



## **YOUTH DAY (AGES 12-17) (YOUTH AND EDUCATION)**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, January 9, 2011**

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**Lection – Ephesians 6:10** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

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

Youth Day provides emerging church leaders with a unique opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts and creative talents as they lead their congregations in the sacred act of worship. This Sunday is different for each particular faith community. For some congregations this Sunday may serve as the culmination of a weekend of youth led activities, classes, meetings, and rehearsals. A heightened level of anticipation tends to surround this particular Sunday. The faith

community is eager to engage in worship on this day because Youth Day provides evidence that God is still speaking in the life or the narrative of the church.

The troubling aspect of Youth Day is that the excitement and heightened level of anticipation usually dissipates at the conclusion of service and things return to being as they typically are. We must move from Youth Day being a once a month or a segregated service to it becoming a continuous, ecclesiastical liberation movement. For this young generation (also called by some the hip hop squared generation),<sup>1</sup> their desire for church leadership is directly connected to the idea of freedom and ownership. The challenge for the African American church is to create a safe space for this generation to be fully engaged in church leadership throughout the entire year and not just on one selected Sunday each month or each quarter.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 6:10**

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

It is no secret that education is the great equalizer. According to President Obama, in a recent address to the NAACP, “There is no stronger weapon against inequality and no better path to opportunity than an education that can unlock a child’s God-given potential.”<sup>2</sup> However, we must face the tragic reality that more than half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the dream of obtaining a first rate education is still being deferred in America. Currently, our education system is failing all Americans, but the education system has failed African American students and other students from low-income and minority groups at an alarmingly disproportionate rate. African American students are falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that 88 percent of African American eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 62 percent of white eighth graders.

This brief narrative offers just a snapshot of the significant challenges in the educational landscape for the African American community in the twenty first century. The educational and professional prospects for African American youth look fragile and weak, but the author of Ephesians challenges us to be strong in the Lord. If our ancestors made educational gains without half the resources available to youth today, we have no excuse for not turning things around. The issue is whether we are determined enough and concerned enough.

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

Combining the inspiring poetic language of early Christian hymns and Jewish scriptures, the Letter to the Ephesians highlights a vision of the universal church as a new unified community. This new community is made possible by Christ’s death and resurrection. The six chapters of Ephesians can be divided into two sections: theological teaching (chapters 1-3) and ethical exhortation (chapters. 4-6). The first three chapters provide the rationale for this new united community in which Jews and Gentiles equally share God’s blessings. The final three chapters challenges this united community to maintain a unified front and embody the basic Christian ethics of love, forgiveness, faith, and truth as they move forward throughout the first century.

The authorship of the Letter to the Ephesians has remained a constant source of debate among scholars. Some scholars suggest that Ephesians was originally distributed to a number of churches in Asia Minor as a circular letter. Questions regarding authorship arise when Ephesians is compared to the letters that can be confidently ascribed to the Apostle Paul. There are several significant terms and ideas used in Ephesians that are not used anywhere else by Paul. This serves as one of the reasons why some scholars argue a Jewish-Christian admirer of Paul wrote Ephesians in the late first century. On the other hand, there are several verbal parallels between Ephesians and other Pauline letters, especially Colossians. If Paul wrote Ephesians and Colossians, they would have probably both been composed around the same time, in the late 50s. If an admirer or follower of Paul wrote Ephesians, one might assume that he modeled his work after Colossians.

Strength, courage, and trust are presented as major theological themes in the first sentence of the author's closing statement. In verse 10, he concludes the letter by admonishing the faith community at Ephesus to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. These three characteristics would be critical if the new united community would be sustained amid the growing tensions and challenges of the early first century world. The language of being strong, in verse 10, has roots in the Hebrew Bible. After the death of Moses, Israel's first liberation theologian, in the plains of Moab, Joshua was commanded to lead God's people into the land God promised them. Before they actually begin their conquest into Canaan, God speaks to Joshua and tells him to, "only be strong and very courageous" (Joshua 1:7). The Deuteronomistic Historian uses the themes of strength and courage again in 1 Kings 2:2 as David delivers his final set of instructions to Solomon.

Paul picks up the idea of strength in his second letter to the Corinthians. After suffering from an unclear affliction and receiving no direct divine assistance, Paul declares that he will be content in his weakness since it is in his weakness that he is strong because he must rely on the power of the Lord (1 Corinthians 12:10). When we are without strength and courage the Lord will be all the strength we need. The psalmist declares, "God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46).

Elements of trust can also be seen in verse 10. The text identifies the Lord as the source of our strength and the one in whom we must place our trust. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, in war accounts, there are several examples of the Lord going before the Israelites to fight on their behalf. The Lord has an impressive track record of winning battles on behalf of those who completely put their trust in the Lord. This idea of trust in the Lord is inextricably linked to the concept of divine intervention. One example of trust in the Lord leading to divine intervention can be found in Joshua 10 when the Lord is recorded as fighting for Israel. The Lord's intervention in our situations is conditionally based on whether we completely trust the Lord.

The text challenges those in Ephesus and us today to be faithful and fearless witnesses for the Lord. This can only happen if we trust in the Lord and in the Lord's power. Just as this new united Christian community was challenged to be strong witnesses for the Lord against the social, political, and religious forces of the first century world, the African American church must remain strong witnesses against a declining American educational system. So this Youth

Day we must recommit ourselves to being faithful and fearless in the Lord's power. **And the Lord just doesn't have some power, but the Lord has all power.**

The three principles (strength, courage, and trust) in verse 10 must be used to inform our community formation to ensure our young people have a bright future. We must be honest and transparent with our young people and say, "Yes, if you are African American, the chances of you growing up around urban decay (crime, gangs, poverty) may be higher. If you grow up in a low-income community you will face different challenges than someone in a wealthy suburb. But that does not serve as a reason for you to miss class, not complete homework assignments, and drop out of school."

Despite the existential reality concerning our youth and the education system, we must continue to be strong in the Lord and in the power of the Lord's might. The Lord did not intend for our young people to drop out school and perform at lower rates than other groups. Our youth are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Our young people possess the intellect of a Cornel West and a Tricia Rose. They have the homiletical prowess of a Jeremiah Wright Jr. and a Claudette Copeland. They have the poetical flow of a Saul Williams and a Jill Scott. They have the business minds of a Tom Burrell and an Oprah Winfrey. What is needed is for adults to do the front-line basic work: Parents ensuring that their children attend school and complete homework assignments; churches assisting young parents and un-educated parents as back-up so that children do not fall through educational cracks due to too little supervision, communities demanding that their schools are clean, safe and have qualified teachers whose students achieve. Those who are strong in the Lord must declare that educational failure is not an option for one more generation. We have little reason to shout on Sundays if we do not know that all the children in our churches and those in the communities where our churches exist are thriving in schools on Monday. We must stand strong in solidarity with youth, advocate for, encourage them, and expect no less than a strong effort from them. This battle is not for the faint of heart. We must be strong, courageous, and trust the Lord, because the Lord will fight on behalf of the just and the righteous.

### **Celebration**

Verses 11-17 tell us to put on the whole armor of God. In our struggle to ensure access to quality education, we must make sure our youth have on their armor. Youth have to go into battle with their armor on. Remember as David prepared to battle Goliath he had to take off Saul's armor and pick up his slingshot and five stones. This generation has to be prepared to do battle in their "gear." But if they are strong and trust in Lord's power nothing will be too hard for them. This is their moment and ours. Let's go do battle.

### **Descriptive Details**

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

**Sights:** Weak and weary souls receiving added or renewed strength (v.10); and war-like imagery, spiritual warfare (vv. 11-17).

### III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- A. Youth Day is a tradition in many African American churches. This day must move from a single, selected day for youth led worship to an ongoing liberating tradition. The late Yale University historian Jaroslav Pelikan distinguished between liberating and non-liberating traditions when he observed, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”<sup>3</sup>
- B. There must be a “both and” approach to educating our young people. So it is not just secular education, but secular and sacred education. The church must reestablish itself as the center for communal growth and development. In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth narrative an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and instructs him to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape Herod’s policy of destruction. Egypt, as the birthplace of science, mathematics, and rhetoric, represents achievement. Although some individuals may be geographically challenged and do not know, Egypt is in Africa. God wanted Jesus to grow and develop in a place where achievement was the norm. Jesus developed in an environment where it was normal for people to accomplish great things. The African American church is our Egypt. The church should be the place where a young person can develop into the individual God is calling them to be. Where else can a young person learn how to operate the media ministry? Where else can they develop their oratorical skills by doing the Sunday morning welcome and announcements? Where else can they learn about God and their heritage in the same space? The church is our Egypt and must continue to nurture young people.
- C. Two intellectual giants of the twentieth century produced significant scholarship that every young person should read. Carter G. Woodson’s two works, The Mis-Education of the Negro and The Education of the Negro Before 1861, provide unique insight on our current education system. Also, W.E.B. DuBois’s Souls of Black Folk complements the work of Woodson. In their respective works, both authors closely examine the struggle of African Americans to pursue a quality education in post antebellum America.
- D. The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation by Ralph C. Watkins and The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and The Crisis in African American Culture by Bakari Kitwana are two good books for youth leaders to read or anyone interested in learning how the African American church can overcome the challenges of reaching the hip hop generation.
- E. The following organizations may be helpful in gathering statistics on child and youth education in America:  
The U.S. Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/>)  
The National Assessment of Education Progress (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>)  
The Alliance for Excellent Education (<http://www.all4ed.org/>)  
The Children’s Defense Fund (<http://www.childrensdefense.org/>)

### Notes

1. "Hip Hop Squared Generation." The New Oxford Annotated Bible. Augmented 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
2. Obama, Barack. "Your Destiny Is in Your Hands...No Excuses." NAACP Centennial Convention. Hilton New York. 16 July 2009. The White House. Web. 26 Dec. 2010.
3. Pelikan, Jaroslav. "The Vindication of Tradition: Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities." National Council on the Humanities. Washington, DC., 1983.