



KWANZAA

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Saturday, December 26, 2009 – January 1, 2010

Gene M. Donaldson, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Senior Pastor, Capitol Hill Seventh-day Adventist Church, Washington, DC

Lection – Hebrews 11:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11.1) Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Kwanzaa is a seven day Pan African holiday celebrated from December 26 through January 1. It is not intended to be a surrogate Christmas or religious holiday, but rather a time for African

Americans to celebrate their African heritage as well as their journey as Americans. *Kwanzaa* was born in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement, when Dr. Maulana Karenga advocated a new holiday for African Americans to embrace traditional African values such as family, community, and faith.

These values are clearly delineated in the seven guiding principles of *Kwanzaa* which are practiced each day during the holiday. The seventh principle, *Imani*, or faith, reaffirms the hopes African Americans have in the promise of the future. The *Imani* principle is designed to remind African Americans that the true meaning of *Kwanzaa* is not found in homes decorated with red, black, and green streamers, or meals based on African recipes, but rather the opportunity it affords African Americans to never forget their past story, and the obligation they have to add their own testimony to the long legacy of those who maintained a steadfast faith, that the promise of tomorrow far outweighed the reality of any hardships endured.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Hebrews 11:1

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

We are living in sobering times. As I write this commentary, the United States military forces are embroiled in two armed conflicts on foreign soil. Unemployment is rising, the housing market continues to stagnate, the credit market is experiencing a lending gridlock, and stock prices are daily spiraling downward.

Despite the alarming news out of Washington and Wall Street, there is a current of vibrant expectation that brighter days are coming. This rebirth of hope, especially in the African American community, has been fostered primarily by the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States. The historic election of the first African American to the highest office in the land is a vivid object lesson of the *Imani* principle of *Kwanzaa*. For the African American church, it has been another satisfying validation of the providential leading of God, the very essence of our lection text Hebrews 11:1.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Hebrews was written to a group of first century believers who were in danger of giving up their recent allegiance to Christ during hard times. The author argues that returning back to their former religion is a mistake of epic proportions, because Jesus Christ is superior to the angels (Hebrews 1:5–2:18), Moses the great prophet (Hebrews 3:1-6), and Aaron the greatest earthly high priest (Hebrews 4:14-6:20). Jesus offers a better rest than the Canaan rest of Joshua (Hebrews 4:1-11); a better priesthood than the Levitical system (Hebrews 7:1-28). He conducts ministry in a better sanctuary (Hebrews 8:1-5); and offers a better covenant promise based on a more effective sacrifice (Hebrews 8:1-10:18).

On the basis of who Jesus is and what he accomplished, the author concludes that faith in him provided a much better alternative than the one his listeners were considering (Hebrews 10:19-12:29). Hebrews 11 is pivotal in advancing the argument that Christians must “re-see” through the lens of faith which views circumstances from an eternal perspective. Hebrews 11 is critical,

because it links the bold statement that the “*Righteous ones shall live by faith*” and not shrink back (10:38) with the answers to the two obvious questions undoubtedly on his hearers minds. If faith is required of the righteous, are there credible demonstrations of such a faith? The author answers with a resounding yes! For there is a “great cloud” of Old Testament witnesses (Hebrews 11:4-40), all with one testimony, they did it by faith! The second question, “What is the nature of this faith?” he answers in Hebrews 11:1.

Most commentators agree that v.1 is not a formal definition of faith, but rather a description of what faith actually does. Faith has the capacity to make the things we hope for as real as if we already possessed them. Faith introduces a new way of visualizing – not where actual seeing prompts believing (I must see it to believe it), but where believing is actually seeing. Faith traffics in the realm where the promises of God are revered as “self-evident,” even though there exists contradictory or no concrete evidence of support.

There are several key words and phrases used in verse 1 that help to cement the author’s description of faith:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The Greek word *hupostasis* is translated as “assurance” in the text. It carries the meaning of something that is put underneath as a support like a foundation for a building. It can also be used to convey the idea of the legal document a person would possess to prove ownership of a piece of property. In this sense, *hupostasis*, or assurance, would be equated to a deed of title. Faith, therefore, operates as an undergirding on which our aspirations and hopes are built. Since faith trusts the Word of God implicitly, it acts as the guarantor that God’s promises will come to pass. As a co-signer to the veracity of God’s character (God cannot lie), faith provides a cogent environment for hope to have the audacity to believe that what is not evident today will be tomorrow. By faith, we can be sure that what God has promised exists and, by hope, we can be confident that we shall have everything God’s Word has promised.

Faith is the conviction of things not seen. The Greek word *elegchos* is translated as “conviction” in the text. It denotes a proposition or belief that after close scrutiny and painstaking examination proves to be valid. The author declares that the way of faith has been tried and tested. Its track record is irrefutable and impressive as evidenced by the long list of Bible personalities who previously walked in the way of faith (11:4-ff). God does keep his Word emphatically even though we cannot always discern the how or the when of his working. We don’t see the reservoir that contains water, or the underground pipes that allow water to flow to a house, but we know they must exist every time we turn on the faucet and water comes out. I have no personal empirical evidence that Jesus died on Calvary’s cross – I was not physically there. Nevertheless, by faith, I know unequivocally that he died for my sins and now lives evermore to intercede on my behalf. The author suggests, for the Christian, that which is not seen is no longer problematic, because the mettle of faith, grounded by the Word of God, is trustworthy having proven its validity over and over again.

Celebration

The central message of Hebrews 11:1 is important particularly for African Americans. It is indispensable to the African American psyche because it encourages us to shout while in the midst of a storm, and that we shall overcome, though the internal and external forces that are against us are formidable. Throughout our history in America, God has provided evidence of the veracity of our cause and the assurance of a just outcome. We have been holding to the promise of an America where character, not skin pigmentation, is the litmus test of how a person is judged. African Americans have been resolute in their fidelity to that promise, even in the darkest hour of this nation's uncomplimentary past. Buoyed by an undaunted faith, we have witnessed steps toward the fulfillment of the promise. Rosa Parks sat in 1955; Martin Luther King walked in 1963; Barack Obama ran in 2008, that our posterity may fly tomorrow. We celebrate today, because as long as faith is alive and well, the promises hoped for, though often deferred, can never be a denied.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sight: Seeing must be done through the mind's eye in order to view "*things not seen*;" and

Sound: Hearing the inner voice of the Spirit of God, who provides conviction for those things that the eye cannot substantiate but the heart can verify.

III. Sermon Illustrations

- Marshall Shelley, who suffered the death of two of his children, wrote in Leadership: Even as a child, I loved to read, and quickly learned that I would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel. New characters were introduced. Disparate seemingly random events took place. Subplots were complicated and didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot. But I learned to keep reading. Why? Because you know that the author, if he or she is good, will weave them all together by the end of the book. Eventually, each element will be meaningful. At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice. Even when I can't explain why a chromosomal abnormality develops in my son, which prevented him from living on earth more than two minutes ... I choose to trust that before the book closes, the Author, will make things clear.²
- **Page Intentionally Left Blank**
One day while printing a report for work I noticed a blank page. I initially thought that the printer was malfunctioning. I thought this until I looked near the bottom of the black blank page and saw this note, "Page intentionally left blank." After a sigh of relief, a different section of the report began to spout from the printer. When that section finished another blank page followed with the same note, "Page intentionally left blank." A few seconds later a new section began to print. As I thought about it I realized that the blank page that came at the end of each section served two purposes. First, it informed me that the previous section had ended. Second, it informed me that a new section was about to begin. Sometimes, God will seem silent. You will wonder what's going on, or where is God. But it's

possible that the current page in your life may have been intentionally left blank by God to let you know that a new chapter is coming.

Timothy Jackson, Memphis, Tennessee

- **Act Before You See It**

When the meteorologist predicts the weather, we act on that prediction, basing our choices on what we have heard. We act like it is going to rain before the rain comes, until it comes. If the weather forecaster say there's a hurricane coming, you start acting like it is coming before you see it. You go to the store and start buying bread, water, and all that stuff. You act like you've seen it before you've seen it, until you see it. All that is based—not on what you've seen—but it's based on what you've heard. That's what faith is. Faith is acting like you've seen it before you've seen it, until you see it.

Alexander, Claude. "Faith." The African American Pulpit (Winter 2006-2007): p. 59

Notes

1. For further information consult, "What is Kwanzaa?" Kwanzaa Information Center: Melanet.com. Online location: <http://www.melanet.com/kwanzaa/whatis.html> accessed 1 August 2009
2. Shelley, Marshall. "My New View of God." Leadership Journal.net. (10 Jan. 1996): 90. Online location: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1996/fall/614089.html> accessed 1 August 2009