



JESUS AND HIP HOP CULTURE: YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, April 27, 2008

Luke A. Powery, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ

Lection – Revelation 5:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; (v. 2) and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (v. 3) And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. (v. 4) And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. (v. 5) Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” (v.6) Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (v. 7) He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. (v. 8) When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (v. 9) They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe

and language and people and nation; (v. 10) you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.” (v. 11) Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, (v. 12) singing with full voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (v. 13) Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (v. 14) And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshipped.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Jesus and Hip hop have always had a relationship. Some religious folk have tried to end their marriage saying they had no business being together in the first place—the sacred has nothing to do with the secular they say. Others have felt led to rhyme and rap about Jesus, even though they don’t claim to be “Christian”—they say you can’t separate the sacred and secular because even Jesus knows about a cross, the lynching tree, dying gangsta style. Now, in some Christian musical camps, there is even gospel hip hop where the gospel message of Christ is key, more so than the boom-boom beat or bling-bling. Regardless of your view on hip hop, it is clear that Jesus and hip hop are married. Some segments of the black church have rightly endorsed this relationship in an attempt to engage youth culture and resources from this generation.

This liturgical moment reveals how God is active in all areas of life with all people for all time. God is with those that might be deemed outsiders in a community—homeless youth, the poor, the dope fiend, the criminal, the young woman with a STD. As Kanye West says, “Jesus Walks” with them!¹ This Sunday reveals how ministry is incarnational or contextual and must be “real,” connecting to every generation within the African American community. No one should be left out, but young adults in particular should be brought in, and engaged through their own language. That means that on this Jesus and Hip Hop Sunday, young adults will have a resounding voice. The Word will be translated by the Spirit into the tongue of hip hop. Creative rhythmic sermons with a beat, hip hop hymnody, poetic pastoral prayers, could all “raise the roof” for Jesus, keepin’ it real. Young adults could lead the entire service or should at least be in leadership. This Sunday shows that hip hop is redeemed while keepin’ Christianity connected to real life.²

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Revelation 5:1-14

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I was born in the Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop, but nurtured in the home of a holiness preacher. That means “secular” hip hop was not deemed holy like sacred “Christian” music. Words mattered more than the music, and if Jesus wasn’t lifted up, the music had to get out of the house. It did not have a hearing unless I snuck one in and of course I did! But even though “secular” hip hop had a cool reception from my holiness parents, one thing was clear—the rhythmic beats touched a chord within their African diasporan selves.

My quiet reserved mother, whose normal doxological shouts come in the form of falling tears, suffered from back pain most of my life and still does. Though her praise is more introverted in nature, when the drums begin to talk, her feet and hands begin to walk in a new way as the rhythm moves her. She might not say a word with her mouth, but she doesn't have to because her subtly moving body says it all. The back pain is still present, but it is as if the beat makes it more bearable in the moment and points to a future hope when she will have a new dance step. The beats minister to her pain, allowing praise to happen in the midst of her pain. For her, the rhythm speaks more than the actual rhyme. This is the potential of holy hip hop: allowing praise to occur amidst real human pain where "Jesus walks."

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The hymns of Revelation occur in the middle of oppression, the same human birthplace of hip hop. Despite a lack of consensus on the exact social situation of Revelation, it is clear by the tone of John, the revelator, that there is a crisis, whether it is an actual, perceived, or future crisis. The neighbors are not being so nice to the Christians. From the outset, John speaks about his persecution and patient endurance (Rev. 1:9), even enduring exile on Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:10; cf. Rev. 6:9). Because of his Christianity, he has a cross to bear along with the other followers of Jesus. Though they were part of God's heavenly kingdom, they lived in the earthly kingdom of the Roman Empire which competed with God for their allegiance. The Christians clashed with the Greco-Roman culture and religion (Rev. 9:20-21; Rev.13). In the midst of this crisis, they still had hope because Christ was "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5), and God was "the Almighty" (1:8); thus, they could praise in the midst of pain, even though death or economic deprivation awaited those who did not worship the Roman emperor. This did not matter to John for his focus was on God and the Lamb. He uses poetry, not mere prose, to articulate his feelings and attitudes about God and the world, creatively colliding with those who strive to be god in the place of the one true God. He tells it like it is in a twofold manner, because doxology for John is the praise of God in the midst of real pain. Praise and pain are both necessary parts of his hymns like they are for the music of African Americans. These hymns represent the blues sensibility of black music, just as in hip hop. Kanye West may say with confidence that Jesus walks. Jesus walks among "war with terrorism, racism and most of all . . . with ourselves." "The Devil trying to break me down" and "the restless might snatch your necklace." Hip hop does not shun pain but sings and cries from it and acknowledges the African American reality, keepin' it real.

John keeps his music real. The troubled existence of the Christians is hinted at throughout John's hymns which function as a political polemic against Roman imperialism on one level. The presence of a polemic implies pain. His hymns are interested in God, but also in fighting Roman politics. As one scholar notes, "praise is the beginning of political practice."³ His musical vision sings against the imperial cults, and the injustices of life. "God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down." Just using the hymn form to praise God, which was normally used to praise Roman gods, was an indictment against the Romans. John wants to "crack down on Rome while raising up the Lamb."⁴ In this "crack down," pain is present; if this were not so, a "crack down" would not be necessary. John begins with weeping while his praise is focused on the pain of the Lamb, "standing as if it had been slaughtered" (v. 6). This phrase

points to the pain of a Passover sacrifice (1 Cor. 5:7), alluding to the sacrificial death of Christ. His being “slaughtered” (Rev. vv. 9, 12), and his “blood,” are emphasized for pain is at the heart of this hymn. In other words, John is singing “I know it was the blood for me. One day when I was lost, he died upon the cross!” The Lamb, standing and slaughtered, relates to the “walking wounded” who suffer under Roman oppression. If this was a clean, bloodless lamb, it would not be worthy because “worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered” (v. 12). It is this Lamb, this Jesus, this bloody figure that pervades the hip hop scene. It is not just the negative images of women or the false sense of maleness that are paraded but the images of a crucified Christ pervade hip hop to keep it grounded in black religious memory. The slaughtered Christ is the original gangster and has the “Juice” because Jesus walks with us, even “the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers, and victims of welfare.”

For John, worthiness stems from experiencing pain. The Lamb, a crucified Christ, is one of the wounded and thus worthy of worship. Even in his given reasons for worship, John appeals to the painful past of Egyptian slavery (“slaughtered,” “ransomed for God saints,” “made kingdom and priests serving God”) for through the pain of Christ, humans are ultimately delivered from their pain. The pain does not stop the praise because through the pain, praise was born (e.g. “You are worthy . . . for you were slaughtered”) showing how pain is the “matrix” of praise.⁵ Life under the rule of the Romans did not satisfy thus John focuses on a ruler of another kingdom, not the expected conquering messianic Lion of Judah but a bloody slaughtered Lamb. And even the Roman emperors will eventually pay homage to this God (v. 13) for there is only one King (1:5, Rev. 17:14) and it’s not the bling. The Lamb of God reigns “forever and ever!(v. 13)!”

John’s purpose is to exalt God and persuade us to do the same, for it is God’s power alone that can undo the earthly powers of Roman imperialism. That’s why his refrain is “worship God!” (Rev. 19:10; 22:9), not sex, money, or power. Because of God, there is a “new song” of praise. If a listener was not attentive initially, the “loud voice” of an angel captures the imagination and ears of the hearers. When no one is found anywhere to open or look into the scroll, John despairs and weeps “bitterly” over this tragedy. But his weeping turns to singing when the Lamb appears. The presence of the Lamb is so overwhelming and exciting that the crowds contagiously grow (v.11) and grow while they sing “with full voice” (v. 12). The hymn of 5:9-14 is a musical crescendo which gradually increases in size and volume as the Lamb becomes a greater focus. In the beginning, there is John, the one on the throne, an angel, and one elder (vv.1-5). Then the four living creatures, the twenty four elders, and the Lamb increase the size of the vision, along with the “saints” (vv. 6-10). The crescendo continues when John hears the “voice of many angels” numbering “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands.”(vv. 11-12). Finally, John hears “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them”(vv. 13-14), leaving nothing and no one excluded from the praise. This chapter begins with a mournful solo (John weeping), but ends with a joyful symphony, all because of the Lamb.

The Lamb is the impetus for the praise and this is John’s main point. The Lamb is worthy to be praised. There is no reason for doxology without God and the Lamb. The Lamb has perfect knowledge and strength (seven horns and seven eyes), is omnipotent and omniscient. The Lamb is the one who controls human history because he’s the one who can open the scroll, the book of destiny about God’s will. If this isn’t enough, John triggers our memory of God’s past faithful

liberating actions during the Exodus. The Lamb is worthy because he was “slaughtered” (Ex. 12:6, Lev. 14:13, 1 Cor.5:7, 1 Peter 1:18), and his blood “ransomed for God saints,” and he made them into “a kingdom and priests serving our God” (Rev. vv. 9-10; cf. Ex. 19:6). The Lamb is praised for what he has concretely done for others. John does not present an empty summons to praise but fills it with valid reasons because our God is one who acts in the world. Remember, “Jesus walks.” John speaks in this manner to persuade his audience that what God did in the past, God does in the present. “God show me the way because the devil trying to break me down.” This Exodus God is their God because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Brian Blount is right that “John recalls the past in order to charge people up in the present.”⁶

John definitely charges up the Roman powers when he places God on the throne, especially because the throne is the center of the universe, and God’s placement there means that God is the center and power belongs to God. This is a clear attack on the earthly thrones of the Roman emperors, wherein from John’s perspective only one can sit on the throne, God Almighty. The throne is never described because the throne by itself is not what is significant, but the one on the throne is. God is the center of our attention and praise. God is king, no earthling. John wants his hearers to shower lavish praise on God and in so doing they will declare political resistance against the imperialist regime of Rome. He realizes that praise legitimizes social power⁷ and all power is God’s. Praise is a subversive act towards Rome’s power and in this doxological resistance, pain is inevitable, thus John shows us that praise happens amidst real pain and struggle. One can praise and still stay connected to the real world.

“Jesus walks.” He might be slaughtered but he’s still standing. Hip hop is not just hype but holds together real hurt and hope at the same time. It has to when black on black crime persists on the streets. It has to when schools still don’t have adequate educational resources. It has to when “Brenda’s Got a Baby” (Tupac’s song about teenage pregnancy). It has to when police profiling persists, “getting choked by the detectives.” It has to because that’s keepin’ it real. This is the way the Christian life is—pain and praise together. There is hurt and yes, there is hope. Hip hop may have its problems like misogyny and economic gain off the reality of the poor, but it can also help the Church keep it real by its yearning for something different and something better from God. “God show me the way.”

Celebration

Pain is real but it does not and will not have the final say when God intervenes. The Lamb, though slaughtered, stands, thus overcoming pain and death and defeat. Jesus walks (out of graves). We, too, can stand though in pain (slaughtered). Christ will ransom us, delivering us from modern day oppression. Trouble don’t last always!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The loud voice of the mighty angel; John weeping bitterly; elder telling John not to weep; the new song of the living creatures and elders; the voices of the angels surrounding the

throne; the singing with “full voice”; every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the seas, singing; four living creatures say “Amen!”;

Sights: The right hand of the one seated on the throne; the scroll written on the inside and on the back, the scroll sealed with seven seals; the mighty angel; see John weeping; Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered with seven horns and seven eyes; Lamb taking scroll from right hand of the one seated on the throne; four living creatures and twenty four elders falling before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense; elders falling down and worshipping;

Smells: Incense from golden bowls; and

Textures: The sand-paper feel of the scroll; smooth stringed harp and smooth golden bowls.

Notes

1. For lyrics to Kanye West’s Jesus Walks, Online location: www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/kanyewest/jesuswalks.html accessed 23 February 2008 [Throughout this commentary, I quote various portions of this rap.]
2. For further information, see Sorrett, Josef. “Beats, Rhymes, and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip Hop.” The African American Pulpit. (Winter 2006-07); and Sorrett, Josef “Reflections on Hip Hop Culture, Christianity, and Social Capital.” Kinetics: Faith In Motion. Online location: www.faithinmotion.net/faith-and-politics accessed 23 February 2008 [enter title of article in search box]
3. Brueggemann, Walter. Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1988. p. 68.
4. Blount, Brian K. Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation Through African American Culture. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005. p. 3.
5. Brueggemann, Walter. Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology. p. 136.
6. Blount, Brian K. Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation Through African American Culture. p. 21.
7. Brueggemann, Walter. Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology. p. ix.