



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 28, 2009

Forrest Elliott Harris, Sr., Guest Lectionary Commentator

President, American Baptist College, Nashville, TN and Director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, TN

Lection – Jeremiah 3:15 (New Revised Standard Version)

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The biblical tradition celebrates the priestly and prophetic life of good shepherds who lead God's people. Black churches have always celebrated their leaders whom they highly appreciate and honor for the labor and love they invest in ministry. Black pastors have taken up the hard vocation of ministry that confronts the threats and dangers, burdens, and the mental, emotional and sometimes physical suffering that go with the prophetic task of leading black people through hostile land. This is why Martin Luther King, Jr. was among the greatest pastors and prophets of our time. The most incomplete record to date is the unrecorded testimony of many unsung shepherds of black churches whose sacrifice and courage, pastoral care to wounded people, and preaching defiance of injustice gave hope to black people so that they could trust God for their future.

Contemporary black churches continue the tradition of pastoral anniversary celebrations, because they are occasions for affirming the authentic leadership and pastoral shepherding whose spiritual agency is selflessly shared in the struggles of God's people.

Pastors preach “in season and out of season” the proclamations that call people back to authentic worship and devotion to God’s way of freedom, justice and righteousness.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Jeremiah 3:15

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

I owe my life to shepherds of black churches. My early formations of faith, spirituality and love for God’s justice were birthed in a North Memphis black Baptist church where the pastor of my upbringing, the Reverend Brady Johnson, was shepherd for forty years. The Springhill Missionary Baptist Church was a refuge of safety where faithful people whose steadfast hope for freedom and justice seemed never diminished by the dehumanizing injustice and realities of Southern racial segregation. His pastoral instincts, spirituality, and the musical quality of his preaching lifted my soul in those days and kept alive deep impulses in my soul to always trust in Jesus. When pastoral anniversary Sundays came around, they were great occasions for celebrating our pastor who held us together under extreme hostile social conditions and crisis. He provided hope through the hospitality of the gospel. Though the violence of a racially segregated culture deeply wounded the psychic balance in our souls, the pastor was there to keep hope alive. My root experiences in the Southern black church provide me with the memory of a pastor who nurtured my spirit when I become discouraged and even disillusioned about the turmoil that surrounds so much of black life.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In the text, Jeremiah can be seen as a prophet whose proclamations and pastoral concerns exemplified profound love for God’s people and devotion to God’s truth. What one discovers about Jeremiah’s life as a prophet is that prophetic proclamation in tension with pastoral sensitivity is neither a simple nor a desirable activity; it is only manageable if one is under the agency of a divine call. As prophet, Jeremiah is chained to divine truth-telling. As one with a heart and love for Judah, Jeremiah is a prisoner of hope for the transformation and healing of the people. Jeremiah lived in constant tension between divine truth-telling and Judah’s willful denial and rejection of that truth. Grief and hope characterize Jeremiah’s care for and pleading to Judah to trust God for fulfillment in all areas of their spiritual and material life.

The book of Jeremiah is primarily a message of judgment on Judah for rampant idolatry. After the death of King Josiah, the last righteous king, the nation of Judah had almost completely abandoned God and his commandments. Jeremiah chapter 2 is the backdrop for the prophetic speech in Jeremiah 3:16, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

Jeremiah acts out the steps of a lawsuit God files against Judah. An ambiguous faith (without clarity and consistent commitment) breeds disloyalty and infidelity on Judah’s part and compels this lawsuit of sorts in the court of divine judgment. Judah has no legal ground upon which to stand. They have exchanged authentic worship and devotion to

God for profitable, worthless, non-productive, non-effective gods. Judah searched for gods that would satisfy their hunger for material security, make the land productive, and increase their wealth and security. The character of the god(s) did not matter. The charge against them is “Wreck-less Abandonment,” exchanging the true God for lesser gods. What’s more, they did it to no avail; what they sought would not profit them.

The search for other lovers/gods is Judah’s sin; as such a search was unwarranted given the clear evidence of God’s steadfast love for them. The divine court has not seen anything like this level of abandonment. God, who loved Judah into existence, nurtured them to maturity and established a covenantal bond of love and faithfulness to sustain them, wants a divorce. But the deep constraints of unconditional divine love compel God to consider other options.

Jeremiah announces to the court that God wants Judah to return. It is a call of return to faithfulness. Forgiveness and compassion are offered by God to reconcile the broken relationship. Tension in the courtroom mounts as Judah must weigh the options of grace and law, repentance and reconciliation. The terms of God’s offer are uncompromising. Upon her return to faithfulness, God offers Judah what she needs to sustain a life of covenantal faithfulness. God will give them true and faithful pastoral shepherds to guide them in the disciplines of love and justice.

Shepherds who model a passionate love for God’s people, and who nurture people to trust God’s love and future for them as the people face the challenges of uncertain social and political arrangements, are no small gift from God. Judah needed such shepherds to keep them from vacillating and turning to the marketplace of small gods. They needed shepherds who would nurture in them a consciousness of faithfulness to the God their ancestors worshipped as the source of life, well being, and human flourishing.¹

The pastoral prophet is a type of Jeremiah who lives at the intersection of truth-telling and a clear realization of the authentic needs of the people. Sometimes the pastoral prophet’s work is not appreciated and, as in the days of Jeremiah, it can be difficult to convince people that they are serving idol gods instead of the true and living God. This is difficult, painful and, sometimes, even dangerous work. We get a sense of the heaviness of such work from the fact that Jeremiah is nicknamed the “weeping prophet.” So, those pastors who do this difficult work week in and week out are to be highly honored.

Celebration

Today, we celebrate all pastors who love God and God’s people. We celebrate their spirituality and pastoral care as healers who do not treat the wounds of God’s people carelessly. We thank God for the resistance of pastors against the idols of our time and celebrate their efforts to stop the gross injustices of our time. Lastly, we celebrate the pastor whose sound preaching, teaching and theology creates mature Christians and is accountable to God.

Descriptive Details

There are few descriptive details given in our one verse text. However, the context verses for our text provide numerous descriptive details

Sights: At the beginning of chapter 3, Jeremiah refers to Judah as a prostitute with many lovers (v. 3:1); Judah sitting by the roadside waiting for other lovers (v. 3:2); Judah roaming in deserts searching for God; dry land because God has not sent rain (v. 3:3); Judah metaphorically committing adultery on high hills and under trees (v. 3:6); and God sending shepherd after God's own heart.

III. Additional Material for the Sermonic Moment

- There is nothing like the experience of celebrating a pastor's anniversary when that pastor's work has blessed the congregation's life and the community. The worship, fellowship, food, and joyful music combine to make the pastor's anniversary Sunday an inspired occasion. A song that is always appropriate for such occasions is titled "He'll Understand and Say 'Well done.'" It was written by a pastor, Reverend Charles Albert Tindley, one of the greatest hymn writers that the world has known. The song says in part:

If when you give the best of your service,
Telling the world that the Savior is come;
Be not dismayed when men don't believe you;
He'll understand; and say, "Well done."

But if you try and fail in your trying,
Hands sore and scarred from the work you've begun;
Take up your cross, run quickly to meet Him;
He'll understand, and say, "Well done."²

- Celebrating God's agency through the pastoral shepherd is a recognition that God works through human personalities.

Notes

1. Petersen, David L., Gene M. Tucker, Christopher R. Seitz, Patrick D. Miller, Anthony J. Saldarini, Anthony J. Saldarini, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr. The New Interpreter's Bible. Volume VI, Introduction to Prophetic Literature, the Book of Isaiah, the Book of Jeremiah, the Book of Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, the Book of Lamentations, the Book of Ezekiel. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001.

2. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #413