



## **SENIORS, ELDERS, AND GRANDPARENTS DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, September 11, 2011**

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**Lection – Psalm 37:23-26** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 23) Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way; (v. 24) though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the LORD holds us by the hand. (v. 25) I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. (v. 26) They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Old places and old persons in their turn, when spirit dwells in them, have an intrinsic vitality of which youth is incapable, precisely, the balance and wisdom that come from long perspectives and broad foundations.

—George Santanyana

In a society plagued by the logic of ageism, many people give a blind eye to the gifts, plights, needs, and multifarious energy of the burgeoning population of seasoned persons—the elderly. On Seniors, Elders, and Grandparents Sunday, the Church honors the stewardship of the most precious of God’s resources—human resources. Able-bodied and differently abled, economically secure and unstable, our elders function as rich reservoirs of spiritual, financial, moral, and communal wisdom.

This day allows the family of faith to give voice to the emulative diligence, ageless values, folk ethics, and inexorable contributions of seniors, grandparents, and seasoned saints. Such days stitch the saints together in valuably intimate ways. Though congregations of African American churches forge a de facto family (in faith) throughout the year, Seniors, Elders, and Grandparents Sunday allows each youth, young adult, and middle adult to hold every elderly woman as her grandmother and every man as her grandfather.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 37:23-26**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “A test of a people is how it behaves toward the old. It is easy to love children. Even tyrants and dictators make a point of being fond of children. But the affection and care for the old, the incurable, the helpless are the true gold mines of a culture.”<sup>1</sup> As the nation’s economy attempts to stabilize after an unfathomable collapse and the national treasury continues to hemorrhage due to perpetually expending detestable amounts of money on militaristic campaigns and “bail outs” for Wall Street and everyone except those **beyond** “Main Street,” the budget for social security spending creeps into the red. Subsequently, grandmothers have no recourse for finding resources to treat diabetes, cancers, and heart diseases, and grandfathers rejoin the workforce to procure the financial “security” with the hope of providing care for dying wives as their own illnesses go undetected and untreated.

The aforementioned circumstances are not foreign to my own family. However, in spite of seemingly insurmountable states of affairs, my grandparents and countless other spiritual and familial sages remain gripped by faith. While I “suffered” and owe much of my spiritual formation to the stories and testaments of my Baptist-born and Baptist-bred grandparents, they lived out a trust in God that continually leaves me in awe. Offered with inexplicable sincerity and irrefutable vigor, my grandmother would spontaneously intone the chorus to “We’ve come this far by faith.” Impressed upon my mind and inscribed on my heart are the words “He’s never failed me yet.”

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

According to Michael Coogan, most psalms possess an Ancient Jewish liturgical function, generally discernable from the rhetorical content, structure, and author. While the historical context remains obscure, this wisdom psalm, Psalm 37, flows with a homiletic cadence, which is a common designation for the liturgical function of wisdom literature. The opening letters of

alternate verses are arranged according to the sequence of the Hebrew alphabet—the individual sections are only loosely connected with each other and the psalm is lacking in a consistent thought-sequence.<sup>2</sup> Conventionally, we attribute Psalm 37 to the experience, heart, and pen of David, the venerated second and unexpected king of Israel. This exhortation to patience and trust excavates the existential problem of material attainment and spiritual maturity: satisfaction with possessing God in community and other intangible blessings while non-believers exist unchecked and wealthy. Believed to be an elder statesperson at the time of its penning, the author of this psalm draws a distinction between God’s chosen people and the ungodly, secular materialists.

The intersection of human inquiry, divine provisional care, and memory emerge as theological themes in this text. Based on the rhetorical context of this pericope, the writer seemingly addresses Israelites struggling to make sense out of the unearned prosperity of the wicked in relation to the meager resources and modest lifestyle afforded to the Israelites. This raises a question of theodicy: why do wicked persons prosper as the believers of God (YHWH) possess little? Antithetical to particular current theological trends, the faithful are not pavilioned from discouragement, discontentment, and adversity, but benefit from God’s superintending omnipresence in said experiences. How does this theological theme of hope relate to the experiences of African Americans as “Blues People”?<sup>3</sup>

Against the backdrop of various references to the self-destructing culture and philosophy of the materialistic despisers of God and God’s people—the wicked, verse 23 commences with a testimonial assurance of God’s activity in the preservation and guidance of the members of the family of God. “Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way . . .” This suggests an intimacy with God that one might align with the recondite will of God. To live to God’s delight requires an acquaintance with God’s expectations. Like the folk sages in our homes, neighborhoods, and churches, this aged psalmist exhorts his audience to endure material dissatisfaction and the shallow and momentary status of the ungodly with patience and trust in God. The tenured believer opines that God’s gaze moves beyond the culpabilities, insecurities, and inhibitions of people. Listening to the anecdotes of elders strips failure of its fatality. This psalmist, possibly recounting personal and communal sentiments, concludes that the Lord sustains the righteous/faithful in their stumbling—mistakes, misrecognitions, and missteps. Pointing to an intimacy with the divine, using a word which connotes strength, God upholds the faithful by the hand.

Notice the repeated reference to plural pronouns—“we,” “our,” and “they”—in this pericope. This speaks to the communal nature of the Ancient Israelite religious imagination. People of God operate within an expansive circle of care. As the American Prophet Martin Luther King Jr. posited, “All people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”<sup>4</sup> A lover of philosophy might suggest that the communitarian ethic of this text seems reminiscent of the Aristotelian “person of virtue.” For Aristotle the person brought into being is shaped and given humanity by the community which is prior to the person. “Aristotle’s theory of virtues stresses the role of the community as that which not only forms virtues and confers the vision of the good, but also directs and tutors the passions of the human heart to love and hate . . . to hope and regret in a manner rationally consistent with the virtues of character.”<sup>5</sup>

As a seasoned person of faith, the author of this psalm invites the audience on a stroll down Memory Lane (with a stop at the corner of Providence Place) in verse 25. “I have been young, and now am old, I have not seen the righteous forsaken . . .” Explicitly, the Psalm ensures that to his knowledge God never abandons his people. Grandparents and seniors possess a wealth of memories of Divine works for and through them from which they encourage, admonish, and draw strength. Elders example the power of living with a hermeneutic of memory—the resolution to interpret and forge your disposition to a present situation while holding in mind the fidelity of God to God’s people. Like only a church mother or salt and pepper-headed deacon proves capable, personal narratives advance the service of sacred memory. Remembering the pervasive presence of the Lord in the terrestrial affairs of the faithful incites the family of faith to adopt a posture of uncompromised trust.

Further articulating the advantages of the righteous, the psalmist proceeds to dispel the notion of “their children begging bread.” Begging in this verse is translated from *baqash*, to search for. This word for begging specifically connotes a worship or prayer context. He references the writings of the Pentateuch in this verse. In Deuteronomy 15:4, begging is reckoned among the curses of God, and the law expressly exempts from it those who fear and serve God. This is critically important, as bread proves necessary for Israelite worship and prayer. This relationship between begging for bread and worship suggest at least two things: (1) the Israelites trusted God for all their resources, and (2) the psalmist maintained that God met this basic need without duress and coercion. Possibly, the writer is evoking the sufficiency of worship and an awareness of God’s omnipresence despite the material abundance of the unrighteous. In what ways can this be fleshed out with contemporary situations—personally, socially, and globally?

With this mentioning of bread—a victual and a worship necessity—the psalmist gestures toward **a theology of enough**—a disposition that recognizes dissatisfaction, a false sense of entitlement, and the rampant preoccupation with the possessions of the Joneses (or Kardashians) but focuses on sustainability and says simply, “We have enough.” With modest resources of “questionable” quality, this aged and experienced writer commends the audience to take joy in the presence of God and fellow humans. These are blessings—free things that bring wholeness like peace, togetherness, and God’s presence. Although the wicked boast their abundance and flaunt their wealth, the writer of this psalm espouses and promulgates a theology of enough. If one interpretively reads verse 26 in relation to verse 25, one deduces that, in addition to God’s provisional care, the members of the community deliberately attend to the needs of other members. “I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are ever giving liberally and lending . . .” The children of God avoid lack and deficits, because they care for one another. The subjects and audience of this psalm have been vouched safe enough to share with their compatriots, and this perpetual act of sharing precludes their sisters and brothers from experiencing the grip of destitution. Contemporarily, what would it mean to be stitched together as a community of compassion in order to alleviate chronic neediness?

The psalmist describes the character of this people by evoking a word primarily reserved to articulate God’s character in Hebrew Scripture, *chanan* or merciful. Becoming a merciful or gracious people, they example and reflect the character of God in the world as others falter from this model and God’s will. They conform to the character of God. Through this memory of

God's activity, a people cultivate a distinctive disposition and iconoclastic identity. While God, indeed, uniquely bestows and attends to the people of God, these people cultivate a culture of lending freely to and without expectation of reciprocity from those in need. This unique character subsists through subsequent generations. While the King James Version translated Brakah to mean blessed, it is, in fact, a noun instead of an adjective. The works they perform become synonymous with their being, with who they are. In the context of this psalm, the writer means "a blessing." Granted they perpetuate and remain arrested by faith in YHWH, the progeny of the faithful become a blessing to others.

## **Celebration**

Thank God for Big Mama and Papa, Madea and Granddad! As we build on the heritage of our seasoned warriors of compassion and service, faith and hope in God through the limitedless calamities of life enables us to become blessings for the world. We are blessed to be a blessing! What a joy it is to be shaped by God's characters and manifest the divine wherever our feet trod! Reliving and advancing the testimony of the seasoned-saints, we can audaciously exclaim,

We've come this far by faith,  
Leaning on the Lord;  
Trusting in His holy word,  
He's never failed me yet.  
Oh can't turn around,  
We've come this far by faith.<sup>6</sup>

Despite our stumbles, faith gives us the power to be and become more than we ever expected. Despite our limitations, culpability, and missteps, God uses us to eradicate the darkness of materialism and individualism. Standing on the promises of God and building on the persistence of grandma and grandpa gives us the platform to become joy in a sorrow-stricken society, peace in a war-wrangled world, love in a habitat of hate, and hope in nihilistic neighborhoods of this nation.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include, but are not limited to:

**Sounds:** The steps of the righteous; the slight crunch of unleavened bread; conversation as the community eats bread; worship-related noise;

**Sights:** The hand of the Lord; bread; people eating bread; people walking; pathways; people stumbling; the young and old; and

**Textures:** Smoothed ground/pathway.

## **III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use**

- Drawing on an Africentric framework, Dr. Maulana Karenga postulates seven principles to undergird the celebration of Kwanzaa. For the purposes of homiletic applicability and cultural relevance, the principles Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and Ujamaa (cooperative economics) help accentuate the message of Psalm 37:25-26. Ujima implores observants to build and maintain our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems, and to solve them together. With the principle of Ujamaa, Karenga captured the importance of building and maintaining our own stores, shops, and other businesses and to profit from them together.<sup>7</sup>
- For more biblical material on the "Theology of Enough," consider referencing/reading Chad Meyer's The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics (2001).
- For testimonies, illustrations, and references, read Viola Lechner's Work and Caring for our Elderly: International Perspectives (1999), Howard Gleckman's Caring for Our Parents: Inspiring Stories of Families Seeking New Solutions to America's Most Urgent Health Crisis (2009), and William T. Liu's Who Should Care for the Elderly?: An East-West Value Divide (2000).
- American philosopher George Santanyana proffered, "Old places and old persons in their turn, when spirit dwells in them, have an intrinsic vitality of which youth is incapable, precisely, the balance and wisdom that come from long perspectives and broad foundations."<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

1. Heschel, Abraham J. The Insecurity of Freedom. New York, NY: First Noonday Press, 1967, p. 72.
2. Weiser, Arthur. The Psalms: A Commentary. Louisville, KY: Westminster Knox Press, 1962, p. 315.
3. "Blues People" is a phrase used by Amiri Baraka (formerly known as Leroi Jones) to capture the irresistible existential hopefulness of African Americans in a world (America) of misfortune and pain. See Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Blues People: Negro Music in White America, New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1999.
4. King, Martin Luther Jr., "The Man Who Was a Fool" in Strength to Love. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981, p. 72.
5. Weiser, 315.
6. Goodson, Albert A. "We've Come This Far by Faith," in African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #412.
7. Karenga, Maulana. Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture. Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2008, pp. 53–56.

8. Stern, Chaim. Day by Day Reflections on Themes from the Torah from Literature, Philosophy and Religious Thought. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1998, p. 41.