



THANKSGIVING DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

For Sunday, November 23 or Thursday, November 27, 2008

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Lection - Isaiah 12:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. (v. 2) Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. (v. 3) With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. (v. 4) And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. (v. 5) Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. (v. 6) Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Thanksgiving holiday is a distinctly American celebration that has been adapted in the African American religious tradition. More than an historical event to be commemorated on the calendar, the act of “Thanksgiving” is an organic, authentic and integral theme of African American worship. Provoked expressions of “thank you” are common in the various call-and-response, song, offering, proclamation, and prayer and praise statements of worship in the black church. Therefore, a Thanksgiving Service, as a devoted time of reflection, remembrance and renewal of the faith, is a customary occasion in many black churches, observed on the corresponding date of the fourth Thursday in November.

The distinction between the American national holiday and the African American religious celebration can be described as the nuanced differences between commemoration and culmination. Thanksgiving serves as the dynamic climax of a journey, and not a static commemorative event. It is celebrated near the end of a calendar year and directly before the season of Christmas/Advent (technically the beginning of the Christian Calendar). The journey is at once ending and beginning. We give thanks for where the Lord has brought us from, while simultaneously giving compulsory “anticipatory thanks” for what lies ahead. For African American worship, thanksgiving and praise go hand-in-hand.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Isaiah 12:1-6

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Thanksgiving is one of the most significant holiday celebrations in the lives of many African American families. It is often the annual family reunion for generations that have become geographically disconnected. The gatherings around tables filled with the comforts of the past – soul food, turkey and fixings, and sweet delicacies – are also the antidote to the emotional distance created over the years. In many instances, the Thanksgiving Day is topped off by a worship service to honor the central meaning of the holiday – God is worthy of our thanks. I have come to see the celebration of family and God as inextricably connected. Having been reared in the black church and serving as an AME Zion Church pastor, I cannot conceive of a Thanksgiving Day without participating in a worship service. I have fond memories of sharing soulful joint worship celebrations in Chicago with the Carter Temple CME Church, led by (now-Bishop) Dr. Henry Williamson. I have looked forward to preaching and participating at the annual Thanksgiving Service at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta. Dr. Raphael Warnock has continued the tradition carried out by his predecessor, Dr. Joseph Roberts, by celebrating the rich symbolism of the harvest season. Each worshipper leaves with fruit representing the bounty reaped from the previous season of labor. The experience leaves an indelible impression upon the worshippers, who often bring their families that have travelled distances to share the day. It is fitting that such a celebration would happen in the home that nurtured Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. You leave that African-centered sanctuary singing, with hands and hearts uplifted.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This brief chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah is a song of praise. Reminiscent of a Davidic psalm, this composition heralds the prospect of a reunited people, a “new Jerusalem,” and new world order. It points to the future Church and Kingdom redeemed and ruled by the righteous Messiah who will judge and save. It speaks of a personal deliverance expressed in collective salvation. The content of the song is, therefore, spiritual *and* political. The song begins with acknowledgement of the exile experience as evidence of judgment. A post-exilic remnant seeks redemption in spite of spiritual and physical separation. They also seek a political-economic restoration that attends a restored kingdom. Consequently, the preeminent grace of God’s salvation wins out and is worthy of thanksgiving praise.

As with many psalms set for worship, this song of praise evokes physical expressions that demonstrate the meaning of the sentiment “to give thanks.” The Hebrew word for praise employed here is *yadah*, which signifies the stretching out of one’s hands in thanks while singing. It is a confession of utter dependence upon God for the inferred gift, namely God’s deliverance. A people who were once scattered and symbolically disconnected from their God are now reunited, and thus reconnected to the One who has created them. There is an eschatological hope that has been fulfilled “in that day.” Their profound longings for “home” are now met in a glorious family reunion made possible by a God who promised not to forsake them. More importantly, they can bow before their true King without inhibition or recrimination. They can now wave their hands in joyous gratitude, for three essential reasons: God remembers, God redeems and God restores.

First of all, **God remembers**. Verse one states: “*You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.*” The original meaning of remembrance is “to re-member” or recollect. In other words, what was once literally and figuratively detached and incoherent is now connected and coherent. One of the most egregious offenses that any Hebrew could commit was to forget who God was and what God has done. Likewise, the worst tragedy that any Hebrew could experience was for God to forget them. God’s wrath and judgment on a people resulted in a lack of memory of them, i.e. their abandonment and alienation from God and one another. Likewise, our African ancestors’ ultimate act of honor was to “keep alive” the saints in living memory. One is “forgotten” when their name and legacy are no longer mentioned. The fact that the remnant, once displaced and disconnected, has been re-collected is reason to give thanks.

It should also be noted that an act of remembrance can be a profoundly political act. There is a kind of “anamnestic solidarity,”¹ to use Archie Smith’s term, in a communal worship that recounts their common past and collective salvation. Black worship is a type of liturgical *anamnesis*, the opposite of amnesia. Anamnesis means “to recollect the forgotten past and to participate in a common memory and a common hope.”² Authentic corporate worship takes seriously the scripture, “Where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20) Christ becomes fully present as both redeemer and liberator. James H. White discusses anamnesis as an objective of the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, “No single English word conveys its full meaning; remembrance, recalling, representation, experiencing are all weak approximations. Anamnesis expresses the sense that in repeating these actions one experiences once again the reality of Jesus himself present.”³ This certainly characterizes the spirit of the sentiment that an African American congregation has not “had church” until the

presence of Jesus is felt in the house. Consequently, Thanksgiving is about “re-remembering” *who* we are and *whose* we are. It is a defining feature of black worship that serves a psycho-social purpose in liberation and salvation. This enables black folk to shout, “Thank you!” in spite of receiving unmerited suffering, historically and presently. We remember to give thanks because God remembers us.

Second, **God redeems.** Verses 2-3 state: “*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*” Every Hebrew embodied a sacred identity derived from their relationship to God. Separation from God resulted in a fractured identity. Before one could be restored, one had to be redeemed, and only God could redeem an alienated people. Ed Wimberly describes redemption through John Wesley’s “therapeutic soteriology,”⁴ a key component of the evangelical enterprise that Africans in America first understood about the Gospel, as it was re-presented to an oppressed people. Sin, personal and social, separated individuals and communities from God. In the ancient worldview, to be disconnected from God is to *not* be a person. A people who have been redeemed have a reason to give thanks: God has redeemed their privilege as a child of God and as a member of the redeemed community. I can sing, “I am redeemed, bought with a price. Jesus has changed my whole life. If anybody asks you, just who I am, tell them, I am redeemed.” (Jesse Dixon and the Chicago Community Choir)

Celebration

Finally, **God restores.** Verses 4-6 state: “*Among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*” This second “stanza” of the hymn signals a crescendo of appreciation for being redeemed and restored to privileged status as “royal Zion.” The people of God are reminded to consider their present favor in light of their former plight. They have been restored, in the way that the book of I Peter asserts: “*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.*” (I Peter 2:9-10). This is what the saints had in mind when they sang, “When I think of the goodness of Jesus and all he has done for me. My soul sings ‘hallelujah.’ I thank God for saving me!”

III. Resources to Consult

1. Abbington, James. Let Mount Zion Rejoice. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001.
2. Ashby, Homer U. Our Home is over Jordan. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003.
3. Watley, William D. Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993.
4. Watkins-Ali, Carroll A. Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999.

Notes

1. Smith, Jr., Archie. The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy for a Black Church Perspective. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982. p. 19.
2. Ibid.
3. White, James F. Introduction to Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990. p. 223.
4. Wimberly, Edward P. Claiming God, Reclaiming Dignity. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003. p. 11.