



CELEBRATION OF VOCATIONS (LABOR DAY)

Sunday, September 4, 2011

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The unit you are viewing, [Celebration of Vocations \(Labor Day\)](#), is a compact unit. This means that it does not have a supporting cultural resource unit and worship unit. Instead, to enliven the imagination of preachers and teachers, we have provided scriptural text(s) that we suggest for this moment on the calendar along with a sermonic outline, suggested links, books, articles, songs, and videos. For additional information, see [Celebration of Vocations \(Labor Day\)](#) in the archives of the Lectionary for 2008–2010. 2011 is the first year that the African American Lectionary has posted compact units for moments on its liturgical calendar.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The year 1894 was a significant one in American History. In this year employees of Pullman Palace Car Company altered the ways in which employees were viewed in American society by pulling off one of the most successful strikes in the history of the United States of America. The Pullman Strike was a conflict between labor unions and railroads in the city of Pullman, Illinois, where workers took unofficial industrial action against the Pullman Palace Car Company, otherwise known as a “Wildcat Strike.” Due to the impact that the strike had on the lives of the workers involved in the strike, the traffic in Illinois, and the economy of the nation, President Grover Cleveland decided to concede to the Central Labor Union (a union highly involved with the Pullman Strike) and compose and enact legislation known as Labor Day. The first Monday of September was selected by the Central Labor Union.

The United States Department of Labor explains the history and meaning of the Nation’s Labor Day on their website: <http://www.dol.gov/opa/aboutdol/laborday.htm>. On their site you will find “The History of Labor Day”:

Founder of Labor Day

More than 100 years after the first Labor Day observance, there is still some doubt as to who first proposed the holiday for workers. Some records show that Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a cofounder of the American Federation of Labor, was first in suggesting a day to honor those “who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold.” But Peter McGuire’s place in Labor Day history has not gone unchallenged. Many believe that Matthew Maguire, a machinist, not Peter McGuire, founded the holiday. Recent research seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, N.J., proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York. What is clear is that the Central Labor Union adopted a Labor Day proposal and appointed a committee to plan a demonstration and picnic.

The First Labor Day

The first Labor Day holiday was celebrated on Tuesday, September 5, 1882, in New York City, in accordance with the plans of the Central Labor Union. The Central Labor Union held its second Labor Day holiday just a year later, on September 5, 1883.

In 1884 the first Monday in September was selected as the holiday, as originally proposed, and the Central Labor Union urged similar organizations in other cities to follow the example of New York and celebrate a “workingmen’s holiday” on that date. The idea spread with the growth of labor organizations, and in 1885 Labor Day was celebrated in many industrial centers of the country.

A Nationwide Holiday

The form that the observance and celebration of Labor Day should take were outlined in the first proposal of the holiday—a street parade to exhibit to the public “the strength and esprit de corps of the trade and labor organizations” of the community, followed by a festival for the recreation and amusement of the workers and their families. This became the pattern for the celebrations of Labor Day. Speeches by prominent men and women were introduced later, as more emphasis was placed upon the economic and civic significance of the holiday. Still later, by a resolution of the American Federation of Labor convention of 1909, the Sunday preceding Labor Day was adopted as Labor Sunday and dedicated to the spiritual and educational aspects of the labor movement.

The character of the Labor Day celebration has undergone a change in recent years, especially in large industrial centers where mass displays and huge parades have proved a problem. This change, however, is more a shift in emphasis and medium of expression. Labor Day addresses by leading union officials, industrialists, educators, clerics and government officials are given wide coverage in newspapers, radio, and television.

African Americans have long had an ambivalent relationship with the celebration of Labor Day. Modernly, as do many in the general society, Labor Day is viewed by African Americans as another holiday before summer ends. However, it is also a reminder of the difficulties that blacks have historically faced in attempting to secure work for decent pay. We have been locked out of unions, accused of taking jobs that belonged to whites, are under-paid, not promoted as quickly as whites, and even now we are still the last hired and the first fired.

II. Celebrations of Vocations (Labor Day): Sermonic Outline

A. Sermonic Focus Text(s): Nehemiah 6:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Now when it was reported to Sanballat and Tobiah and to Geshem the Arab and to the rest of our enemies that I had built the wall and that there was no gap left in it (though up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), (v. 2) Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, “Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono.” But they intended to do me harm. (v. 3) So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?” (v. 4) They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. (v. 5) In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant to me with an open letter in his hand. (v. 6) In it was written, “It is reported among the nations—and Geshem also says it—that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall; and according to this report you wish to become their king. (v. 7) You have also set up prophets to proclaim in Jerusalem concerning you, ‘There is a king in Judah!’ And now it will be reported to the king according to these words. So come, therefore, and let us confer together.” (v. 8) Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done; you are inventing them out of your own mind” (v. 9)—for

they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

B. Possible Title(s)

- i. A Little Hard Work Never Hurt Anybody
- ii. Do Not Come Down
- iii God Loves a Committed Worker

C. Point of Exegetical Inquiry

In any text there can be several words or phrases that require significant exegetical inquiry. One exegetical inquiry in this text to which one may want to give particular attention is the cultural significance of the walls in Jerusalem and why Nehemiah engaged in a project to rebuild them. Nehemiah indicates in this pericope that the Jews are not intending to rebel. So, why the need for a wall?

III. Introduction

This pericope in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative highlights the numerous obstacles and nefarious impediments faced by the author of the Nehemiah memorandum. In an attempt to rebuild a place that held spiritual and cultural significance for the formerly exiled Israelites, Nehemiah, the alleged author, attracted the undesired attention of neighboring Israelite foes.

Much like 18th and 19th century abolitionists, Nehemiah faced countless death threats for attempting to inculcate meaning into a people who no longer were connected to the cultural apparatus with which their ancestors were well acquainted. These Israelites did not exist when David, Solomon, or Rehoboam were kings. Therefore, much like 18th and 19th century enslaved blacks in America, they were unaware of a time when their people were royalty and ruled Kingdoms. Nehemiah was a builder. However, the wall that he led in building was not the main thing that he desired to build; it was the self-esteem and courage of his people. Oh, how great is the need for builders like Nehemiah in our community today! We need persons who in all of their labor glorify God and uplift their families and community. Are we ready? Then, in the words of legendary songwriter, Fannie Crosby, “To the work. To the work!”

(verse 1)

To the work, to the work, we are servants of God
Let us follow the path that our Master has trod
With the balm of His counsel our strength to renew
Let us do with our might what our hands find to do.

IV. Moves/Points

Move/Point One – Once you begin work for God enemies will arise.

- a. Nehemiah began working and enemies showed up;
- b. God’s enemies are our enemies; and
- c. God never loses when faced with an enemy.

Move/Point Two – God’s workers are always opposed.

- a. Important work requires sweat;
- b. Important work requires tears; and
- c. Important work requires commitment—an “I will not come down” attitude.

Move/Point Three – Being a Godly worker requires resilience and God will help you.

- a. Those who want to topple Godly workers will lie;
- b. Do not be frightened by those who want you to stop working; and
- c. God will strengthen your hand.

V. Celebration

We praise God for all work assigned to our hands. We praise God that we are co-laborers with God. We praise God for jobs and ways to provide for our families. And even if we are going through a season of unemployment, we praise God for being the one who provides for us, even when we don’t have the ability or the employment to provide for ourselves. No matter what, we know Who is the one who puts food on our tables and clothes on our backs. No matter what, we know Who is the one who supplies our needs. No matter what, we know Who is our employer, our boss, our friend!

VI. Illustration(s)

I have three children, and my oldest son went to Cornell—Ivy League. My second son went to Claremont—Ivy League. Now what happened was that I was the benefactor, and I paid twenty-seven thousand dollars a year for each one of those two boys. I have paid much tuition, not to mention cars and clothes and all the other things that go with going to college. So I am out of \$250,000 for two boys’ education. I want you to notice with \$250,000 I could have bought a degree. I could have said, “Here children, here is yours, here is yours, and here is yours. Here it is—you’ve got it. But the first day they go to work the boss would understand that they had bought a degree, but they don’t know a thing about the job. I paid, and they studied. I told one son, a quarter is too much if you don’t study. A hundred thousand is not too much if you do your work, because the

benefactor has to cause the recipient to share in the sacrifice.

— Noel Jones, “Do Something with It.”
The African American Pulpit (Spring 2003), p. 55

VII. Sounds, Sights, and Colors in This Passage

The sounds, sights, and colors in this passage include:

Sounds: The workers building the wall; Nehemiah refusing to listen to his enemies; the letter being read aloud; the sound of construction and people yelling;

Sights: The step-by-step erection of the wall; Nehemiah’s facial expression when he is being told lies; the letters he is given; and

Colors: The color of an ancient construction site and the cream color of the parchment on which the letters were written.

VIII. Songs to Use to Accompany This Sermon

A. Hymns

- To the Work. To the Work. Lyrics by Fannie Crosby. Tune by W.H. Doane
- A Charge to Keep I Have (meter). By Charles Wesley. Tune, African American spiritual
- Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen
Nobody knows but Jesus [Nobody knows my sorrow]
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen
Glory hallelujah!

Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down
Oh, yes, Lord
Sometimes I’m almost to the ground
Oh, yes, Lord

Although you see me going ‘long so
Oh, yes, Lord
I have my trials here below
Oh, yes, Lord

If you get there before I do
Oh, yes, Lord

Tell all-a my friends I'm coming too
Oh, yes, Lord

B. Well-known Songs

- God Favored Me. By Hezekiah Walker
- Never Would've Made It. By Marvin Sapp
- I Won't Complain. By Don Johnson
Youtube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=adg5Aum0h_4&feature=related
- I Don't Feel No Ways Tired. Text and Tune by Curtis Burrell
- He's My Foundation. Text and Tune by Frederick Burchell
- I'll Be Alright. By Doc McKenzie
- He's Working It Out for You. By Shirley Caesar

C. Spirituals

- Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?
The Moses Hogan Chorale
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01O0rPIsgk&feature=related>
- The Nathaniel Dett Chorale
YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01O0rPIsgk&feature=related>
- We Shall Overcome.

D. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2000–2010)

- It's about Time for a Miracle. By Samuel Butts
- My Heart Says Yes. By Tory Sneed
Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0hB5G3z6mg>

E. Liturgical Dance Music

- Through the Storm. By Yolanda Adams
- Stand. By Donnie McClurkin

F. Invitational Songs

- Thirsty. By Marvin Sapp
- Standing in the Need. By John P. Kee

IX. Books to Assist in Preparing Sermons or Bible Studies Related to a Celebration of Vocations (Labor Day)

- Anderson, Claud. Black Labor, White Wealth: The Search for Power and Economic Justice. Bethesda, MD: Powernomics Corporation of America, 1994.
- Kidner, Derek. Ezra & Nehemiah (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries). Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.
- Martin, Joan M. More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.
- Boyce, James Montgomery. Nehemiah (An Expository Commentary). Ada, MI: Baker Books, 2006.
- MacArthur, John. Nehemiah: Experiencing the Good Hand of God (MacArthur Bible Studies). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001.
- Royster, Deirdre A. Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men from Blue-Collar Jobs (George Gund Foundation Book in African American Studies). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003.

X. Videos

- A video recording of “Song from a Cotton Field” by Bessie Brown. The video includes images of slaves at work. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zxmbie8dfkI&feature=related>
- Musical traditions and recollections of eight retired African American railroad laborers whose occupational folk songs were once heard on railroads that crisscrossed the south. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=025QQwTwzdU&feature=related>
- In a series of short clips, The History Channel takes a look at the origins of Labor Day, changing methods of manufacturing, and legislative gains made by labor unions. Online location: <http://www.history.com/videos/history-of-labor-day#history-of-labor-day>

- The violent beginnings of Labor Day are chronicled in this clip. Online location: <http://contemporarybusinessupdates.com/2010/09/06/labor-days-violent-beginnings>

XI. Links to Helpful Websites for Labor Day

- <http://afroamhistory.about.com/b/2010/09/06/african-americans-and-labor-unions.htm>
- www.aflcio.org/aboutus/history/history/anderson.cfm
- www.aphiliprandolphmuseum.com/index.html
- A collection of African American clip art celebrating Labor Day: <http://www.faithclipart.com/clipart/labor-day.html>
- Children's Labor Day crafts for church: http://www.ehow.com/list_7222015_labor-day-craft-ideas-church.html

XII. Notes for Select Songs

A. Hymns

- To the Work. To the Work. Lyrics by Fannie Crosby. Tune by W.H. Doane
Location:
Online at: <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/t/o/t/tothewor.htm>
- A Charge to Keep I Have (meter). By Charles Wesley. Tune, African American spiritual
Location:
[African American Heritage Hymnal](#). Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #467

B. Well-Known Song(s)

- God Favored Me. By Hezekiah Walker
Location:
Hezekiah Walker and the LFC. [Souled Out](#). New York, NY: Verity, 2008
- Never Would've Made It. By Marvin Sapp
Location:
[Never Would Have Made It](#). New York, NY: Verity, 2007.
- I Won't Complain. By Don Johnson

- Location:
Jones, Paul. I Won't Complain. Miami, FL: Pure Records, 2003.
- I Don't Feel No Ways Tired. Text and Tune by Curtis Burrell
Location:
African American Heritage Hymnal. #414
 - He's My Foundation. Text and Tune by Frederick Burchell
Location:
Zion Still Sings for Every Generation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
#181
 - I'll Be Alright. By Doc McKenzie
Location:
Hold On. Alpharetta, GA: MCG records, 2001.
 - He's Working It Out for You. By Shirley Caesar
Location:
He's Working It Out for You. New York, NY: Word/Epic, 1991.

C. Spirituals

- Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?
Location:
The Moses Hogan Chorale: Online location:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01O0rPIsgk&feature=related>
- The Nathaniel Dett Chorale. Online location:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s01O0rPIsgk&feature=related>
- We Shall Overcome.
Location:
African American Heritage Hymnal. #542

D. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2000–2010)

- It's about Time for a Miracle. By Samuel Butts
Location:
Crawford, Beverly. Live from Los Angeles, Vol. 2. Los Angeles, CA: JDI Records, 2010.

E. Liturgical Dance Music

- Through the Storm. By Yolanda Adams
Location:
Through the Storm. New York, NY: Verity Records, 1997.
- Stand. By Donnie McClurkin
Location:
The Essential Donnie McClurkin. New York, NY: Verity Records, 2007.

F. Invitational Song(s)

- Thirsty. By Marvin Sapp
Location:
Thirsty. New York, NY: Verity, 2010.
- Standing in the Need. By John P. Kee
Location:
The New Life Community Choir featuring John P. Kee. The Essential John P. Kee. New York, NY: Verity Records, 2007.