



**(Family and Friends Day)**

## **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

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**Lection - Joshua 4: 1-7**

### **I. Introduction**

Just as Joshua and the children of Israel marked their crossing of the Jordan River with a memorial, African Americans through the celebration of Homecomings and Church Anniversaries have marked the passage of historic events and their progression as a people. Homecoming, which has its roots in southern/rural black churches, became increasingly important in the twentieth century, as migration became a dominant theme in black families. In the years surrounding World War I, World II and the Korean War, southern blacks migrated in record numbers to the North and West. These population shifts greatly affected familial, congregational and community ties.

One of the highlights of the worship life of southern black churches was Homecoming, which not only marked the return of family and friends that had moved from their

ancestral homes, but in some instances also preceded into summer revivals. It generally involved a church service that drew not only returning family but also other members of the community together. Following this service, which generally commemorated the history of the church, prominent families and the community as a whole, there would be a dinner. These dinners ranged from the traditional church picnic where everyone contributed to the meal and socialized in an informal manner to a more formal meal in the fellowship hall of the church. Homecoming became a time of commemorating the past, reconnecting with family, and the transmission of rituals and history to younger generations. Today many churches have moved away from the celebration of Homecoming, with the Church Anniversary now serving as the main day for celebrating church history and familial relations

## **II. Songs That Speak to the Moment**

Songs commonly heard during Homecoming celebrations include "We've Come This Far by Faith" and "If It Had Not Been for the Lord on My Side."

### **We've Come This Far by Faith**

Chorus

We've come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord.  
Trusting in his Holy Word, he's never failed me yet.  
Oh, can't turn around. We've come this far by faith.

Verse 1

Don't be discouraged with trouble in your life.  
He'll bear your burdens and move all misery and strife.  
That's why we've

Chorus<sup>1</sup>

### **If It Had Not Been for the Lord on My Side**

If it had not been for the Lord on my side,  
Tell me where would I be.  
Where would I be?

Verse:

He kept my enemies away.  
He let the sun shine through a cloudy day.  
Oh, he wrapped me in the cradle of his arms.  
When he knew I'd been battered and torn.

If it had not been for the Lord on my side,  
Tell me where would I be.  
Where would I be?<sup>2</sup>

## **III. Cultural Response to Significant Aspects of the Text**

While the reasons for migration may have varied, each person who left their ancestral home believed that their destination signified a new life and new opportunities. But life in the North and West hardly mirrored the elaborate stories of “Promised Land with money hanging from trees.” While they did not have to contend with the overt racism of Jim Crow, migrants were subjected to *de facto* segregation that limited their housing choices, kept them out of labor unions or from being hired in the more lucrative jobs, or exposed them to intra-racial discrimination from Northern blacks. Because of this and a desire to connect with their family and cultural roots, many migrants annually made a pilgrimage back to the south. But Homecomings were more than just opportunities to socialize with relatives and friends. According to Yvonne V. Jones in her work Kinship Affiliation Through Time: Black Homecomings and Family Reunions in a North Carolina County, these events also “symbolized obligations and responsibilities towards kin and community and acted to restore a connection between the living and the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

The activities surrounding Homecoming were largely multi-generational which resulted in the transmission of certain values and practices from generation to generation. Through the telling of stories, singing of songs, or the playing of games, younger generations were introduced to the cultural practices that came to define familial and community identity.

#### **IV. Audio Visual Aids**

To aid in helping hearers of the morning sermon better understand a Homecoming message, one may want to include the following:

- PowerPoint and audio presentations that explore the history of your church through photographs and oral interviews with older members of your congregation;
- A commemorative bulletin or book that surveys the history of your church families (use old pictures and new pictures of families currently associated with your church); use photos of auxiliaries of the church; landmark dates in the history of the congregation;
- As a symbol for your Homecoming celebration, consider using the Akan symbol of Sankofa, meaning to return to or go back to; and
- Host a special exhibit featuring artifacts from former and current members, artifacts that belong to the church and/or the surrounding community.

#### **V. Stories and Illustrations**

##### **Finding My Way “Home”**

The food that was served at the picnic and dinner were a major part of the Homecoming experience. For many migrants, greens, macaroni and cheese, pig’s feet and hog’s head

cheese were the only remnants of home that they could take back with them “up North.” While the church I grew up in never had “Homecoming,” every summer my maternal grandfather would load my brothers, cousins and me in the car and take us to the “country” for Homecoming at some distant relative’s church. The “country” was merely traveling thirty miles north to Altavista and Gretna, Virginia. But to small kids it seemed as if we went to another country. While the memories of outhouses and cemeteries that were in back yards or beside the church made me wary of these trips, I can recall the excitement of family reuniting over apple pies, cold watermelon, the best barbeque this side of the Mississippi River and cold sodas stored in washtubs filled with ice. My mother never ventured with us on these trips, but she always made sure to contribute her “world famous” potato salad. My mother has quite a reputation for making the best potato salad and she would prepare 20-30 lbs. of the delicacy for us to take. Even as a young girl, I knew my mother’s potato salad was something coveted. People would ask—“who made the potato salad?” And if the answer wasn’t Carolyn, they skipped the dish.

Stories were told of life North by cousins who I did not know and aunts I had never seen. They had all migrated to these cities. Hymns and gospel songs sung by different combinations of church members and family accompanied by handclapping generally rounded out the day’s activities, and my grandfather would load us back into the car for the trip home. While I was too young to really understand everything that Homecoming stood for, what was apparent to me even then was how important it was to reconnect with family and friends. I’m thankful that my grandfather pushed so hard for my brothers and me to know our extended family or even experience a life different than the one we lived every day. Many of those family members have passed on, but every summer my extended family meets “in the country” to celebrate Homecoming and reconnect with our ancestral roots. As a transplanted southerner now living in the North, I now understand how important that annual sojourn southward was to my relatives. Although I don’t return for a Homecoming celebration associated with a specific congregation, my brothers and I return home every summer to laugh and tell stories while gathered around our parent’s table filled with our favorite foods. I look forward to these trips; they are a balm to my soul. I leave refreshed, light-hearted and with a car packed full of food and fresh fruits and vegetables I can’t get in Ohio.

## **VI. Bernice Reagon Reminisces about Homecoming Celebrations**

The first Sunday in September of each year was the highest day at Mt. Early Baptist Church in Southwest Georgia. It was a long day. We began by going down to Jordan the local creek to baptize those who had “come thru” during the two weeks of revival meetings that preceded our big day. After “wading in the Jordan,” we all went home to dress and pack the box of food that would be served between the two services that would be held that day. It was also the beginning of the school year, and my sister, Mae Frances, and I always saved one of the three new dresses my mother had made to wear for the big day at Mt. Early. The opening service at Mt. Early was always led by the mothers of the church. That service ended with the right hand of fellowship being extended to the new “lives in Christ” who had just been baptized. Every Christian in that the church got up and moved as guided by the ushers singing:

I'm gonna trust in the Lord  
I'm gonna trust in the Lord  
I'm gonna trust in the Lord till I die  
I'm gonna trust in the Lord  
I'm gonna trust in the Lord, till I die

Other lines:

I am gonna stay on the battlefield...  
Whose going down in the grave with me...  
Jesus going down in the grave with me...

Mt. Early's sister church was New Provisor Baptist, and they held church on the first Sunday of the month as did Mt. Early. As soon as they finished their service, they drove over to Mt. Early and we all met outside and shared a very special meal. First, there was a pit in the ground where the Mt. Early men had cooked a whole pig, and you could smell pork barbecue in the air. My mother had made her particular style of Brunswick stew. I think every sister had Brunswick stew; you could tell a person's Brunswick stew by the color, which was determined by whether and how much mustard was in the pot. The base of the Brunswick stew was a hog's head stewed until the meat fell off the bone. The gelatin in the hog's head meant that, by the time it was time to eat the stew, it had a solidity and could be sliced and made into sandwiches when cold—and good Brunswick stew did not run. All of the boxes also held fried chicken, sweet potato pie, greens, cornbread and some kind of cake. My mother would make chocolate cake, another cook would make coconut cake, another pound cake, some boxes had macaroni and cheese, others potato salad. The women would all be on one side of a long table standing in front of their dishes waiting to serve you. I would get a paper plate and pick from the different choices, add a little of the barbecue on top and have a great feast.

Once the feast was over, we all returned to the sanctuary and had the second meeting with New Provisor Baptist deacons leading the devotional service. With baptism at the break of dawn, there were three services with a feast—a long day. People on both sides of moving away, those who moved and those who stayed, cherished this sacred sharing: a day of worshipping and feasting, storing up sustenance and memories and strength, that could still be found in that place where they were first formed. They were coming home to their foundational ground.

## **VII. Making It a Memorable Learning Moment**

For many years Second Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio celebrated what they called Heritage Sunday. This service mirrored traditional Homecoming celebrations held at southern churches. Parishioners dressed in clothing from eras of long ago and engaged in a picnic or church dinner that encompassed southern cuisine.

Some churches have celebrated the importance of southern cuisine and cultural identity with commemorative recipe books consisting of “famous” recipes from women within

the congregation or from area churches. Your church may want to use the idea from Second Baptist or create a commemorative cookbook. Be sure not to miss this great opportunity to pass on to future generations those values, traditions and skills that have carried us through.

### **VIII. Resources to Enhance Your Knowledge of Homecoming**

1. National Council of Negro Women. The Black Family Reunion Cookbook: Recipes and Food Memories from the National Council of Negro Women, Inc., New York, NY: Fireside Books, 1993.
2. Height, Dorothy I. The Black Family Dinner Cookbook: Health Conscious Recipes & Food Memories. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
3. Jones, Yvonne V. "Kinship Affiliation through Time: Black Homecomings and Family Reunions in a North Carolina County." Ethnohistory. 27 (1980): 49-66.
4. White, Joyce. Soul Food: Recipes and Reflections from African American Churches. New York, NY: William Morrow Cookbooks, 1998.

### **Notes**

- 1." We've Come This Far By Faith." By Albert Goodson. African American Heritage Hymnal, Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #412
2. "If It Had Not Been for the Lord on My Side." Traditional.
3. Jones, Yvonne V. "Kinship Affiliation through Time: Black Homecomings and Family Reunions in a North Carolina County." Ethnohistory. 27 (1980): 62.