



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (BELOVED COMMUNITY DAY)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Monday, January 17, 2011

(Be sure to view the great videos and links included in the Cultural Resource unit.)

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Lection – Exodus 3:9-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 9) The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. (v. 10) So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." (v. 11) But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (v. 12) He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s public career, as a leading voice of the civil rights movement, dramatically altered the socio-political landscape in America. In fact, many of the civil liberties enjoyed today are a direct result of the campaign against racial injustice that led him along that road from Montgomery to Memphis. More, therefore, than an opportunity to simply take a day off from school or the office, Dr. King's birthday comes as a modern day call to remember, celebrate, and act in acknowledgement of the life and legacy of one who sought to bring healing and hope to our Nation and World House¹ through his methods of Nonviolent Direct Action.

While uniquely anchored to the life of the African American church, this 2011 King Day Observance will mark the eighty-second birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the National Holiday which has been adopted by all fifty states and is now observed in over one hundred countries around the world. As such, it is considered a holiday which rightly encourages interracial, interdenominational, intercultural, and intergenerational

gatherings which address the dual themes of liberation and reconciliation, justice and beloved community. This year's theme is: Remember, Celebrate, Act: A Day On Not a Day Off.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Exodus 3:9-12

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As we gear up for yet another King Day observance, we do well to raise the question Dr. King raised forty-three years ago in his 1968 publication entitled "Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos?"² It was a book written at the crossroads of a chaotic nation and world, facing the frightening prospect of an unbridled armaments race, the war in Vietnam, democracy's bitter contest with communism, and the lethal mix of racism and classism that polarized and paralyzed American progress. King's prophetic model invited us to choose the high-road of community rather than opt for the low-road of human chaos.

Given the stress and strains of our current socio-economic environment, and the disproportionate ways in which African Americans continue to be affected, how can we best celebrate King's Birthday in ways that will build bridges that benefit community? Robert Franklin is right to insist that as African Americans we must assume a primary role in reclaiming and rebuilding our village.³ May we, therefore, rediscover the strength and courage to act in ways that will in fact determine where we go from here.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Exodus narrative has served as a powerful theological reminder of the God who remembers the pain and prayers of the people of God, then acts in and through the events of history to affect the liberation and emancipation of those that are oppressed. It is also a poignant reminder that much of God's liberating action is accomplished via the agency of human hands, heads, and hearts. Hence, Moses is invited to remember, act and then celebrate the God who brought them through.

The text commences with Moses' invitation to remember from whence he has come. He is invited to remember the mission that he has avoided for forty years. His burning bush encounter came as an uncomfortable reminder that there was more to life than his comfortable, non-conflicted life in Midian. Moses fled there following his failed attempt as a freedom fighter forty years earlier. Moses moved to Midian, he met his wife, bought his home and quietly assimilated into the culture. Ironically, Moses fled from the environment of Egyptian slavery to live next door to the folk who sold his great grandfathers son (Joseph) into slavery. His flight from Egypt brought him to a suburb that supported and participated in the sale of slaves to Egypt. No, they were not slave-holders; they just prospered and fueled their local economy by assisting as slave-traders. That's where Moses moved, he moved to Midian. Close enough to Egypt to benefit from its industrial complex, but far enough from it to insulate the conscience from the slings and arrows of outrageous injustice. God shows up: Hi Moses, remember me, I'm the God of your weary years and silent tears, the God of your ancestors. In fact, I'm the one who sat down with your great, great, great, great grandfather Abraham. Moses, I know you've carved out a

comfortable space in Midian, but I've been troubled lately. I've heard their cry and I've seen the oppression. I've heard and seen what most folk don't want to hear and see these days, and I'm here to help you remember what your passion used to be before you took your eyes off the prize and exchanged your mission for the comforts of Midian.

If verse 9 speaks to the issue of remembrance, verses 10-12a provide Moses with his call to act. Having been reminded of the 70% birthrate of children to unwed mothers, the near 30% unemployment rate among black males, how black-on-black violence has become the leading cause of death among black teens, the dropout rate among middle school and high school students, the tendency of too many black families to freak out, flip out, and fall out, the disproportionate rate of AIDS infection among women, and the staggering record of incarceration instead of education, Moses is challenged to act, to return to Egypt. It is helpful to know that the Hebrew word for Egypt (*Mitzrayim*) is a reference to a place of "limitations, boundaries, and constraints." In no uncertain terms God is saying go down Moses, way down to Egypt land, and when you get there tell ole Pharaoh I said "Let my people go." You see, I'm not sending you (to *Mitzrayim*) to just bring a message of hope. Not sending you to have another meeting. Not sending you to engage in the paralysis due to too much analysis. Not sending you to hold another press conference so that you can be seen and make back-room deals with corporations that leave the masses with crumbs. I've heard their cry and I've seen their oppression and I'm sending you to get my people out. I'm sending you to act in ways that will transition my people from the land of limitations to the Land of Promise.

It is of interest that *action* precedes *celebration* in the natural flow of the text. While our national King Day theme reverses the order, I would submit that the text offers a necessary revision of the order. Verse 12b suggests that the worship occurs on the other side of the Red Sea, well beyond the restrictive boundaries of Egypt. While we ought not 'wait till the battle is over to shout,' there are some celebrations that ought to be reserved until after the results. The sad truth is that too many communities have majored in celebrations and minored in the action items we've been called to model. We've been celebrating Dr. King's life and works for forty-three years, when in fact there have been fewer and fewer real gains to celebrate. Can we really afford the continued luxury of celebrating in light of the regressing statistics? It may take forty years to reach the Promised Land, but let us at least defer the celebration until we've crossed a few more Red Seas.

Celebration

To spur us toward some Red Sea victories, the text reaffirms that it's no secret what the Lord can do, what He did for Moses, He'll do for you. He'll go with you. God won't go for you or instead of you but He'll go with you! Step by step you can make the journey... and if in your going you trust and never doubt He will surely bring you out. Just walk together children and don't get weary... there'll be a great camp meeting, not in Midian, but in the Promised Land.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The bleating of the sheep, God's voice;

Sights: The burning bush, the flock of sheep, rugged grazing terrain; and

Smells: The smells associated with shepherding a flock of sheep.

*The spoken word selection that accompanies today's material is titled *Someday We'll All Be Free*. By Raphael Warnock with Jennifer Holiday. *Goodness and Mercy*. INDIE. 2010. Available at <http://www.rafaelwarnock.com>

III. Additional Material that Preachers and Others Can Use

- This is a conversation about what can and must be done to do a better job of “people making,” especially “child-making.” And ultimately, we must discover and implement the science and art of making better families, communities and, we hope, a better nation and global community. This is the work that Dr. King referred to as building the “beloved community.” It is the work that will require the collective efforts, cooperation, and investment of the entire nation.⁴
- We must avoid extreme optimism - the notion that we have come a long way and have nothing to do but await the inevitable. We must also avoid extreme pessimism - the notion that we have come nowhere and can do nothing to alter our lives. We must say realistically that we have come a long way, but still have a long way to go. We must realize that change does not roll in on wheels of inevitability, but comes through struggle.⁵
- There is a spirit abroad in life of which the Judea-Christian ethic is but one expression. It is a spirit that makes for wholeness and for community; it finds its way into the quiet solitude of a Supreme Court justice when he ponders the constitutionality of an act of Congress which guarantees civil rights to all citizens; ... it kindles the fires of unity in the heart of the Jewish Rabbi, Catholic Priest and Protestant Minister as they join arms together, giving witness to their God on behalf of a brotherhood that transcends creed, race, sex and religion.... It is the voice of God and the voice of man; it is the meaning of all strivings of the whole human race toward a world of friendly men underneath a friendly sky.⁶

Notes

1. King, Martin Luther. The World House Project. Online location: <http://www.theworldhouse.org/whessay.html> accessed 5 December 2010
2. King, Martin Luther. *Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos?* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968.
3. Franklin, Robert. *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
4. Ibid.
5. King, Martin Luther. Montgomery Improvement Association. Holt Street Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL. 5 December 1955. Inaugural Address.

6. Thurman, Howard. The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope. 1965. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989.