



(Family and Friends Day)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 20, 2009

Violet L. Dease, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Assistant Pastor, The Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York, NY

Lection - Joshua 4:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: (v. 2) “Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, (v. 3) And command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’” (v. 4) Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. (v. 5) Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, (v. 6) so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ (v. 7) then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the African American worship tradition, Homecoming marks the return of believers and church members to the place they call “home.” For many, it marks the end of the summer and travel season, while jump-starting the activities of a new church year. This time coincides with the return of school children to their studies as schools re-open their doors for the fall academic year. Recess ends for everyone at this time of year, both young and old. Homecoming continues to be celebrated as we mark the preparation for what used to be the harvest season. It was a time to return to regular duties, work the land, till the farm, and so on. Homecoming leads us into the fall marking the final days of rest and relaxation the summer provided. Homecoming introduces the youth to traditions of the past. They see the places and edifices that have been erected as testaments of a mighty and powerful God. These places include schools, churches and other community dwellings which have helped foster community, pride and self worth in a people who had been despised, dejected and demeaned. Homecoming celebrations generate remembrances for all. It is a time that reminds the old of God’s faithfulness across the years and God’s sustaining power in the present. It is a time when all come together to give thanks for what the Lord has done.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Joshua 4:1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Growing up in rural South Carolina, Homecoming had a permanent place in our worship life. The memories will forever be etched in the experiences of my family. It was not an event that took place on one Sunday out of the year. To the contrary, it was a month-long celebration that spanned several churches and two states. It felt more like a season than an event. To most who attended, it was regarded as such!

It began with my mother’s parents who lived just below the North Carolina line in South Carolina, but worshipped over in North Carolina. Some of the smaller churches did not hold service every Sunday. Instead they held a schedule for worship consisting of two Sundays a month – perhaps the first and third or second and fourth. Additionally, some of these same churches were serviced by the same pastor, and they held a combined service on the fifth Sunday. Therefore, it was conceivable to celebrate Homecoming for an entire month, which is what we did.

Revival services were held in the evenings during Homecoming which began on Sunday night, the day marking the beginning of the Homecoming celebration. Unlike the contemporary experiences of two to three night revival services, these services were held until Friday night (six days). It was truly a season of celebration and a time to renew ones commitment to the Lord.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Stones are central to the crossing over narrative in our text. In the Hebrew context, the word “stone” represented a sacred object. The Hebrew word for stone, transliterated is *`eben* which is continuously mentioned in this chapter. Perhaps the initial significance of stones in Scripture is seen through Moses, who received the law and the commandments from God on tablets of stone (Exodus 24:12) for the purpose of teaching and guiding the people.

The communal life of the Israelites is connected to their historical and religious experience. Childs asserts, “Israel became the people of God, not by a natural bond, but by its experience of redemption from Egypt which it understood as an act of divine favour.”¹ The people express their commitment and obedience by honoring the instructions of the LORD.

Here Joshua is depicted as the new Moses. Just as Moses carried the role of prophet and priest, so will Joshua carry such important roles for the people. As Israel journeys toward the Promised Land, this occurrence signifies that God has surely remained with them. The crossing over the Jordan serves as witness of God’s enduring presence and promise. As the ark of the covenant of the Lord was in their possession during this incredible passage, this story also stands to show forth the awesome provision, protection and power of YHWH.

The important stones were laid for the purpose of remembering what took place at Gilgal for the twelve tribes of Israel, but also to share that the river had ceased flowing. These two remarkable events were to be memorialized for all the generations who would follow. The stones symbolized that the location where they were placed was holy ground; they were sacred objects placed as a memorial. They were special remembrances of what the ancestors lived through.

During my youth, not only did the Homecoming celebration yield a huge feast and dynamic fellowship after the services, it also marked a time for visitation of those gone on to be with the Lord. In the south, many of the churches included cemetery plots on their land. For those who traveled from their northern locales back home, they were provided an opportunity to visit the graves of their beloved family members who had died. I remember my father, and often go to place flowers on his headstone at the cemetery plot for my family located in the lot just behind New Zion Baptist Church. This was the sister church of my home church growing up.

My maternal grandmother and grandfather are buried at Cedar Creek in a plot beside the church. My maternal great-grandmother is buried at Timmonsville Missionary Baptist Church in a plot next to church. Two of my aunts are buried in the Timmonsville plot. Two of my aunt’s stillborn babies are also buried in the Timmonsville church cemetery. My paternal grandmother and grandfather are buried at Deep Creek behind the church.

Homecoming was a time of great reflection. The worship and celebration of Homecoming never truly ended with the church service. It extended out onto the church

grounds, the cemeteries, even the homes of nearby church-goers and family members. What a time. What a time. What a time.

Celebration

One of the many songs for the corporate worship experience in Homecoming services celebrated by my family and me directed everyone to remember the power of a loving and gracious God, who was always at work on behalf of all who gathered. The lyrics said, “See what the Lord has done. See what the Lord has done. Count your many blessings! See what the Lord has done!”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: Family gathered; and

Sounds: The sounds of water and sounds in nature (chirping, growling, barking, etc.)

Note

1. Childs, Brevard. Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992. p. 138.