



HOMECOMING (FAMILY AND FRIENDS DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 26, 2010

J. Alfred Smith, Jr., Guest Lectionary Commentator
Senior Pastor, Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, CA

Lection - Leviticus 25:10 (New Revised Standard Version)

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The poet in exile sings his people to homecoming. And that is a theme to which the exiled church in America is now summoned. The gospel is that we may go home. Home is

not here in the consumer militarism of a dominant value system. Home is also not in heaven, as though we may escape. Home, rather, is God's Kingdom of love and justice, and peace and freedom that waits for us. The news is we are invited home (cf. Luke 5:17). The whole church may yet sing: Precious Lord take my hand. Lead me home!
--Walter Brueggemann

Homecoming (also called Family and Friends Day by some) is an annual celebration commemorated across racial and denominational lines in the United States. African American churches have a special fondness for Homecoming, because of strong feelings of affinity with the homecoming experiences of the Ancient Israelites in the Bible. Just as the Israelites experienced the dislocation brought on by the Exodus and the Exile, African Americans experienced the traumatic dislocation of forced removal from Mother Africa and later, an exodus of their own during the Great Migration to northern urban centers. This migration created a sense of loss because family members and friends were often left back home in the south; and spiritual and social resources from the old home church and community were often sorely missed. Eventually, these new northerners found ways to get back home for annual homecoming celebrations. In Texas, "Juneteenth" often became the time for church homecoming services.¹

Today, established northern churches also celebrate homecoming to welcome back those who have moved away as well as those who remain in the community but have either become inactive or have joined other congregations. Homecoming celebrations often occur on church anniversaries and may feature a celebrated guest preacher and a down-home dinner on the church grounds.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

In urban America, we are confronted with the complexities of how people understand the notion of "home." This challenge is particularly experienced by some of the youth in our community who sometimes have difficulty drawing from positive memories of home because their homes have been broken by a variety of family stresses stemming from poverty and hopelessness. Some of these youth have difficulty conceptualizing a positive image of home because their latent memories of home involve being born into a cold institutional system, which bounces them around from one foster home to another. Rather than home being idealized with crocheted images of "Home Sweet Home," many have experienced home as a place of pain and shattered dreams. They find themselves agreeing with an elder singer, Gil Scott Heron, that "it might not be such a bad idea if I never went home."²

Further, the home foreclosure crisis has created a sense of instability and grief for countless families who have lost their homes because of unjust, deceptive, sub-prime loans. Sadly, these families have no Jubilee laws to restore them to their homes.

Under these circumstances, churches represent one of the few spaces for many to experience the safety, stability, and sanctuary of home. The celebration of homecoming in God's house helps families re-envision and re-locate their notions of "home" so that they can experience the joy and liberation of Jubilee.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The biblical idea of Jubilee provides a powerful picture of the joy of homecoming for the people of ancient Israel. Leviticus 25:10 is at the heart of the Biblical instructions regarding the Jubilee year celebration. The word "jubilee" comes from the Hebrew word *yobel* which means "ram's horn." This is significant because on the Day of Atonement a ram's horn made into a type of trumpet (*shophar*) was used to sound the arrival of this extraordinary year and to proclaim liberty throughout the land. As noted in the text, this sacred year occurred once every fifty years and it required everyone to make a homecoming return to their ancestral homes and families.³ This sacred year dispensed grace and mercy throughout the land, righting the relationships of the people with the Lord, the land, and with one another. Jubilee provided Israelite society with radical restoration, characterized by a sacred year of repentance, rest, relief, return, reconciliation, and redemption.⁴ I would add three others: return, reconciliation and redemption.

Repentance- (Verse 9) ... on the day of atonement, you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land.

- The Day of Atonement was a day of fasting, prayer, and offering to atone for sins (see Lev. 23:27-32).
- Jubilee spoke to an understanding of the boundless realm of God and the holistic dimensions of Israel's religion (spiritual, material, social, etc.). While this day brought about social, political, economic and even environmental restructuring of Israel's community life, this all emanated from a spirit of reverence and submission to the Lord. Jubilee exemplified Israel's understanding that there was "no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular."

Rest- (Verse 11) ... *you shall not sow, or reap the after growth, or harvest the unpruned vines.* (See also vv. 4-5.)

- The Jubilee year of rest demonstrated great respect for the land. The land was given an opportunity to organically replenish itself.
- How can we apply this principle of respect and care for the land to our present day urban environment as we deal with pollution and toxins which cause high rates of asthma, lead poisoning, and cancer, in our communities?

Release/Relief- The year of Jubilee proclaimed liberation to those who were enslaved. (Verse 10, see also vv. 39-41.)

- Jubilee provided a fresh start for those who had been in bondage. What does this mean in terms of the church's ministry to parolees and addicts?
- All financial debts were forgiven. (See Deuteronomy 15:1-2 which offers further clarification regarding the provisions of the Sabbath year.) Our modern day bankruptcy system was based on this Biblical system of loan forgiveness. Therefore, Christians should not stigmatize those who are forced to utilize this legal means of financial relief.

Return- (Verse 10) *...you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.*

- This return of the people to their ancestral properties entails a home-coming of epic proportions. Homecoming means a fresh start engendering great joy and celebration
- Foreclosures were canceled. People were able to return to their original homes.

Reconciliation- (Verse 10) *...you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.*

- This homecoming brought families back together to face one another and to reconcile relational rifts.
- In our contemporary setting, we are mindful of fractured families that have been broken by the stresses of poverty, substance abuse, disagreements, and infidelity. On other occasions, petty disagreements have created broken relationships. The Jubilee principle undergirding home-coming, should beckon families to respond to the challenges of reconciliation and healing.

Redemption- (Verses 23-24) *... The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. Throughout the land that you hold, you shall provide for the redemption of the land.*

- Jubilee instilled an understanding that the land belonged to God and that the people were simply tenants and stewards of the land.

Jubilee ensured justice for the poor and protected future generations, ensuring that their inheritance would not be doomed by the folly or the misfortune of their forbears. The system of Jubilee provided a built-in deterrent against the sins of greed, hoarding and oppression. Because of Jubilee, all of the people had an ancestral home and were blessed with the joyful, restorative experience of homecoming.

Celebration

When Jesus declared the acceptable year of the Lord in Luke 4:18-19, He was announcing the Gospel decree of Jubilee, restoring us home to His Kingdom. This decree is authoritative to the church as it calls us to a justice agenda in the world. This decree brings good news to the poor, liberty to the oppressed, and healing to those who are broken. This Jubilee decree brings us back to the security of home in our earthly journey regardless of our life circumstances because our true home, the Kingdom of God, is among us (Luke 17:22). This divine decree of Jubilee also provides us eternal security, because Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us, so that where He is, there may we also be. Jubilee points us triumphantly to that great day of heavenly homecoming.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details within this passage include:

Sounds: The sound of the Trumpet (v. 9); people shouting “liberty;”

Sights: Crops growing freely; absence of people working the land; plows and pruning hooks lying idle; masses of people returning home; festive celebrations; families embracing; and

Smells: The smell of wheat, grapes and other crops growing freely.

III. Resources

Books

1. Holy Bible: King James Version: African American Jubilee Edition, published by the American Bible Society (May 2000). See especially the chapters on “The Biblical Jubilee” by Virgil A. Wood; “Creating a Jubilee World: Practice Jubilee, Celebrate Jubilee,” and “Jubilee in Leviticus 17-26, by Jerome Clayton Ross.”

2. Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. Harper's Bible Dictionary. (1st ed.). Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1985.

3. Baraka, Amiri (Leroi Jones). Home: Social Essays. New York: Akashic Books. Originally published in 1966 by William Morrow and Company. (See Page 15 in new Introduction (2009).) The author explains why he entitled the book home:

“The title was meant not only to speak of my attempts to analyze and understand what life was like here in the U.S. as the 1950s came to an end and the 1960s swept in, but for me, it was also a conscious attempt to home in on both where I was coming from (literally) and where I was trying to get back to, spiritually and finally, on the very real side.”

4. Boesak, Allan Aubrey. Farewell to Innocence: A Socio-Ethical Study of Black Theology and Power. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977. (See pages 20-26 for a discussion on Jubilee as “The Gospel of the Poor.”)

5. Brueggemann, Walter. Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. See chapter 5: “Second Isaiah- Homecoming to A New Home,” pages 90-108; Conclusion: “Hurt as Hope’s Home,” pages 131-133, and especially page 130 where the author writes the lines with which I opened this lectionary commentary.

6. Sanders, Cheryl J. Saints in Exile: the Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. (See Conclusion: Exile and Homecoming, pages 143 -151.)

7. Wolfe, Thomas C. You Can’t Go home Again. c. 1934. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers. Perennial Classics Edition, 1998. Excellent quote on page 664:

“He saw now that **you can't go home again**--not ever. There was no road back. Ended for him, with the sharp and clean finality of the closing of a door, was the time of his dark roots, like those of a pot-bound plant, could not be left to feed upon their own substance and nourish their own little self-absorbed designs. Henceforth, they must be spread outward--away from the hidden, secret, and unfathomed past that holds man's spirit prisoner--outward, outward toward the rich and life-giving soil of a new freedom in the wide world of all humanity. And there came to him a vision of man's true home, beyond the ominous and cloud-engulfed horizon of the here and now, in the green and hopeful and still-virgin meadows of the future.”

Film and Online Resources

1. Homecoming by Charlene Gilbert.⁵ This film tells the story of African American land loss and chronicles black farmers from the civil war to the present. In 1920, there were nearly 1,000,000 black farmers in America. By 1999 there were less than 18,000. In the words of the writer/filmmaker,

“On that journey I discovered the power of community, family and tradition. **Homecoming** is as much about hope in the future as it is about loss in the past... the South can sometimes be a romanticized dream of family, or a nightmare of burned bodies hanging from trees. What I discovered in the telling of this history was the importance of the land to those who continue to work it and in working it honor those who spilled their blood to escape it.”

2. Priscilla's Homecoming.⁶ The story of Thomalind Martin Polite, an African American woman from Charleston, South Carolina who made a joyous homecoming visit to the West African nation of Sierra Leone. Mrs. Polite traced her roots back seven generations to her ancestor, Priscilla, a ten year old girl taken on the slave ship Hare from Sierra Leone to South Carolina in 1756.

Musical Resources

1. "Just Over in the Gloryland." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #602
2. "Going Home." (Largo theme) performed by Paul Robeson, written by Antonin Dvorak. Vanguard Records Audio CD (May 24, 1990).
3. "Coming Home" by John Legend. From the CD Getting Lifted. New York, NY: GOOD Music and Columbia Records, 2006. (This is an R&B song about the hopeful return of a soldier from war.)
4. "Homecoming" by Kanye West & Chris Martin from the album Graduation. New York, NY: Sony Music studios, 2007. (Hip-hop lyrics reflecting on Kanye's love for his home town of Chicago. It is a presentation of gritty urban images.)
5. "Home Is Where the Hatred Is" by Gil Scott Heron. From the 1971 record album, Pieces of a Man (a poetic lament about the destructiveness of drug addiction to a person's sense of internal security and self worth).
6. "Home" performed by Stephanie Mills, written by Charlie Smalls (This pop song was featured in the Broadway musical The Wiz and speaks to the yearning of the protagonist (Dorothy) to return home.

See additional musical resources in the Worship section for Homecoming/Family and Friends Day.

Notes

1. McQueen, Clyde. Black Churches in Texas: A Guide to Historic Congregations. The centennial series of the Association of Former Students, Texas A&M University, no. 85. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000. p. 14.
2. Herron, Gil Scott. "Home is Where the Hatred Is." Pieces of a Man. Flying Dutchman Records, 1971.
3. Achtemeier, Paul J. Harper's Bible Dictionary. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985.
4. Wiersbe, W.W. Be Holy. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996/1994. (Wiersbe identifies four elements of Jubilee, the four "r's" of repentance, release, rest, and restoration).
5. Gilbert, Charlene. Homecoming: The Story of African-American Farmers. Documentary. PBS. Online location: <http://www.pbs.org/itvs/homecoming/> accessed 26 May 2010; Book format: Gilbert, Charlene, and Quinn Eli. Homecoming: The Story of African-American Farmers. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.
6. Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. Priscilla's Homecoming. 1990s. Online location: <http://www.yale.edu/glc/priscilla/> accessed 26 May 2010