



We Are Witnesses

Worship Resources for Mennonite Heritage Sunday October 26, 2008

Introduction

Not all who have been drawn to the faith and practices of Anabaptism trace their ancestry to the cold drownings or fiery stakes of martyrdom in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. The commitment to follow Jesus at all costs attracts believers from all nations and all walks of life. Mennonite Heritage Sunday 2008 honors and commemorates the roots of those other stories that are merging with the Anabaptist horror story.

In the Gulf States region of the southern United States, for example, some members of Mennonite Church USA are descended from survivors of the Trail of Tears, a death march that seems unreal to our current sensibilities. In the 1830s, Choctaws, Creeks, and Cherokees were deported to Oklahoma, a journey that claimed thousands of lives due to disease and weather. Mississippi Mennonite congregations Choctaw Christian Church in Louisville, Nanih Waiya Mennonite Church in Preston, and Pearl River Mennonite Church in Philadelphia minister to Native Americans whose ancestors escaped the deportation. Poarch Community Church in Atmore, La., is made up of Creeks who hid in the swamps to avoid removal to Oklahoma. Over the years they were assimilated into the white Southern culture, losing their identity and language in the process.

Meanwhile, Mashulaville Mennonite Fellowship and Open Door Mennonite Church in Mississippi are among the Mennonite Church USA congregations that include African-Americans, descended from people who came to this country as slaves, bound in chains as property to be sold.

These "holocaust stories" are valid chapters of our broader history as brothers and sisters following Jesus. We are family. We are one through the Blood of Jesus. On Mennonite

Heritage Sunday, let us celebrate that, despite our different perilous journeys, God was present. The Great Heart of God was moved with pity. Even though some of our ancestors may not have known God as we know God revealed in Jesus, God was there.

While we remember the stories of those who survived the Trail of Tears and the horrors of slavery, other groups and other stories are no less important. If your congregation is fortunate enough to have another part of God's family sharing your lives, adapt this material to celebrate their history and their "holocaust." A legacy of bondage, fear and robbed dignity has marked us. But we, along with Rabbi Israel Spira in *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, can say, "The suffering and the testimonies, when told by Holocaust survivors, are a song, a hymn of praise, a testimony to the eternity of ... people and the greatness of their spirit."

Mennonite Church USA is enriched by the melding of these stories with Anabaptist history. We affirm that God loves all creation and is angered by the injustices heaped upon it. We are empowered by the courage, the faith and the endurance these ancestors proclaimed in the face of unbelievable persecution., bringing the powerful vision of the Kingdom of God, as found in Revelation 7:9, into focus: "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands."

We are that witness today.

Call to worship

Leader

God of the ages, God of a thousand generations, thank you for giving us this lifetime.

Men

We remember that you covenanted with our ancestors.

Women

We remember that you believed in us before we believed in you.

All

Lord stand among us, blessing us and keeping us. As we seek your face, Reveal yourself to us in this service. Amen

(By Robert O. Zehr in *Invocations and Benedictions for the Revised Common Lectionary*, p. 40, John Drescher, editor and compiler, Abingdon Press, Nashville)

Scripture

Deuteronomy 10:14-22

Psalm 115

Psalm 137

Hebrews 2:5-19

Children's story

This story can be introduced by asking the children about the ways they celebrate their birthdays, or if any of them is afraid of the dark, or reminding them that is always present with us, no matter the circumstances.

Many years ago the people of the Cherokee tribe of Native Americans had a wonderful sort of birthday party for boys who were having their 13th birthday. It was very special because it marked the day when the boy would no be a boy. He would awaken the next morning as a man. Here is how it would happen:

That night his father would take him into the forest, deep into the dark, dark woods, blindfolded, and leave him there alone. The boy would sit on an old log with his eyes shut and spend the entire night alone scared and trembling. Even the sound of the rustling leaves sounded like monsters in the darkness. In his imagination bears and wolves, cougars and snakes would be circling him waiting for the right time to pounce on him. Some time during the night he would hear a snapping twig and a shuffle in the grass and he would know almost for certain that a wild animal was going to attack him. During a moment of really being tired and scared he might drowse off for a few moments and dream of monsters and ferocious animals. One of these animals would become his protector for his entire life.

As the night wore on he would sit there brave, never once peaking out of the blindfold, never once crying for help. This was how he changed from being a child. After this scary night he would be a man. Finally the night would end and the sun would peek through the leaves of the trees around him. He would remove his blind fold, and guess what? There on a stump beside him sat his father. He really had not left him that night. Through all the frightening hours his dad sat there keeping watch over him. He protected him from harm through the dark and scary night.

God is just like that. God never leaves us. Even though we go through dark and dangerous places God is always with us. God does this because God loves us. Always remember, even if we can't see God it does not mean God isn't there.

Prayer for the messenger

This prayer should be read by someone who can project the power contained in Johnson's words.

“Listen, Lord: A Prayer” by James Weldon Johnson

O Lord, we come this morning
Knee-bowed and body-bent
Before Thy throne of grace.
O Lord – this morning –
Bow our hearts beneath our knees,
And our knees in some lonesome valley.
We come this morning –
Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,
With no merits of our own.
O Lord – open up a window of heaven,
And lean out far over the battlements of glory,
And listen this morning.

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners –
Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,
Who seem to love their distance well.
Lord – ride by this morning –
Mount Your milk-white horse,
And ride-a this morning –
And in Your ride, ride by old hell,
Ride by the dingy gates of hell,
And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.

And now, O Lord, this man of God,
Who breaks the bread of life this morning –
Shadow him in the hollow of Thy hand,
And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.
Take him, Lord – this morning –
Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin.
Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth –
Beating on the iron heart of sin.
Lord God, this morning –

Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time.
Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms,
Fill him full of the dynamite of Thy power,
Anoint him all over with the oil of Thy salvation,
And set his tongue on fire.

And now, O Lord –
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow –
When I've been called everything but a child of God –
When I'm done traveling up the rough side of the mountain –

O – Mary's Baby –
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death –
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet –
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
To wait for that great gittin'-up morning – Amen.

(From *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson. Copyright © 1927 The Viking Press Inc., renewed 1955 by Grace Nail Johnson.)

The message (sermon)

Explore and flesh out the truth that God's presence is with those whom God loves where ever they are. Where was God when the slave ships struggled through storm-rocked seas? Where was God when the slave auctions took place in the steamy, malaria-ridden streets of New Orleans? Where was God when the Trail of Tears took place? Where was God when that Choctaw mother struggled carrying her baby close to her breast through the snow with bare feet and miles and miles to go? Explore and affirm that God was there.

Hard questions to look at:

- Does God engineer the bad things in our lives?
- Does God love some nations and people groups better than others?
- Can God forgive the inhumanity we heap on each other?
- Can a follower of Jesus have enemies?
- What does God want us to do with enemies?

Song suggestions

From *Hymnal: A Worship Book*

#164 When Israel Was in Egypt's Land

#546 Guide My feet

#579 Lift Every Voice and Sing

#143 Amazing Grace (words by John Newton, who reportedly was captain of a slave ship)

Benediction

Go from this place in humble adoration of the One whose place
Is the timelessness of space.

And whose existence is expressed,

“I was, I am. I shall be!”

Go from this place in adoration of Christ,
who left that glorious realm with fervent love
personally for you and personally for me!

Go from this place in confidence.

Nothing can ever separate us from that Love! Amen

(By Robert O. Zehr in *Invocations and Benedictions for the Revised Common Lectionary*, p. 40,
John Drescher, editor and compiler, Abingdon Press, Nashville)

Resources

These internet sites contain further information about the history of slavery and the Trail of Tears as well as the story of Native American and African-American involvement in the Mennonite church.

www.poarchcreekindians.org/xhtml/index.htm

www.aamamcusa.org/ -- African American Mennonite Association

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trail_of_Tears

www.nativeamericans.com/TrailofTears2.htm

pjcockrell.wordpress.com/2007/11/22/amazing-grace-just-the-black-notes/ -- A wonderful description of the power of Black spiritual music

www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15587 -- Information about James Weldon Johnson

The Lost German Slave Girl by John Bailey (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 2003) – An extraordinary true story of Salome Miller and her fight for freedom in old New Orleans.

This book explores the institution of slavery in America and chronicles the experience of one little girl sucked into its nightmare by mistake. History proves the whole institution was a horrible mistake as well. A must on your reading list.

The Trail of Tears by Gloria Jahoda (Wing Books, New York, 1975) – An excellent history of the Trail of Tears.

God's Trombones by James Weldon Johnson (Penguin Books, New York, 1990) – Seven sermon poems and a prayer.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Linda Brent, edited by L. Maria Child (A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace Javanovich, San Diego, New York, London, 1973) – A first hand account of slavery.

Bullwhip Days: the Slave Remembers: An Oral History, edited by James Mellon (Avon Books, New York, 1990) – Oral accounts of the institution of slavery.

This year's Heritage Sunday worship materials were developed by Robert O. Zebr of Des Allemands, La., who has lived and served among African-Americans and Native Americans in the Deep South for nearly 40 years. A teacher by profession, he has pastored Mennonite congregations in Mississippi and Louisiana and served as moderator and conference minister for Gulf States Conference. He also pastored congregations in Kansas for seven years.