



## SENIORS, ELDERS, AND GRANDPARENTS DAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, September 8, 2013**

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**Lection – Psalm 71:17-23** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 17) O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

(v. 18) So even to old age and grey hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
until I proclaim your might  
to all the generations to come.

Your power (v. 19) and your righteousness, O God,  
reach the high heavens.

You who have done great things,  
O God, who is like you?

(v. 20) You who have made me see many troubles and calamities  
will revive me again;

from the depths of the earth  
you will bring me up again.  
(v. 21) You will increase my honor,  
and comfort me once again.

(v. 22) I will also praise you with the harp  
for your faithfulness, O my God;  
I will sing praises to you with the lyre,  
O Holy One of Israel.

(v. 23) My lips will shout for joy  
when I sing praises to you;  
my soul also, which you have rescued.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

In the 1970s, Marian McQuade of West Virginia created Grandparents Day. She desired that it be a national holiday to honor senior citizens. The national holiday will occur this year on September 8, 2013. As Africans in diaspora, our cultural memory calls us to always be mindful of our elders. In them is housed all manner of liberating wisdom. On Seniors, Elders, and Grandparents Day we celebrate the living history that is in our midst.

The Bible is rich with stories of the high regard in which societies have held elders. They embodied the wisdom of the ages and a wealth of experience from walking with God. Perhaps for these reasons Leviticus 19:32 was written. It says, “Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.”

On this day and on other days throughout the year, we should take time to truly honor the seniors of the community. The liturgy could involve presentations of “living history” in which young people interview and then present stories of elders. I have attended Seniors Day services and programs leading up to this type of worship service in which special forums that address issues affecting seniors were lifted. These types of forums are needed.

Whatever the format we choose, our elders are deserving of honor for their endurance, wisdom, and contributions to our communities.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 71:17-23**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

The positive impact that seniors have had in my life is perhaps why I have such respect for their presence in our community. Moreover, their impact is what has made my most recent position as Ministerial advisor to the seniors program at Charles Street AME Church in Boston so fulfilling. “Our Time and Space” was designed to be an outlet for seniors in the Roxbury Community to fellowship and learn together once a month. The motto for the monthly gathering is “generations aging together.” The seniors I serve have an intergenerational perspective because they believe

that everyone in the community can benefit when each generation shares its wisdom with those of all other generations.

I am most fortunate to be a beneficiary of their wisdom. Also, through my many interactions with this group, I have become acutely aware of many of the challenges seniors face. The issues are numerous: from health care benefits, to the need for retirement and estate planning, to a lack of daily interaction with others which typically leads to loneliness, to the typical issues that go with aging. Furthermore, seniors, especially African American seniors, are often left out of the loop as to what services they can avail themselves of.

It is difficult to be an African American senior citizen in this country. Like the speaker in Psalm 71, life has dealt our seniors some harsh blows and continues to do so. Many of the seniors in my group are well into their eighties and nineties and remember the harsh environment in which black people lived prior to the modern civil rights movement. They know the voice of hatred and slander. They know what evil looks like. Some of this evil still exists and rears its head regularly. I believe that many of the seniors I serve would resonate with the sentiments of Psalm 71.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

This is a psalm written by an aged saint. Many believe it was written by David and some believe it was written by Jeremiah, but we cannot know for certain. John J. Collins in his *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, classifies Psalm 71 as a psalm of complaint/lament.<sup>1</sup> As such, this psalm reaches to the heart of human longing and desire through a prayer aimed at God's own heart, with the hope of moving God to swift and decisive action. The root of this psalm of complaint is an experience with some entity that is poised to cause the psalmist harm or in this case put the psalmist to shame (v.1). It is perhaps reasonable to posit that the psalmist believes that his or her assailants desire to disgrace, debase, and devalue his or her good name, reputation, and purpose.

Peppered throughout the repeated acknowledgment of the psalmist's foes are several theological proclamations that are important to note. The first theological proclamation is that God is righteous (v. 2). God's righteousness, according to one commentary, becomes a dominant theme of the psalm.<sup>2</sup> God's righteousness or will is what makes the world go round and indeed instills hope in the heart of the psalmist. The second theological proclamation is that God has everything under control. The whole world and the living of our days are in the hand of God.

As the psalm continues it becomes apparent that part of God's will is to be attentive to well-being of those who call God their God. Next, we notice that due to a close relationship with God this psalmist is keenly aware of God's attentive and careful leadership in his or her life. God's liberating wisdom not only guided the psalmist in his or her youth but has continually followed the psalmist.

The continued presence of God's care, and the fact that God's will is at the center of life itself instills within the psalmist a sense of profound trust and hope. The circumstances that fuel his or her complaint will be resolved by the help of God alone. The psalmist says, "I will praise you for your faithfulness." While this melodic prayer does not indicate whether or not there was

resolution to the immediate issues of the psalmist's slanderous foes, the overwhelming trust of the psalmist creates a sense of resolution within the heart of the speaker as he or she awaits the answer to the prayer.

As I consider the elders in the faith communities I have served throughout my ministry, I think this text speaks volumes to the witness of many who have "seen the lightning flash and heard the thunder roar." These witnesses know that God is never too far away to hear our prayer. God is, indeed, the king of the universe who "has the whole world in his hands." The seniors I serve in my congregational context, many of whom migrated with their families from the south to the New Haven area, endured racism, segregation, and fear in their new home in Boston. I know their testimony to be that God is faithful and God is a protector.

I must also point out the psalmist's request to take vengeance on his or her aggressors. The psalmist asks God to revert the shame they have tried to heap on the psalmist back on the aggressors. This is a common request found in the psalms of complaint/lament. The raw emotion of the prayer, birthed out of the anguish of being under attack, creates an understandable desire for vengeance and for one's faithful God to vindicate his children. Such raw emotion truly pushes the boundaries of how we approach prayer. This text shows us just how real we can and should be in our prayer life. Of course, praying for vengeance is not the best use of prayer. Nevertheless this text suggests that their relationship (God and the speakers) is so strong that the speaker can tell God anything that is on his or her heart.

The psalmist is straightforward and open-hearted with God and hopeful that God will raise him out of his lamenting condition. The psalmist even feels comfortable telling God that God has allowed him to feel and experience great troubles. Even those closest to God sometimes face trouble. But as one writer said, "God's hand is to be eyed in all the troubles of the saints and that will help to extenuate them and make them see light."

In the end, the psalmist who has sought vengeance and complained sees the righteous way, moves to praise, and offers to sing and even shout for joy. This is the only conclusion that one who knows that he or she has been kept by God down through the years could reach.

## **Celebration**

The people of God, especially those who are elders, can trust a God who holds the whole of life in his hands and is indeed listening when we pray; this brings blessed assurance. A song by Shirley Caesar says in part, "God's got it all in control. God's got it all in control. You know he put that assurance way down in my soul; God's got it all in control."

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this passage include but are not limited to:

**Sights:** Seasoned saints on their knees, a position they have found themselves in many times before, asking for help;

**Sounds:** Praying out loud—the speaker addresses God in deep anguish and profound hope with no regard for how loud he is or who can hear her; the sound of old bones creaking as people kneel or shift their weight as they talk passionately to God;

**Colors:** The amber hues of a dimly lit room; from a traditional liturgical perspective, the color purple. (This color is particularly appropriate if this text is used during the Lenten season. Lent is a season that highlights the tense cohabitation of despair and hope. These emotions are quite real for many seniors as they try to survive in an ever-changing world while slowly seeing many of the securities of another time slipping away. The feelings of despair are coupled with hope in a God who will somehow make a way. Purple is also a royal color. In the context of worship, as we celebrate our seasoned royalty, purple might be a nice color with which to decorate the worship space.)

### **III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions**

Music is a good way to soothe anxiety and stress. To that end, the following hymns would be appropriate for the Scripture passage and its theological themes. These hymns can be found in the hymnbooks of most major denominations as well as the *African American Heritage Hymnal*.

- Time Is Filled with Swift Transition. By Jennie Wilson. Tune, (GOD’S UNCHANGING HANDS).
- Just a Little Talk with Jesus. By Clevant Davis. Tune, (A LITTLE TALK).
- Lead On O King Eternal. By Earnest W. Shurtleff. Tune, (LANCASHIRE).
- Great Is Thy Faithfulness. By Thomas O. Chisolm. Tune, (FAITHFULNESS).

### **Notes**

1. Collins, John J. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 465.

2. McCan, Jr., Clinton J. “The Psalms” in The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 958.