



Usher's Day

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – 2 Kings 22:3-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 3) In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan son of Azaliah, son of Meshullam, the secretary, to the house of the LORD, saying, (v. 4) “Go up to the high priest Hilkiyah, and have him count the entire sum of the money that has been brought into the house of the LORD, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people; (v. 5) let it be given into the hand of the workers who have the oversight of the house of the LORD; let them give it to the workers who are at the house of the LORD, repairing the house, (v. 6) that is, to the carpenters, to the builders, to the masons; and let them use it to buy timber and quarried stone to repair the house.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The Merriam Webster dictionary provides a functional definition of the word usher, “an officer or servant who has the care of the door of a court, hall or chamber.”¹ Ushers extend the first hand of welcome and hospitality to arriving visitors and members.

Quietly and efficiently, ushers tend to the physical needs of worshippers; from passing out the ubiquitous church fan to offering a comforting pat on the back and a tissue to someone in grief. African American churches have long depended on the silent service of ushers. Ushers follow the tradition of the Old Testament doorkeepers who collected money for temple upkeep.

Because of the invaluable ministry of these humble servants who arrive early and stay after worship, the church sets aside Usher’s Day as a special occasion to honor ushers of all ages. In the tradition of our African ancestors who functioned within communal societies, traditionally,

guest ushers from area churches are invited to come and serve the host church in support of the ushers being honored. Usher's Day is therefore a communal thank you and celebration of service.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness” (Psalm 84:10 NRSV). The words of the psalmist are both descriptive of and prophetic relative to the contemporary role played by ushers. The selfless service and hospitality offered by ushers stand in stark contrast to the frequent indifference we often experience in our “me-focused” society at large.

Through weekly practices, ushers learn the intricate system of hand signals that constitute their silent language of service. The wide age range of usher creates opportunities for intergenerational mentoring.

In 2009, the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC recognized the vital ministry of ushers in African American churches in the exhibit, “Speak to My Heart Communities of Faith and the African American Community.”² The exhibit featured photographs, objects, and dioramas depicting the uniqueness of all religions from Islam to Roman Catholicism. The doorkeeper to the exhibit is a mannequin dressed in white uniform, stockings, shoes, and gloves with straight posture, one hand extended in welcome and the other behind her back. This mannequin, modeled after Shelia M. Parker of St. Leonard, Maryland, stands as the archetype of all ushers who dutifully minister in the life of African American churches.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The little used passage, 2 Kings 22:3-6, is one of the few that mention the work performed by ushers in the Old Testament. In these verses, ushers are those who are “keepers of the threshold.” Their role was to collect money from the people for the upkeep of the temple. The 22nd chapter of 2 Kings also highlights the actions of King Josiah. Chroniclers commend Josiah, who assumed the throne as an eight year-old child, for being astute enough to seek the counsel of the Lord unlike his grandfather, Manasseh. By his eighteenth year as king, Josiah was touted as a righteous king who “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2).

Josiah was a reformer, evidenced by his response to hearing the contents of the Book of the Law discovered in the temple of the Lord by Hilkiah, the high priest. Hilkiah shared his discovery with Shaphan, the secretary, who in turn read the Book of the Law to King Josiah. The words struck Josiah as more than perfunctory information about the past. The message contained in the Law held prophetic meaning for the contemporary world Josiah faced.

Upon hearing the Book of the Law read, Josiah tore his clothes as an act of repentance and sought spiritual guidance. Huldah, a prophet from Jerusalem, interpreted the meaning of the

words to King Josiah. In short, her interpretation noted that because Josiah humbled himself and ceased the pervasive worship of idols in his kingdom, God would spare him from judgment (2 Kings 22:13-20). Restoration of respect for the sacredness of the temple and God were hallmarks of Josiah's reign.

Josiah dispatched Shaphan, the secretary, to the temple of the Lord to gather the money that the doorkeepers had collected from the people and distribute it to the supervisors overseeing the repair work on the temple. The supervisors in turn paid the workers.

In ancient biblical times, the gates of the city and temple courts closely resembled the door of a house. Accordingly, the same Hebrew word was used for doorkeeper and gatekeeper. The word "porter" is frequently used in translation as well. 2 Samuel 18:26 and 2 Kings 7:10-11 mention porters at the gates of two cities, Mahanaim and Samaria. These writings also mention "keepers of the threshold" of the temple whose duties included gathering money from people for temple purposes and the care of sacred vessels. The keeper of the threshold was an honorable position.

Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah mention doorkeepers or porters whose function differed slightly from the "keepers of the threshold." The doorkeepers formed sacred orders from the time of David (1 Chronicles 9:22; 23:5). They guarded the gates of the house of the Lord (1 Chronicles 9:23). They were responsible for opening and closing the gates at appropriate times and they prevented persons deemed unclean from entering the sacred enclosure. That they lived in the temple chambers underscores the honor with which doorkeepers were afforded.³

The New Testament does not refer to the temple doorkeepers. Instead, the writers refer to the doorkeeper of a private home, a high priest's house, and sheep-folds. The biblical doorkeepers, gatekeepers, and keepers of the threshold served in these honorable positions with the humility and sense of call urged by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. October 26, 1967 as he spoke to a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In the speech, "What Is Your Life's Blueprint?," he urged the determination to achieve excellence and the discernment to discover one's call in life, even if that calling was to be a street sweeper. "Sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures...Beethoven composed music [and] Leontyne Price sings before the Metropolitan Opera..." he implored.⁴ King could easily have added, "serve with the honor and humility of an usher in an African American church."

Celebration

Thanks to the ancient doorkeepers of Old Testament fame and the faithful men and women who nurtured and mentored generations into this ministry of humble service, today's usher has a rich legacy to celebrate. As descendants of Africans who related as communal societies, Usher's Day is a time to invite ushers from sister churches to celebrate the faithful service of the host usher board. We gather to celebrate. We gather to honor. We gather to give thanks for those who continue in the rich Old Testament tradition of being doorkeepers for the Lord.

Descriptive details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sound: Shaphan, the secretary, heard both the words of King Josiah and the authority behind the words that inspired immediate action;

Sights: Hilkiah, the high priest, saw and counted the money collected by the keepers of the threshold; and

Touch: How the money felt in the hands of the keepers of the threshold as they collected it for temple upkeep.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

For a fuller examination of the legacy from which today's usher emerges, consider doing a word study on the following terms: porters, doorkeeper, gatekeeper, and keeper of the threshold as described in Bible passages. Selected Old Testament biblical references that mention porters, doorkeeper, gatekeeper, and keeper of the threshold:

Doorkeepers or Porters

2 Samuel 18:26
2 Kings 7:10-11
1 Chronicles 9:22-3, 25, 27; 23:5
Psalm 84:80

Keepers of the Threshold

2 Kings 12:9; 22:4; 23:4; 25:18;
1 Chronicles 9:19
2 Chronicles 23:4, 19; 31:14
Jeremiah 35:4
Esther 2:21; 6:2

Selected New Testament biblical references that mention doorkeepers include:

Mark 13:34
John 10:3; 18:16-17; and
Acts 12:13

By using collateral texts the sermon writer will gain access to a richer, more complete understanding of the various roles and functions served by doorkeepers.

Notes

1. "Usher." Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary. Online location: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/usher> accessed 1 November, 2009
2. "Speak to My Heart Communities of Faith and the African American Community." Online location: http://anacostia.si.edu/exhibits/online_exhibitions/speak_to_my_heart/credits.htm; and, "Ushering in the Faithful: Local Life Reflected in Smithsonian." Online location: http://www.bayweekly.com/year99/issue7_48/dock7_48.html accessed 6 November, 2009

3. International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE). Online location: <http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/D/DOORKEEPER/> accessed 1 November, 2009
4. “About MLK and His Words: What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?” The Seattle Times 2007. Online location: <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/special/mlk/king/words/blueprint.html> accessed 1 November, 2009