



FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, November 27, 2011

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Lection – Psalm 89:19-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 19) Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said: “I have set the crown on one who is mighty, I have exalted one chosen from the people. (v. 20) I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him; (v. 21) my hand shall always remain with him; my arm also shall strengthen him. (v. 22) The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. (v. 23) I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. (v. 24) My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;

and in my name his horn shall be exalted. (v. 25) I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. (v. 26) He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’ (v. 27) I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. (v. 28) Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him, and my covenant with him will stand firm. (v. 29) I will establish his line forever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Advent is for Christians a holy season of joyful expectation. It is the fulfillment of a promise. The God who promised to be with us comes to us. Right at the annual apex of unbridled commercialism and uncritical consumerism, we heralds of the gospel are called to ask ourselves and to ask others, what does God intend? To whom and for whom does God come in Christ and for what purpose?

To ask that question is to take seriously both the text *and* the African American experience of subjugation and exclusion as pivotal points for the preaching of the good news. Therein is a necessary yet often neglected witness. Black preachers know that many, bound by various religious and racialized claims of exclusive inheritance, have missed the Christ Child, hidden in our midst, poor and wrapped in swaddling clothes. In her singing of the spiritual, Mahalia Jackson captured it with eloquence and power: “Sweet little Jesus boy, dey made you be born in a manger. Sweet little, holy child, we didn’t know it was you. The world treat you mean, they treat me mean too. But that’s the way it is down here below. We didn’t know who you were.”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 89:19-29

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As an African American preacher and a liberation theologian, I must ask, what could the Davidic Covenant, with its declaration of God’s eternal covenant with and commitment to King David and those in his lineage, mean for my own community and for all who seek justice, peace, and equality as God’s intent for all of humankind? Is this covenant ethnically, nationalistically, or religiously exclusive? If so, whom does it exclude and to what political end? What are its implications in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians or in the conflicts between the “Christian” West and the Islamic world? Moreover, does the text posit a dangerous Royal Theology that has provided and continues to provide safe biblical harbor for “the divine right of kings” and the authoritarian claims of despots (some of them Christian) and dictators (some of them African) who would argue for themselves a “line forever, and [a] throne as long as the heavens endure” (29b)?

Whatever one’s particular preaching and pastoral agenda, it seems to me that the responsible preacher, particularly of African descent, must engage this text with these kinds of questions in mind. Otherwise, you run the risk of preaching a word that is unhelpful at best, and hurtful at worst, to a world where competing claims of divine

chosen-ness make peace seemingly impossible and justice extremely difficult to achieve. In this regard, the African American preacher, informed by the liberationist legacy of African American Christianity, may yet have a divine word to say about God's promise *through* David to all who would be men and women chasing after God's own heart.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 89:19-29 is an elaboration upon the basic covenantal promise expressed in verses 3-4. God says, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David: 'I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.'" Set within the context of the rise of the monarchy in Israel, it is God's assurance to David that his dynasty would be preserved forever. Indeed, among David's last words is the assertion that "He has made with me an everlasting covenant" (2 Samuel 23:5). Obviously, this is for David, whose kingdom has expanded and whose power has increased, good news. Moreover, for a people who had made their way out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness and into freedom, the monarchy offered its own assurances of protection from enemies and the maintenance of justice, peace, and order.

Yet, these assurances are fraught with difficulties and contradictions because David, like all human kings, has his own problems—both personal and political—and the story will show that his ideological agenda, implicit within the covenant itself, cannot be so easily identified with God's agenda. This is why I argue, in light of the concerns I raised in part one, that this Davidic Covenant, between God and the one upon whom God will "set the crown" (19b) and make "the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (27b), should not be seen in isolation. Rather, it is best interpreted as part of the larger story of God's faithfulness to God's people from creation to consummation, indeed "as long as the heavens endure" (29b).

Specifically, for Advent preaching purposes, I would suggest an approach that is grounded in Moses and anchored in Jesus. The Mosaic Covenant is important because it grounds the universal character of the Davidic Covenant within the story of a particular people, their quest for liberation, and the implications therein for every form of slavery and human bondage, not only for Israel's encounter with Pharaoh, but for their engagement with aliens, orphans, and widows within their own midst. Yahweh, the God of Moses and the One in whose name Nathan speaks this oracle of God's covenant with David, is first and forever "...the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Amidst the machinations of kings and the machinery of their kingdoms, "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The preacher should ask, *What does this everlasting covenant forever mean* for our treatment of the working poor, the immigrant in search of a dignified path to citizenship and freedom, even the former prison inmate whose prospects for participation in covenants of labor (employment) and citizenship (voting) are *forever* stigmatized and stifled by the label "convicted felon"? If Yahweh, whose promise is now everlasting and unconditional, is also the God who delivers from slavery, surely there must be some good news for these children of God also.

This is why the Davidic Covenant, grounded in Moses, must also be anchored in Jesus. For Jesus, Son of David, was himself poor, born under questionable circumstances within the shadows of stigma, and eventually executed as a convicted criminal. Yet, it is the testimony of the faithful that He is King and his kingdom is without end. The Messiah of God, King of kings, who represents the culmination of the Davidic Covenant, is anointed “to bring good news to the poor...proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18b-19). Indeed, upon Jesus’ Advent, Mary will sing about him: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:51). In this sense, it cannot be the case that the covenant is simply issued *to* David but rather ushered *through* David, for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is God’s agenda and not David’s power or legacy that is at stake. Taken as a whole, the Scriptures affirm that the Kingdom of God is imbued with love and justice and it is both present and yet to come.

Yet, for those who seek to struggle faithfully for the Kingdom of God, the Davidic Covenant is crucial because it affirms that although “powers and principalities” are arrayed against us, our fight is emboldened because of a promise. This is it. The faithfulness of God is unmerited, unconditional, and unending. Perhaps the foremost biblical prototype of human complexity, contradiction, and failure, surely David did not “earn his keep” in the divine economy. Rather, he was, according to the oracle, “exalted,” “chosen,” “found,” and “anointed” by God (19, 20). In other words, the covenant is unmerited.

Moreover, “[M]y faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him...” (24). Later in the same chapter, God promises that though they will be punished for their transgressions, God’s steadfast love will not be removed from those in the line of David even when God’s statutes and commandments are broken (30-35). In this way, the covenant is unconditional.

“*Forever* I will keep my steadfast love for him...I will establish his line *forever*, and his throne as long as the heavens endure” (28-29). The covenant is also unending. Hence, the people of God have every reason to work for God while waiting on God. They do so with the promise and hope of a God whose relationship with them and commitment to them is unmerited, unconditional, and unending. Finally, it must be said that Jesus, the Son of David, is also the Son of Abraham. God promises Abraham that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3b). So, the promise that is unmerited, unconditional, and unending is also universal. At Advent, God tiptoes down the back stairwell of human experience in order to become radically engaged in our story. In Christ, God expresses God’s everlasting love and profound care for the whole world, beginning with the poor.

Celebration

Those who struggle to be faithful, bearing witness to the Kingdom of God, imbued with love and justice, do so with the promise that God’s covenantal commitment to us and to

that agenda is unmerited, unconditional, unending, and universal. Emmanuel truly means that God is with us...*forever*.

Descriptive Details

In this passage, congregants might:

See: The festive anointing of a king (vv. 19-20); the foam of mighty rivers; the broad curtain of the heavens (29); the vast canopy of the ocean deep (v. 25);

Hear: The voice of the One who speaks in a vision (v. 19); the crush of battle (v. 23); the crash of waves (25); the cry of the anointed who prays (v. 26); and

Feel: The steadfastness of God's hand and the strength of God's arm (v. 21).

Additional Resources

- Cannon, Katie G. "Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church." Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction. Vol.1. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993. pp. 326–337.
- Freedman, David Noel, ed. The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol. 2. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992.
- Watley, William D. Sermons on Special Days. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1987.
- Williams, Delores. "The 'Sense' of Advent (Is. 40:9-11; 2 Pet. 3:8-14; Mk. 1:1-8)" in *The Christian Century*, November 21–28, 1990, p. 1092.