



EASTER

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 4, 2010

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Lection - John 11:25 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 25) Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Easter Sunday is the high, holy day of the Christian faith! Followers of Jesus the Christ commemorate and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus represents an insurrection against injustice, evil, sin and death. God has the last word on suffering and “soldiers of the cross” and “followers of the Lamb” rejoice in the resurrection of our Lord and Liberator who has put a comma where death had placed a period!

When African Americans flock to church on Easter Sunday, the worship celebration is characterized by pomp, pageantry, praise and preaching. Children dressed in the bright colors of Spring recite speeches about the worst that evil had to offer. Liturgical dancers move majestically to gospel music that highlights the greatest “comeback” the world has ever known. In some churches, banners adorn the sanctuary with messages about the miraculous defeat of death revealed by Jesus’ resurrection. The gospel of the resurrection is proclaimed by preachers who endeavor to give a fresh word from familiar texts. Some preachers creatively do dramatic monologues that preach the resurrection message from the perspective of one of the ancient biblical characters. [Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker’s “Confessions of An Ex-Cross Maker” and the late Dr. E.K. Bailey’s “Herod From Hell” are sermonic classics that were preached, dramatically and dynamically, giving a fresh hermeneutical and homiletical perspective on a tremendous theme (resurrection).]

This liturgical moment reminds us that the Gospel of the Resurrection is Good News, announcing when the forces of death declare “the end” and Jesus victoriously responds, “to be continued!” We may live in a “Good Friday World,” but we walk by an “Easter faith.”

II. Biblical Interpretation For Preaching And Worship: John 11:25

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

The forces of death, the pain of grief, and confusion about what God is doing in the midst of senseless suffering darken the landscape of many African American communities. The forces of death seem to have the last word when black youth are victims of violence. Like many African American pastors, I have presided over too many funerals of teenagers whose lives were aborted by gunfire, not on some foreign battlefield, but on the “home turf” of their own community! Recently, I led a prayer vigil and march against violence in a community dominated by the forces of death. A list of the names of people killed in the last six months was read and, sadly, the majority of the more than 50 names read were under the age of 20!

Then, in addition to teen violence, there is domestic violence as an “elephant in the living room” of the African American community. It has resulted in the forces of death claiming the lives of many whose silent screams were heard too late. Families are devastated, children are emotionally confused and broken, and friends are consumed by guilt and regret when the worst happens and a victim of domestic violence is murdered. One of the most challenging funerals I had to preach was the double funeral of a mother and daughter who were the victims of domestic violence.

On top of the former, the “prison industrial complex” consumes the lives and aborts the potential of many African Americans, especially our young men. I minister in a county and state that leads the nation in the number of jailed people exonerated by DNA evidence. The forces of death manifested in injustice have robbed these men of time and life. The African American Church in the face of these Good Friday realities announces resurrection good news. But how can this really be? Are we just faking it? Are we just telling people what they want to hear? Are we just doing wishful thinking and pouring syrup on blood-drenched situations?

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

One of the memorable themes that continues to energize and empower me with expectation in life’s dark moments was expressed by Dr. John D. Mangrum, Dean of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at now defunct, but never dead, Bishop College. Dr. Mangrum trumpeted the theme for the L. K. Williams Minister’s Institute in 1982. The theme was “An Easter Faith in a Good Friday World.” This powerful and pregnant phrase that presided over the preaching and presentations for that week spoke to a college community and country hurting from an economic recession and a conservative backlash, led by then President Ronald Reagan. The theme reminded us that in the face of Good Friday’s contradictions, we bear a resurrection faith. Resurrection faith empowers us to move through the darkness trusting that God **will** have the last word regardless of how loudly the forces of death scream to be heard.

John 11:25 is a resurrection announcement to a distraught and grief stricken sister, who is in the midst of her own “Good Friday” experience of pain and contradictions. Martha and Mary had sent word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, was gravely ill. Jesus does not rush to the bedside of this one he “loves.” Instead, Jesus says that death will not have the last word on Lazarus’ illness, but that the glory of God would be on display and that God’s Son would be glorified through it. When Jesus finally makes his way to Bethany, he is greeted by the heartbroken sister, Martha. She tells Jesus, “if only you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Death has painfully closed a loving chapter on the relationship she shared with her brother. Death has removed her hope that an alternative possibility for Lazarus exists. Jesus had shown up too late and, now, Lazarus and his sisters are incarcerated by the impossible. They are suffering in their own “Good Friday” tomb. The outcome of this excruciating experience would have been different if only Jesus had shown up on time, Martha maintains.

Jesus responds with a revelation of who he is and a declaration that death can’t defeat. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” This revelation and declaration provide the basis for our “Easter Faith in this Good Friday World.”

In this Good Friday world of painful contradictions, Easter reveals the person and power of Jesus in the midst of the worst the forces of death can muster. Jesus reveals himself as “the resurrection and the life” to a sorrowing sister whose candle of hope had been blown out by the chilly winds of death. Our “Easter faith” celebrates the fact that God operates best and unveils God’s self in a “Good Friday world.”

In other passages and places, Jesus had revealed himself as the “Light of the World,” “Living Water,” “Bread of Life,” etc. However, in this sorrowful situation, Jesus reveals that he is the One who gives power to “stand up again,” which is the meaning of resurrection. There is an “again” after death has done its’ worst work. Dr. Johnny Ray Youngblood, Pastor Emeritus of St. Paul Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, was asked why he was building a church and housing in a community that had been written off as dead. He responded because, “resurrections work best in graveyards.” Our Easter Faith looks forward to a revelation of Jesus in painful predicaments where it seems as if death has had the last word.

Jesus concludes this statement in verse 25 by saying that, “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” Our Easter faith is not denied or defeated by death (ironically, death still comes to those who possess this Easter faith). But, after the word “die,” there is a comma and then the concluding words, “will live.”

Easter faith recognizes that Good Friday may say “period,” but God will replace the “period” with a “comma.” Grammatically, a period means a sentence is over, finished, stopped, ended, done. However, a comma allows for a pause, because there’s more to come. Jesus gives Martha an eschatological hope that invades and overrules her existential painful predicament. Craig Keener keenly asserts, “Christology realizes eschatology so that Jesus brings resurrection life into the present era.” This passage is not a traditional Easter Sunday scripture, but the experience of Mary, Martha and Lazarus remind us that our Easter Faith is operative year round, and that resurrection is a central theme for those who preach to people whose lives are filled with cemetery experiences. Our Easter faith somehow believes that beyond what looks like “the end,” is a resurrection sequel.

Celebration

This passage does not conclude until Jesus goes to the grave of Lazarus who has been dead for four days and after the stone at the grave has been removed, he calls Lazarus by name and Lazarus is given the power to stand and live again. The one who had been given up on is back! Death does not have the last word. Death provides transportation for us to experience the resurrection, revelation and power of Jesus. Our Easter faith refuses to give up on Friday, because Sunday is coming!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: A gravely ill brother who eventually succumbs to death; grief stricken and confused sisters; a community of comforters and mourners; a small close knit village; sisters running to Jesus; a tomb that is sealed by a stone; Jesus visibly upset; Jesus weeping; Jesus praying; Lazarus wrapped in grave clothes and bandages and walking out of the grave;

Sounds: Crying rooted in sorrow; reassuring voice of Jesus; murmuring voices of the friends and relatives who had come to mourn with Mary and Martha; whispering voices offering unsolicited commentary on the actions and behavior of Jesus; Jesus praying so all heard him; Jesus calling to

Lazarus with a loud voice; the shocked gasp of the crowd who witnessed the resurrection of Lazarus; and

Smells: The stench of death when the stone is removed from the tomb.

III. Other Considerations for This Text

- The late Dr. Miles Jerome Jones once stated in a lecture on Homiletics: “Resurrection is being that shouldn’t be. You’re here, but you’re not supposed to be.” This has been the existential experience of African Americans who have endured so much and we really shouldn’t “be.” However we shout with Celie from the Color Purple “By God’s grace, I’m [we’re] still here.”
- It cannot be overlooked that providentially, prophetically and poetically the calendar has been divinely arranged so that this year Easter falls on the 42nd Anniversary of the assassination of the Drum Major for Justice, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Forty-two years ago it appeared as if the assassin’s bullet had the last word; however, the spirit of Dr. King still lives and is seen in movements for justice and peace all over this world.
- It should also be noted that Easter faith is seen in black preaching year round. It’s rare to hear an old school black preacher preach a message without “going to Calvary.” I’ve heard many a sermon rescued by the preacher shouting, “He died...but early Sunday morning...” The once sleeping crowd is stirred to praise and rejoicing. This happens in the Black church because African Americans live with so many reminders of the forces of death, we can’t wait until Easter to celebrate and be reminded of our resurrection hope.
- Lazarus can be used, and has been used, in some sermons as an illustration of the plight of Black men in the United States. We must preach, teach and advocate that we believe resurrection is possible for this oppressed segment of our population.
- The resurrection power of Jesus operating in our existential experience is illustrated by President Barack Obama and tennis star Serena Williams.

After then State Senator Barack Obama lost a campaign bid for the United States Congress for the seat occupied by Bobby Rush, there were many who declared that he was politically dead. But, January 20, 2009, he raised his hand to receive the oath of office as the President of the United States. This is resurrection.

Serena Williams was injured for most of the 2007 and 2008 tennis seasons. She dropped in world ranking to number 200. Many experts wrote her off and said she would never be champion again. At the end of the 2009 season, she again reigned as the #1 Women’s Tennis player in the world.

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