



MARTYRS' SUNDAY (ALL SAINTS DAY) (REMEMBERING SLAIN HEROES AND HEROINES)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

***I Remember I Believe**

By Bernice Johnson Reagon

I don't know how my mother walked her trouble down
I don't know how my father stood his ground
I don't know how my people survive slavery
I do remember, that's why I believe

I don't know why the rivers over flow their banks
I don't know why the snow falls and covers the ground
I don't know why the hurricane sweeps through the land every now and then
Standing in a rainstorm, I believe

I don't know why the angels woke me up this morning soon
I don't know why the blood still runs through my veins
I don't know how I rate to run another day
I am here still running, I believe

My God calls to me in the morning dew
The power of the universe knows my name
Gave me a song to sing and sent me on my way
I raise my voice for justice I believe...

Sunday, November 1, 2009

Lewis Brogdon, Jr., Guest Lectionary Commentator

Ph.D. Student in Renewal Studies at Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA

Lection - Revelation 7:13-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robbed in white, and where have they come from?" (v. 14) I said to him, "Sir you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; and they have washed their robes

and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (v. 15) For this reason, they are before the throne of God: and they worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. (v. 16) They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; (v. 17) for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Martyrs’ Sunday is a time that commemorates those whose lives have been lost for the cause of justice and righteousness. In the New Testament, a martyr was one who, in life, bore witness to their faith in Christ and was celebrated once they died. In early Christian history, martyrs were those who lost their lives during imperial persecution because of their devotion to Jesus Christ.

In the African American religious tradition, Martyrs’ Sunday is a special day that celebrates the fine line that our people have walked between life and death and how meaning has been carved out of experiences that were meant to destroy our people. This liturgical moment, like many special days in the life of the African American faith community, is a somber and yet celebrative time; because, through the years, there have been so many painful goodbyes—but, this text testifies to what so many of our foreparents knew, in spite of the goodbyes here, on the other side, all martyrs for the faith will receive a triumphant welcome, because they have overcome the world.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Revelation 7:13-17

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

Though there was, is, and always will be cause for celebration for the accomplishments and achievements that blacks have made in America, the 400 year sojourn of blacks in America has been overwhelmingly painful. Slavery, characterized by dehumanization and economic exploitation, as well as decades of segregation and legalized oppression, has left the black community permanently scarred. In the midst of this painful history, countless lives have been lost, especially the lives of my black brothers—many whose blood has paved the way for African American advancement. My brothers have been whipped, gagged, hunted with dogs, lynched, harassed, beaten, miseducated, and incarcerated, during “the great tribulation.”

In my life, I have said goodbye to a father and grandfather, in their early 50s. I spent my formative years in the projects in Virginia and have seen my friends from those projects either arrested or dead before age 30. Being a black male in America, from the 1600s to the present, has included far too much familiarity with trouble or in the words of our text, “the great tribulation.”

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The book of Revelation represents the culmination and consummation of God’s redemptive work in the world through the work of Jesus Christ. It was written sometime between 92-96 CE by

John, who was exiled on the isle of Patmos during the reign of Emperor Domitian. Interestingly, the book combines apocalyptic literature with epistolary and prophetic segments woven throughout the text. As an apocalyptic text, it represents a genre that employs symbols, numbers, and figurative language to conceal its message to its enemies, as well as to authentically reveal the truth of God's victory over oppression and all forms of evil. As a prophetic text, it includes sections that contain references to prophetic figures, oracles, messages of judgment for oppressors, and hope for the oppressed. Theologically, the book of Revelation addresses human suffering in the world, the mystery of divine providence, judgment of evil, and victory. In other words, this apocalyptic text speaks a word about tribulation (trouble) in the world.

The Scene

The heavenly scene described in Revelation 7 is a dramatic and powerful depiction of the central truth of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. A great multitude stands before John, as a witness that trouble does not always last. In Revelation 7:9, John sees a multitude "that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." As a result, he asks two questions: who are these people and where did they come from? This week's passage also contains images of victory: coming out of tribulation, having one's robe washed in the blood of the lamb (v. 7:14), and a multitude before the throne of God serving God continually (v. 7:15). In addition, there are heavenly images that tell us that the righteous will abide under the tabernacle of God (vv. 7:15-16) and experience the Lamb of God as shepherd (v. 7:17).

The Social Situation

Aspects of apocalyptic literature reflect and resonate with the black experience. Like John on the island of Patmos, we know what it is like to experience exile and imperial oppression. Africans of the Diaspora have faced unjust political, social, and religious power over the course of our 400 year sojourn in America. Revelation's message of facing darkness with hope, because of eschatological realities, is meaningful in the black religious tradition. In the black Pentecostal-Holiness tradition of my formative years, we used to sing a song that says, "I Am So Glad That Trouble Don't Last Always." This song seems to strike at the heart of the message of the book of Revelation. Trouble in this world happens, just as Jesus said it would. In fact, in the Johannine literature tribulation or overcoming tribulation in the world is often mentioned (John 16:33; 1 John 5:5; 2 John 7; 3 John 10-11; Revelation 2:9-10, 3:10). In this tradition, faith in Christ is not an exemption from adversity. However, the book of Revelation reinforces the message of this song: that trouble does not have the final word, because Jesus has overcome the world. Revelation serves as a fitting conclusion to the New Testament canon, because it makes clear that trouble does have an ending date.

The Identity of the Martyrs

On Martyrs' Sunday (All Saints Day), as we commemorate our heroes and heroines whose lives were lost for the faith, it is good to know that among the multitude stand a host of black ancestors who now don robes of glory. Who are these people--these martyrs? They are the thousands upon thousands of captured Africans who died in the mid-Atlantic, the African slaves who were mercilessly killed at the hands of brutal slave masters, the thousands killed during the Jim Crow years, the thousands who died and continue to die because of the vicious cycles of poverty and violence that eat at our inner cities and rural towns. Finally, and most importantly, they are those who have called on the name of Jesus Christ, who is both the Lamb of God and

king of the heavenly host. John saw them standing before the Lord on that glorious day. In the world, they were called “nobodies.” History does not even remember, nor record, many of their names, but they are somebody in the eyes of God. In the eyes of the Almighty, they are children of the Most High God. In this text, they are clothed in robes of victory.

The Location and Legacy of the Martyrs

The second question, “Where did they come from?” is significant in this apocalyptic text. In this text, both persecution and oppression are carried out by corrupt officials of the Roman Empire. This multitude is unique, because they have come out of the great tribulation. It is an interesting fact that both the church of the first century and the black church faced imperial persecution and oppression. What is even more significant about this connection is that we know that the early Church was not crushed under the weight of unjust and abusive political power. The witness of the first century church serves as a source of encouragement to the black church whenever it faces tribulation: the instruments of hell (economic oppression, unequal justice, and “spiritual wickedness in high places”) will not prevail.

Celebration

Revelation 7:14 describes the multitude in words that elicit a celebrative response. The elder says, these are the ones who came out of the great tribulation. A central part of the mystery and genius of black spirituality is the ability to use celebration in a way that imparts strength for the journey ahead. Black spirituality does not celebrate the fact that there is injustice in the world. Instead, black spirituality accepts the fact that the great tribulation will be faced by the faithful and boldly asserts that one is neither defined by tribulation nor confined to tribulation. God’s people go through and come out of tribulation. Why? Because trouble don’t last always.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Elders - John turns to one of the elders and asks for understanding about the great multitude. In the African and African American cultures, elders are prominent figures who provide insight, wisdom, and oversight. Elders remind us of the importance of the wisdom of the ancestors.

People clothed in white robes - Black martyrs clothed in white robes is a particularly problematic image, because the color white has been used in ways to reinforce white supremacy, while simultaneously demonizing the color black. Great care needs to be taken when employing this image. For example, it should be explained to listeners that the use of the term white, in this context, does not in any way relate to race or ethnicity.

Washing robes - This evokes images of the days of slavery and reconstruction.

The blood of the Lamb - This is arguably the most important image in the passage, because it reminds readers that coming out of the tribulation is only possible because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. The great multitude overcame because they not only persevered in the

face of persecution and oppression, they believed in Jesus Christ. The efficacy and the necessity of the shed blood of Jesus is a truth that must remain central in black preaching.

Hunger no more/Thirst no more - This powerful image reminds readers of the economic and social conditions of most blacks in America. Many know about hunger and thirst, because African Americans are socially deprived and inordinately experience poverty.

Scorching heat - (It reads “sun beat down” in the NAS version.) This brings to mind another powerful image from the days of slavery when our ancestors worked in the cotton, indigo, rice, and tobacco fields, under heat-stroke causing temperatures.

III. Recommendations for the Study of Revelation

Commentaries on Revelation:

Blount, Brian K. Can I Get A Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005.

Mounce, Robert. New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Revelation. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998.

Kistemaker, Simon J. New Testament Commentaries: Revelation. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001.

Morris, Leon. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Revelation. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994.

*Bernice Johnson Reagon. “I Remember, I Believe.” Special thanks to Dr. Reagon for the use of this song in print and audio.