temple Hills, Maryland). Christmas was celebrated in Sunday Services, at Sunday School Christmas programs where my sister and I would offer recitations with the youth of the church, and in celebrations by church choirs and auxiliaries. Church was instrumental in fostering a healthy spiritual perspective on the holiday in our row home on Ingraham Street. There was no question in our house or in our church that Jesus was the reason for the season.

On Christmas Day, my parents would awaken us at pre-dawn so that we could see what Santa brought under the tree. We would then pack the family car and travel three hours south to my birthplace, South Hill, Virginia. My maternal grandparents' home was not unlike the one depicted in Horace Pippin's painting. It was an old house with no indoor plumbing and wooden heaters much like that seen to the left of the mother in Pippin's painting. This, nonetheless, did not prevent my grandmother, Elvetia Bridgeforth, and my

mom, Emma Palmer, from teaming up to create what is still the best Christmas breakfast I will ever have: homemade biscuits, freshly ground sausage and eggs from the farm, fried chicken in gravy, fried oysters, and chitterlings!

After eating our fill Christmas morning, it was time to get back in the car for Christmas visits with other relatives. Christmas evening would find us at the home of my paternal grandparents. We would enjoy the company of aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and much food. My grandmother, Fannie Palmer, was a whirlwind in the kitchen, making it her Christmas mission to provide everyone their favorite dish. As she and I grew older, I tried to gently dissuade her from cooking my favorite dish so that she could rest and enjoy Christmas with the rest of us. But it became clear to me that this was how she enjoyed Christmas, and I relished my favorite dish, her egg custard pie, anytime it came out of her oven. Fannie Palmer, who was affectionately called “Big Mama,” left us in 1987, but the recipe was passed on to my mother and in turn to me. I haven’t baked one yet, but one day I will. Whatever day that will be, it will feel like Christmas:

Fannie Palmer’s Egg Custard Pie Recipe

- 2 ½ cup sugar
- 1 ½ cup milk
- 6 eggs
- butter – flour
- vanilla flavoring ½ tsp.
- Mix milk, eggs, then sugar, flour and butter, and add flavoring
- Cook at 350 degrees until the pie is brown, usually forty to forty-five minutes

VI. Christmas Resources

1. [A Diva’s Christmas Carol](#) provides a different perspective on the Charles Dickens classic tale. In the movie, Vanessa Williams plays Ebony Scrooge, a singer who is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. The movie is available on DVD by logging onto <http://www.amazon.com/Black-African-American-Christmas-Movies>
2. A Christmas decorative touch for your home and for your guests might be a coffee table Christmas book. One that I love is Allison Samuel’s [Christmas Soul: African-American Christmas Stories](#), which includes short remembrances of Christmas from Aretha Franklin, NBA star Grant Hill, and actor Jamie Foxx.
3. Music is instrumental in keeping the spirit of Christmas present, including music ranging from pop to jazz to gospel. The following are a few of my favorites:
 - [Christmas Cookin’](#). by Jimmy Smith, produced by Verve Records, 1992
 - [Great Joy: A Gospel Christmas](#), sung by the Broadway Inspirational Voices with Joseph Joubert, produced by K-Boom Records, 2003

- *Yule Struttin'; A Blue Note Christmas*, produced by Capitol Records, 1990
- *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. by Vince Guaraldi, produced by Fantasy Inc., 1988
- *Stargazer*, sung by the Swarthmore College Alumni Gospel Choir, Peaceful Waters Music, 2000

Cultural Resources for Reading and Further Study

1. Collier Thomas. *A Treasury of African American Christmas Stories*. Philadelphia, PA: Henry Holt Publishing, 1997.
2. Samuels, Allison. *Christmas Soul: African American Holiday Stories*. New York, NY: Hyperion, 2001.
3. Smalls, Irene and Paul Goodnight. *Irene Jennie and the Christmas Masquerade*. New York, NY: Little Brown and Company, 1996.
4. Thurman, Howard. *The Mood of Christmas*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1973.
5. Woods, Paula and Felix Liddell. *Merry Christmas Baby: A Christmas and Kwanzaa Treasury*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1986.

VII. God With Us: Keeping Christmas in Perspective

Over the years things have changed
 Christmas Day has lost its name
 Instead of celebrating his birth
 Praising his presence on the earth
 We've turned this day into a fairy tale
 Frosty men and red nosed deer
 A holiday just for me
 A sale or a shopping spree
 To seek him is still wise
 And to find him just look inside
 If at this time we can be still
 We'll find out what the meaning is
 And the real meaning of Christmas
 The real meaning of Christmas
 The real meaning of Christmas
 is Christ.⁹

I believe New York is the most beautiful city in the country at Christmas. The “City that Never Sleeps” comes to life and light in unimaginable ways during the holiday season. However, the commercialism of this holy day is everywhere. An online search of New York magazine offered 2,661 stores in Manhattan alone.¹⁰ Christmas decorations appear seemingly overnight before Halloween. Several radio stations begin playing holiday music 24/7 the day after Thanksgiving. And the week before Christmas becomes total chaos, with crowds of shoppers and tourists and “gridlock alert days” due to increased

traffic. The hustle of bustle of the season becomes incessant and can be quickly overwhelming.

Things that foster a healthy spiritual perspective within me range from attending the Candlelight Candle Festival, Christmas Eve, and Advent services at my home church (The Riverside Church in New York) to gatherings with family and friends or something as simple as an annual viewing of my DVD of “Dr. Seuss’ How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” perhaps my favorite holiday fable. Doing these things fosters within me a healthy spiritual perspective. I believe that they better equip me to treasure the birth of Jesus, God with us, when Christmas arrives and when the commercialism of the holiday comes to an abrupt end.

One of my favorite holiday gospel recordings in recent years is Fred Hammond’s Christmas.... Just Remember. The title track mentions the holidays with Jesus as center. In the coda of the song, Hammond delivers a powerful message not found in the liner notes. As the choir vamps on “just remember,” Hammond ad-libs, “But if there is no tree, and the tears fill your eyes, just remember God sent his son.” Indeed, when all is said and done, this is the point, the perspective of Christmas that we are to remember every year. As we celebrate his birth on Christmas, we celebrate the blessing of Emmanuel: God with us as Savior, redeemer, liberator, intercessor, and friend, ever present, with us.

Notes

1. McCary, P.K. “The Word According to Matthew.” Merry Christmas, Baby: A Christmas and Kwanzaa Treasury. Ed. Woods, Paula L., and Felix H. Liddell, Eds. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.
2. Hewlett, Howard. “Behold, a Virgin Shall Conceive.” Handel, George Frederic. Handel’s Messiah A Soulful Celebration. New York, NY: Reprise Records, 1992.
3. Boring, M. Eugene. “Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew.” The New Interpreter’s Bible. Nashville, TN. Abingdon Press, 1995. p. 135.
4. Malavasi, Meg Greene. “Johnkankus.” 29 Dec. 1999. Online location: http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/history_for_children/23421 accessed 25 June 2009
5. Nunley, John. “Images and Printed Words in Freetown Masquerades.” African Arts 15 Aug. 1982: 42-46.
6. Dubois, W.E.B., Herbert Aptheker. Prayers for A Dark People. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980.
7. Thurman, Howard. Meditations of the Heart. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1953. p. 48.
8. Oatman, Johnson Jr. “No, Not One.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL. GIA Publications, 2001. #308
9. Winans (Musical group). “The Real Meaning of Christmas.” Decisions. Los Angeles, CA: Qwest, 1987.
10. “Shopping in New York.” New York Magazine. Online location: <http://www.nymag.com/shopping/> accessed 25 June 2009

