



HOMECOMING

(Family and Friends Day)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 21, 2008

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Lection - Proverbs 22:28 (New Revised Standard Version)
Do not remove the ancient landmark that your ancestors set up.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Homecoming Sunday is a staple in African American church life. It is an annual moment when church attendance swells as former members, friends, and family return to celebrate the life of a particular congregation. Many families use this moment as an excuse for a *de facto* family reunion, and relatives, now residing states away, flock to a common sanctuary to catch up with loved ones they may not see again for another year. Such occasions are festal, and most congregations prepare enormous meals or invite pot-luck contributions for the festivities that ensue in their fellowship halls. Often this is a key fundraising opportunity for churches. As former members return, they make generous donations as a testimony of how God has blessed them in their new homes. The moment marks an occasion to celebrate the history of a congregation and how it has contributed to

the lives of those who have since moved away from this, their church home. It is also a time to reflect on our ancestors who have gone to glory, but whose lives shaped the life of this branch of Zion.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Proverbs 22:28

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I remember as a child making the annual pilgrimages from Philadelphia down South with my grandparents, Arthur and Pearl Powell, and my great aunt, Essie Covington. Whether we went to St. Paul's Baptist Church in Aylett, Virginia, where my grandfather and his host of siblings were baptized and reared, or to Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., where most of my family members migrated, these were trips "home." Homecoming was a time of good preaching, food, and fellowship with family and friends, many of whom we only saw on these two annual occasions. Homecoming was about familial continuity, connecting us to our past and reminding us from whence we came, lest we forget.

Homecomings are also special to me because of the nostalgia that they evoke. They were opportunities to get to see not just the people, but the places so significant to the stories of my ancestors. They were pilgrimages to the sacred spaces hallowed by the fact that they were where my foremothers and forefathers first met Jesus.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This Homecoming Sunday text is a strong reminder of the significance of "place" in our lives. Place is a key feature in ancient Israel where former slaves are promised land of their own, and each householder is granted by YHWH a portion for their own *bet ab*, or "house of the father," to be passed on to their offspring in successive generations. Their place here is marked by the *gebul*, a "landmark" or "boundary stone," that determined the end of one person's land and the beginning of another's. Such markers were significant features in a world without clearly established deed maps, for they delimited the boundaries of property ownership, determining what God had granted to each person as their ancestral inheritance. In essence, the *gebul* circumscribed the parameters of "home" and tied this concept to ancient understandings of the *abot* or "ancestors," their heritage, and their familial continuity.

Landmarks in this period were crucial, for to remove a stone would blur the lines of property ownership disrupting YHWH's proportioning of the land to each Israelite. Moving a boundary stone was tantamount to disenfranchising a neighbor by stealing valuable arable land requisite for his or her survival (Deut 19:14, 27:17; Hos 5:10). When the stones that marked the *gebul* were moved, it was often done at the expense of widows (cf. Prov 15:25 and consider Luke 18:1-5) and their fatherless children (cf. Prov 23:10). As such, the prohibition on moving such landmarks was also a matter of social justice and survival.

On Homecoming Sunday, this prohibition against removing a *gebul* is a reminder of the ancient markers that delimit home and place for us as well. Our community is keenly aware of the need for remembering landmarks, for we are a people who have been removed from our native continent and have for centuries been forced to live as aliens on land not our own. Even today the vast majority of us are renters, leasing someone else's space, never having a place to call our own. Our history as a formerly enslaved people is replete with stories of our striving to own land, to carve out a space that belongs to us, only to have it stolen from us in the end.

My wife tells the story of one of her ancestors, Champ Pinnix, a poor African American man in central North Carolina who in the early 20th century saved his meager earnings to purchase piece by piece a portion of land. After acquiring a sizeable allotment, he mentioned his good fortune to a Caucasian neighbor who laughed in disbelief when he heard that this black man owned such a vast estate. Wanting to convince his detractor, Mr. Pinnix retrieved his deed and showed it to him. In a jealous rage, his neighbor took the deed, tore it up, and said "This is *my* land now!" His neighbor moved *his* landmark, he stole *his* land, and left Champ a destitute and broken man. Such tales are, unfortunately, not uncommon in our history. As a people, the only lands that we generally have been able to retain possession of have been those surrounding our churches.

In this regard, Homecoming is a time when we can return to our church homes, these significant African American landmarks, and celebrate the portion that God has allowed us to maintain throughout the travails of our time in this nation. These places of spiritual nurture demarcate a key location of our weekly encounters with the Divine. They are our spiritual homes, the sanctifying space where we can leave the world and come to our *bet ab*, to our Father's house. Hence, not removing the *gebul* is a command to preserve the tangible sanctified space that God has promised to our enslaved ancestors and to us.

But this charge is also a challenge for us to protect the intangible space our God holds in our hearts, by not allowing it to be infringed upon by other concerns and commitments. Not only should this *gebul* not be expanded, *it should not be diminished either!* We must resist the vast pressures of our world that inevitably seek to displace God in our lives. We cannot allow these forces to constrict the time and attention we give to our Lord and Savior.

Several points emerge from this passage that can serve as sermonic moves. Depending on the main focus of your sermon, they can be employed and arranged as necessary:

Maintaining our boundaries

1) The *gebul* determines the parameters of a particular place that we call home. For us, home could be the churches where we were raised or where our foremothers and forefathers were nurtured in their faith. As such, when we return to these landmarks of our history on Homecoming Sunday, we are truly remembering these key places that delineate our origins. Part of remembering this history, is remembering how long we

have walked with our Lord, and how our church homes symbolize how God has walked with us in the fiery furnace over our years in America.

2) The *gebul*, or landmarks, are key reminders of what God has done. They let us know that God has given us a heritage, something that we can build our futures upon. For Israelites, to remove the *gebul* to increase their allotment was to forget what God had given to them, to say that God's apportionment was insufficient. For us, to remove the ancient boundaries is to forget what God has given to us as well; it is to proclaim that God's grace is insufficient. But God's grace is sufficient for us all. We can all "count our blessings" and see that "great is God's Faithfulness," for our Lord provides all that we need not just to survive, but to thrive.

3) These ancient landmarks proclaim our familial continuity, connecting us with a proud past that reminds us of where we came from, lest we forget. Part of homecoming is the reflection on both our genealogy and our church heritage noting that we have "come this far by faith, leaning on the Lord." That connection to the *abot*, or the ancestors, their stories of survival, and the heritage they have left for us gives us the strength to press on toward a more glorious future. Without such a connection to our history, we languish, for in order to face tomorrow, we must remember yesterday.

Expanding our boundaries

4) It was easy for the fatherless and the husbandless to lose their land in that patriarchal society to predatory neighbors. The instruction not to remove the *gebul* protected the rights of the vulnerable; it meant that we should not improve our standing at the expense of others. It is a reminder that God has authorized their provision and that we must be aware of what is set-aside for them. As we come together to celebrate Homecoming Sunday, we should recollect God's impulse to provide a fair portion to all. In this regard, Homecoming should also be a time to restore the previously removed boundary stones; we are to make sure that God's apportionment to each person is lived out by the way that we care for the needs of those doing without in our midst. Homecoming Sunday should be marked by making sure that everyone is granted what God has offered them as a blessing to sustain their life.

5) In recent years, the book The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life encouraged us to think big.¹ There have been countless sermons, seminars, studies, and songs that have rehearsed the key line from this obscure prayer from the Hebrew Canon. "Enlarge my territory" has been a rallying cry for everything from spiritual growth to career advancement to wealth enhancement. "Enlarge my territory" has even become a key mantra of the prosperity gospel, emphasizing God's *principal* desire to grant us material blessings. This passage, however, is a reminder that to remove the landmark and enlarge our territory often means to diminish my neighbor's. It is a charge for us to consider if it is right to become wealthy at the expense of others. The story of Champ Pinnix clearly illustrates this point. As we come together for Homecoming Sunday, we are called to consider our interconnectedness, and to note how our mutual survival is related to that of our neighbors.

Reducing our boundaries

6) Though removing the *gebul* to enlarge our territory is problematic, reducing our territory also poses a dilemma. Symbolically, this territory can mark not only the physical space, but also the abstract space we allow to be God's territory in our lives. In this regard, we should not remove the *gebul* by reducing the proportion of our lives that is committed to our God. There are countless "neighbors" that seek to reduce God's space in our lives, whether they are television, our careers, our personal lives, or a host of other infringing offenders that demand our time and our attention. As we come together for Homecoming, we need to remember that we must all protect God's place in our lives!

7) We rejoice that God has a place in our lives, for this has come at a high cost. God purchased this place on a cross at Calvary with precious blood shed for you and me. We must maintain the *gebul* for Jesus is our portion! As we celebrate this pivotal moment in the African American Christian calendar, let us be attentive to the role of space and place presented by this passage.

Celebration

We can rejoice that God has made a place for all of us. God has made a place for all of us to worship and has given us a space in God's house. The Lord has given us a place in God's grace and a portion of God's blessings. In thanks, we give God a place in each of our lives un-encroached upon by the pressures of the world. More than all of that, God has given us a place in Christ's Kingdom by the death and resurrection of the Son and our Savior. As we come home on this Sunday, we rejoice that we have a place in the Kingdom, and that God daily desires to expand our territory through legacy building!

Descriptive Details

Though this text is brief, it is rich with suggested imagery. We can bring to mind the ancient Palestinian fields demarcated by boulders. These boulders separated fertile pastures white with sheep and fruitful fields replete with grains, grape vineyards, and olive orchards. The neighbors whose lands were separated by these *gebul* peacefully co-existed in a mutually supportive arrangement, cooperating for their collective survival, until someone moved the boundary stone. Also, please do not neglect to put our ancestors in this story -- their clothes, their faces, their actions, and dreams.

Note

1. Wilkinson, Bruce. The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000.