

Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil

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Womanist ethics begins with the traditional role and place assigned to black women. An African-American woman contends with race, sex, class, and other sources of fragmentation. The challenge of a womanist social ethic is to create and articulate a positive moral standard, which critiques the arrogance and deadly elitism of dominance and is so bold as to name it as systematic evil. Womanist ethical reflection focuses on moral standards that are relevant to (but not circumscribed by) the African-American community. This ethical reflection also contains a universal dimension and critique.

Such an ambitious project must contain within its horizon both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions. Descriptively, the African-American experience is the ground for reflection. More particularly, the lives of African-American women provide the lenses for focus. The traditionally "good" moral characteristics of personal loss, denial, and sacrifice provide the interpretive framework for

elucidating black women's lives.

The prescriptive horizon is a praxis for the elimination of suffering. The socioethical claim guiding and informing my argument is that womanist ethical reflection rejects suffering as God's will and understands suffering as outrage. From a historical base built on the experience of African-American women, the moral valuing of loss, denial, and sacrifice is questioned. Womanist ethics advocates a renewed emphasis on authority and obedience that will move and guide the contemporary African-American community and its people of faith.

African-American women play a functional and autonomous role within the family and black society due to economic and social conditions, which have devalued and ill-defined the black woman historically. African-American women are forced, as are other women of color and white women, into images of womanhood imposed by a larger society. Black women also know that they will never reach this model due to the constraints of race and class. One aspect of racism is that it has structured dominant and subordinate roles and relationships between African Americans and whites, and placed blacks within a relatively closed system while blaming deviant behavior on them.

African-American women have been called matriarchs, Sapphires, and castrators. This is due in large measure to the active role many black women have had to play in the support of children, husbands, and African-American society. All have

usually *assumed* the black woman's capabilities. This legacy differs considerably from where the majority of white women begin. White culture does not assume that white women are capable.¹ African-American women who have the legacy of clearing the fields, caring for the children of others as well as their own, and functioning in marginalized roles—while being called on to provide the backbone of black values—are considered a deviation from the norm and an anomaly in United States society.

A majority of the African-American male community has come to believe in the ideal in the United States that they are to be the providers for their families and *their* women. The few leadership roles allowed black men by the dominant oppressive culture are guarded jealously with little regard for the psychological, theological, ethical, and economic damage done to the African-American community and African-American female and male interpersonal relationships.

How did we get to this state of affairs where loss, denial, and sacrifice are elevated to ethical ideals at the expense of emotional and spiritual health—female and male? I begin my answer to this question in West Africa.

The family unit was extremely important in precolonial West Africa. It consisted of a distinct structure and clearly designated roles for men and women. Marriage was not only between two individuals, but also between all the members of each person's extended family. Marriage was a binding together of two people who represented different families as well as the mutual duties and obligations they were to carry out for each other.

The role of women was political, social, and economic. Politically, women were important to the administration of tribal affairs. Lineage was often matrilinear with women assuming significant duties in the tribe. Joyce Ladner notes a recurring theme in many African legends and mythology:

A woman who is the founder and the mother of the tribe . . . is either a queen or the daughter of a king. She is an aristocratic lady who is involved in politics. For example, the creation myths of the Hausa people in Northern Nigeria or of Niger or Chad begin with a woman who goes out and founds a kingdom. She is the Black Moses of her people into the promised land which is an area near the water where communication is relatively free. She settles down and establishes the traditions of her people.²

Women had a close bond with children and this was crucial to the life of the tribe. There was a high regard for the mother's function as childbearer and perpetuator of ancestral heritage. Economically, women were traders and the West African market woman is an institution even today in West African society. This is not to suggest that African women did not and do not still live under rigorous prescriptions for their behavior with curtailed access to decision making and public life.

Within the internal African slave trade, women were in higher demand than men. This internal market was larger than any of the other markets in slave trading. Women consistently brought higher prices and performed most of the agricultural work as well as the craftwork in most slave-owning African societies and households.³

In the significantly smaller Atlantic

slave market, men were in greater demand. There is increasing speculation among anthropologists and ethnographers that the slave woman received such harsh treatment in the United States and colonial America because of the greater expectation placed on her within the internal African slave market.⁴ Although men received greater value in this country's slave system, the women were to work in all male slave tasks. In addition, they provided a home life for children and performed childbearing duties. Let me hasten to add there was not at any time the savagery or brutality present in the internal African slave trade that was common fare for the Atlantic slave trade.

Legal marriage was denied to African slave men and women. Men were denied their traditional role of family patriarch. Women were forced into autonomy as men were no longer allowed to be the economic provider, disciplinarian, and teacher as they had been in Africa. Slave women suffered economic and sexual exploitation. They had to nurse white babies instead of, or in addition to, their own. The dynamics of northern and southern white culture demanded that the image of African-American women be antithetical to the image of white women. The black slave woman was the primary outlet for the sexual passion of the white master.

Slave women practiced forms of resistance to this onslaught upon the humanity of African-American people. They practiced abstinence in refusing or attempting to avoid intercourse with white masters. In this vein, they also delayed marriage to a slave male with the hope that childbirth would happen in freedom.⁵ Abortion and infanticide were also methods of resistance, but were less common

than abstinence. Their resistance to sexual exploitation had political as well as economic implications. By using resistance, women negated, through individual or group action, their role in the maintenance of the slave pool.

Out of this heritage of what Zora Neale Hurston called "the mules of the world," black women faced Reconstruction and the cult of womanhood. The shift from an agrarian economy (in which work had nonsexual connotations) to one of industrialization and urbanization (where work became largely male-identified and located away from the home) helped to fortify the cult. The subordination of African Americans into the ideology of the black savage and confinement of white women to the cult of womanhood were interdependent. White southerners and northerners curtailed any political or economic gains African Americans made—controlling the image of black people was one strategy used. African-American women were promiscuous and evil. White women were the paragons of virtue and purity. Women were to be domestic, modest, and delicate. They were exalted as moral guardians of the home and radiant sources of purity in the new industrial order.

She sits, she walks, she speaks, she looks—unutterable things! Inspiration springs up in her very paths—it follows her footsteps. A halo of glory encircles her, and illuminates her whole orbit. With her, man not only feels safe, but actually renovated.⁶

Men dominate due to their participation in public life and the relegation of women to the private or domestic sphere. This relegation gives rise to universal male authority

over women and a higher valuation of male over female roles. The public realm contains the institutionalized rules and practices that define the appropriate modes of action. It is the political, economic, legal, cultural, and social institutions in which we live as a society. In addition, it is the wide range of actions and practices covered by law. The public realm is the arena of paid work and ideas. It is the world of men. This country's laws, values, education, and morality are debated and shaped in this sphere. Men, not women, are the primary participants.

The private realm is that place of individual actions and interpersonal relations. It is the home. It is the arena where the dominant cultural norms of our society place women.

Each woman—African-American and white—lives with this split and participates in its existence and maintenance. We begin to take separate paths when we reach the juncture of the systematic exclusion of black men, and all men of color, from the public sphere of the dominant white culture. This exclusion suggests that sex-role relationships between people of color cannot be explained fully by the structural oppression between the domestic and public spheres or the differential participation of men and women in the public sphere. Hence it is necessary to distinguish between the public life of the dominant and the dominated societies. The public life of the dominated society is *always* subject to the stresses put upon it by the dominant society. The private life of the dominated society suffers even more so than that of the dominant society.

During Reconstruction, the image of the African-American woman as

mammy became a dominant theme. This puzzling image of the black mammy who was able to care for and be mother to white babies and children was the same woman who was lower than a human being and morally bereft and licentious. White writers portrayed the black mammy as contented, self-sacrificing, and loyal. She was also the object of white male sexual needs as she was in a condition of moral degradation and promiscuity. This bizarre dichotomy was the fulcrum for the balancing of reality and the unreal image of white women.

African-American women debunked this image through the black women's club movement. African-American women of the nineteenth century and contemporary black women resist the notion that morality and worth are bound to race, sex, and class. Both groups argue that external circumstances determine morality and worth in an individual, a race, and a class group. Both groups stress that African-American women are not responsible for their degradation.

The contemporary black woman is called a matriarch. The thesis of the African-American matriarch has its origins in a perversion of the early works of W. E. B. DuBois and the actual theories of E. Franklin Frazier.⁷ This thesis posits that black women have had and continue to have an unnatural dominant role in African-American families and that this role has had tragic effects on black society.

This peculiar image of the matriarch for the contemporary African-American community arises out of a situation in which many of the women who head poverty households were poor before they became

mothers and household heads. This calls into question the concept of feminization of poverty. This phrase implies that these households are poor because of their female heads. In reality, family breakup may merely reshuffle the female poor from one classification to another.

The fact that a household is headed by a woman does not mean that it will be poor. However, in African-American society (as is the case for the majority of people in the United States) many families are kept above the poverty line because there are two employed adults. A single-parent family is more likely to be poor because there is only one wage earner. This becomes deadly if the household head is a woman. Women, on the average, earn much less than men. The sad reality of statistics and facts means that single-parent families with a female head are much more likely to be poor than those with a male head.

Coupled with this, young black women who are the largest category composing the female-headed single-parent families often lack the skills needed for high earnings. With the absence of relatively inexpensive day care, many single mothers of young children cannot earn enough from outside employment to justify working. By definition, matriarchy means decision-making power; it is the power of women over their own lives and the power over the lives of others. In a society and in a church that has white men in overwhelming positions of power, women in positions of economic and social subservience, and the African-American community fragmented, the notion of an African-American matriarchy is ludicrous.

No one family structure fully

represents the diversity of familial arrangements found in the historic and the contemporary African-American community. Although legal marriage was prohibited among slaves, two-parent families were not an uncommon occurrence during slavery and survived the vicissitudes of poverty, migration, and urbanization. Two-parent black families were common among farm laborers, sharecroppers, tenants, and northern and southern blacks in the great migration to the North.

Poverty and high mortality among black men caused a greater proportion of female-headed families among blacks than whites. After the Great Depression, in 1940, nearly three-fourths of black families with children under eighteen were headed by two parents. There was no significant increase in male-absent households after the Great Migrations to the urban North. Until the 1960s, 75 percent of black households with children under eighteen included husband and wife.

The image of the black matriarch became dominant during the dramatic changes of the 1960s. By 1986, 49 percent of black families with children under eighteen were headed by women. Black nuclear families and kin-related households remained intact through slavery, Great Depression, migration, urban life, ghettoization, and poverty. It is unlikely that any one of these conditions or their combinations can fully explain the large changes in marriage and family since 1960s. Economic and social status differences must be taken into account in any analysis of present-day black families and the roles African-American women and men play in them. The interaction and intersection of race, gender, and class become

key to understanding loss, denial, and sacrifice in the role of black womanhood.

Traveling to the New Jerusalem: Why This Suffering?

Black women theorists have moved from an embrace of the ideology of the cult of true womanhood and a later romantic notion of how the African-American woman has survived under adversity to one that is more pragmatic.⁸ The reality is that most African-American women work outside of their own homes out of necessity and the majority do not control the source of their income. More than 40 percent are heading single-parent households and nearly 36 percent are below the poverty line. The black woman joins her people in suffering as a state of being—choice is often not an option.

A womanist ethic rejects suffering as God's will and believes that it is an outrage that there is suffering at all. Although the details of analyses may differ, a womanist ethic must be dedicated to eliminating suffering on the grounds that its removal is God's redeeming purpose.

The black church in this country has paid serious attention to the Hebrew Bible. The suffering of the children of Israel is likened to the suffering of African-American people. It identifies heavily with the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness. Many black folk in the church grew up with stories of Moses, Abraham, Ezekiel, Ruth, and Esther. Suffering is the entry key to the kingdom. The inevitability and desirability of suffering needs to be challenged.

Within any oppressed group, the members of that group are prevented from acknowledging their anger and

frustration at the system and at the tensions under which they must live. But if we believe God is a just God and a loving God, then African-American people of faith must allow and challenge ourselves to search for the roots of our suffering, which exists in our lives and threatens our existence.

Audre Lorde makes a distinction between pain and suffering.⁹ For Lorde, suffering is unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain. Suffering is the inescapable cycle of reliving pain over and over again when it is triggered by events or people. It is a static process which usually ends in oppression. Pain is an experience that is recognized, named, and then used for transformation. It is a dynamic process pointing toward transformation.

Suffering is sinful because we do not choose to act through our finite freedom on behalf of our liberation from sin to justice. If, as most African-American women in the church do, the African-American religious community takes the resurrection event seriously, true suffering has been removed through the redemptive event of the resurrection. Through the *suffering servant*, God has spoken against evil and injustice. The empty cross and tomb are symbols of the victory. The oppressed are set free to struggle against injustice, not out of their suffering, but out of their pain that can be recognized and named as injustice and brokenness. The resurrection moves humanity past suffering to pain and struggle. The resurrection is God's breaking into history to transform suffering into wholeness—to move the person from victim to change agent. The gospel message calls for transformation.

The challenge for the African-American community is to work in

partnership with the intention of moving from suffering to pain, individually and communally. Within the framework of Lorde's model, suffering is a way of being that prevents effective action and denies individual black women and men or the African-American community the right and ability to say "no" to their oppression. African-American women have suffered with death-dealing images designed to keep black women and men in a reactive stance, which does not allow for creative change or challenge to the present conditions. A womanist ethic is never content to merely react to the situation: it seeks to change the situation.

Black women have historically taken the opportunity to redefine suffering for other women, the black church, and society. Ida B. Wells-Barnett did so in a radical and exciting way for her time. She was unwilling to accept the world as interpreted through the eyes of those who would not challenge the power structure or who chose to acquiesce to the sociopolitical circumstances of her time.

The Fellowship Herald newspaper later echoed her refusal to accept the living conditions of African-Americans in the early twentieth century. Again expressing concern about the vagrancy rates in Chicago among young African-American men, Wells-Barnett offers through the pages of the *Herald*:

What is to be done? This is the question every law-abiding citizen should ask himself. "What can I do to make conditions better" should be the next question he should ask himself. The ministers, professional men, leaders of organizations should ask themselves: "what have we done to help this situation?"

Surely with all the forces that make for good citizenship at work, some solution of this grave problem can be formed.¹⁰

To live and work through pain acknowledges our human ability to effect change in individual lives and in the lives of others. We must learn to move from the reactive position of suffering to that of the transforming power of pain, to use it as a critical stance and refuse to accept the "facts" handed to us.

The roots of this stance are grounded in the liberating message of the empty cross and the resurrection. God has taken suffering out of the world through the resurrection of Jesus. Because God loves humanity, God gives all peoples the opportunity to embrace the victory of the resurrection. The resurrection moves the oppressed past suffering to pain and struggle and from pain and struggle to new life and wholeness.

Suffering, and any discussion that accepts suffering as good, is susceptible to being shaped into a tool of oppression. Pain allows the victim to examine her or his situation and make a plan for a healthy future. A position of pain encourages an examination of the past and the recovery of the truth. Pain promotes self-knowledge, which is a tool for liberation and wholeness. The pain of the *reality* of contemporary life can give us the power to question what was written about black womanhood and African-American people in light of the *truth* found in our lives.

Pain assumes that the individual is a loved and cared for child of God and that he or she is blessed with the ability to survive and struggle regardless of the circumstance and oppression. In short, a womanist social ethic *cannot* dodge the

question of God's goodness for it is drawn to question continually the inordinate suffering of the oppressed. This ethic is challenged to new dimensions of awareness of God's presence within humanity as a liberating event. The revelation of God's love manifests itself in work to end oppression. We may not always be successful in our agitation for social change, but we must maintain an awareness that every strategy to defeat sin may not be successful but this is not a sign of God's judgment. It may be a sign of incomplete praxis on our part or on the part of others.

A contemporary womanist ethic would understand this as a signal for the need to reevaluate and try different strategies to bring in the just kingdom. Ida B. Wells-Barnett's words to twelve African-American men jailed unjustly in Elaine, Ark., reveal the depth of her belief in God's liberating love and her critique of inadequate or incomplete praxis.

I have been listening to you for nearly two hours. You have talked and sung and prayed about dying, and forgiving your enemies, and of feeling sure you are going to be received in the New Jerusalem . . . By why don't you pray to live and ask to be freed? . . . let all of your songs and prayers hereafter be songs of faith and hope that God will set you free; . . . Quit talking about dying; if you believe your God is all powerful, believe he is powerful enough to open these prison doors, and say so . . . Pray to live and believe you are going to get out.¹¹

The critical skills evident in pain are crucial for all victims and survivors of oppression. Pain is used by the person who is coming to wholeness and concerned about the oppressive con-

ditions of those she joins in partnership. Pain allows the person to critique her individual circumstance and that of her community of partnership.

Christian mission must be done in the context of authority and obedience—not out of a sense of suffering and its goodness. The definitions of authority span two paradigms: authority as domination and authority as partnership. The latter is the paradigm that reflects community, partnership, and justice. The former is primarily a means of subjugation. I enter the discussion of authority with the understanding that authority is legitimated power or shared power.

The traditional concept of power is a natural consequence of an authoritarian model of obedience based on submission. The world is separated into entities with little or no interrelationship. Power becomes the property of these separated entities and is identified with domination. This notion of power involves the notion of invulnerability.

The concept of power that comes from decision and responsibility is one that entails the ability to effect change and to work with others. This power requires openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change. It is dynamic and concerned with the responsibility we have as moral agents for personal and social transformation.

Power as domination is dysfunctional to society because it inhibits diversity and growth. Power as domination restricts vision and movement and reduces flexibility and responsiveness. Power as cooperation and mutual respect is power in process that happens through us. We experience it when we engage in

interactions that produce value. Power as cooperation and mutual respect summons us to develop our capacities for nurturance and empathy as well as our interconnectedness. Its project is justice.

The concept of authority that arises out of this understanding of power is shared authority. The key here is partnership that begets coalitions. Shared authority is a dynamic process in which the openness to the future evident in power as cooperation and mutual respect is manifest in the actual living out of movements for change and transformation. Shared authority recognizes the plurality in United States culture and is attentive to the various leadership styles and structures intrinsic in this diversity.

Authority becomes a contextualized commitment based on accountability to God through the risen Christ. This commitment is also grounded in a mutual accountability to those in my immediate community, as well as those representative of the diversity in which I live and must be in coalition and community. My context informs me of a segment of the world, and I must be in dialogue with others who are not members of my specific context. Authority becomes the tool for dialogue within partnership. Each participant is recognized and valued as a cocreator of God's kingdom on earth. The views, the experience, the analysis of each person receives full weight, as strategies of transformation and community are constructed and enacted.

A careful consideration of obedience is necessary when considering shared power and authority in partnership for African-American women and womanists who remain committed to the black church and Christianity. African-American women

in ministry must be aware of and articulate an analysis of female inequality that is cogent to the repressiveness of traditional notions of power as well as obedience. Black women have suffered under triple jeopardy and *must* be thorough and systematic in their analysis.

The authoritarian model of obedience depicts obedience as a self/other relationship exclusively. A general definition is one in which the relationship is that in which there is an imbalance of power. There is a fear of the strength of the person who is asserting superiority. Religious and sociological thought forms have been inseparably intertwined in this model: God and establishment, God and ordinances, God and country. Obedience in this model is not a standard, but a behavioral technique. One never asks the question why.

When obedience concentrates itself completely on a higher and guiding other, it becomes blind to the world. Obedience that is blind to the world and only follows directions has divested itself of all responsibility for what it is commanded to do. Responsibility implies willingness to engage in freedom. This kind of "world blindness" formalized conception of Christian obedience leads to voluntary obedience as an end in itself. This in turn leads to easy manipulation by the authority figure(s) for its own purposes. The Bible, tradition, and experience are used as tools of repression. The individual or group is told what to think and does no independent interpretation.

Discriminatory obedience recognizes that the worldview of the authoritarian model is more Greek than Hebraic. Greek thought stressed order and did not tolerate continual change. The biblical worldview is that

of movement toward a goal. The authoritarian model cannot adequately express the will of God for the world because this model is interested in the preservation of order and has a hostility toward the future.

In the Hebrew Bible, obedience is always related to justice. It is requested of people directly concerned with shaping the world entrusted to human beings. Obedience implies responsibility: a decision that first discovers God's will and then decides what must be done. Neither the situation nor the will of God can be determined in advance. The person can make the decision in the now only. Jesus requires an obedience that has its eyes wide open as we accept responsibility for the order of the world and engage in transforming that order. The distinction I wish to make in these two models of obedience is one of obedience as religious decision versus obedience as mindless submission. God is a sustaining God who has proclaimed life over suffering and is willing to do battle with the forces of sin and evil to proclaim the good news of a just society.

Living in the New Jerusalem: Jeremiah as a Subtext

A womanist ethic cannot accept mindless violence, conditional justice, destructive life-styles, or complacent inertia. Discriminating obedience trusts and values anger and indignation rather than victimization of injustice. This means that a prophetic womanist ethic may demand going it alone but prefers to be active in a community of faith and witness. Like Wells-Barnett's response to those who were amazed that "no leading people of the race" were active in the

Negro Fellowship League, a womanist ethic of the new Jerusalem would reply,

Neither did Jesus Christ have any of the leading people with him in his day when he was trying to establish Christianity. If I remember correctly, his twelve disciples were made up of fishermen, tax collectors, publicans, and sinners. It was the leading people who refused to believe in him and finally crucified him.¹²

To live and work through pain acknowledges the human ability to effect change in individual lives and in the lives of others. One must learn to move from the reactive position of suffering to that of the transforming power of pain. Wells-Barnett lived her life through the critical stance of pain. African-American women and men must refuse to accept the "facts" handed to us.

We must practice a thorough hermeneutic of suspicion and investigate the conditions and circumstances of daily life. Our discoveries free us from the misconceptions that promote injustice and social, political, and theo-ethical control. We must sharpen our critical tools, which are necessary to examine the oppressive conditions under which a black woman or any oppressed individual or group must live.

The new Jerusalem is a horizon for us. A horizon to which we must ask, "What is this society we are trying to create? What does it look like? Is there a common vision? Have we become so overwhelmed by the process that we have lost sight of the end?"

Horizon is an ornery image for the new Jerusalem. It comes from the Greek word *horos*, which means

boundary or limit. The horizon describes the edges of our living spaces—it is also the place of sunrises and sunsets. Horizons are very personal, and we each have our own. Our horizons are different, not because the sky and earth change, but because we change, we are different. We can define what a horizon is, but we cannot capture one, we cannot even capture our own. When we are committed to justice and decency our horizons are moved further and further away. When we take seriously the need for change, we can sometimes stand in the same place and discover new horizons we have never noticed.

Again, what is the society we are trying to create? What does it look like? Is there a common vision? Have we become so overwhelmed by the process, that we have lost sight of the end? These are questions a womanist ethic to combat evil takes on individually and collectively. Any discussion of evil and injustice that does not keep these questions in mind easily degenerates to theory and prospect rather than as a blueprint for justice.

The horizon a womanist ethic works toward is a society that respects the rights and humanity of all peoples and nature. It is a society that provides adequate education, health care, and income opportunities. The society that is part of the new Jerusalem respects and cares for the young and the elderly. It is a society that is rich in diversity through its cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. It is a society in which women and men learn to build healthy relationships with one another. It is a society that does not dwell on sexual orientation or life-style. It is a society that addresses the roots of its problems

instead of building prison after prison as a vain panacea. It is a society that is uncompromisingly rooted in justice and fueled by people who use their hope to construct and enact meaningful and significant social change.

With such a challenge and such a vision, the black church, like the people of Israel in Jeremiah,¹³ is called to make a new covenant, which is really an ancient one. African-American society is at risk. Womanist ethical reflection insists that the black church move beyond a ritualized, a sterilized, a codified, and a magnificently vacuous faith to one that comes from the heart, soul, and intellect.

The covenant of Jeremiah, which frames womanist ethical reflection, is one so dynamic, so challenging that the cut of a stone cannot hold it and the script on parchment cannot capture its essence. From this covenant, this faith, this challenge, we craft a community of witnesses and discipleship. This community holds within its bounds women, men, and children of faith with varied life-styles and abilities, different political and theological agenda, and folks from all levels of the class structure.

A covenant that reaches for the horizon of the new Jerusalem demands that the black church do no less than teach and preach the Bible, witness through our spirituality and our sense of justice, search for pithy Christian religious education, demand the best of who we can be as a church, refuse to accept easy answers to tough questions, realize the danger of blind obedience, and celebrate the joy and challenge of true Christian obedience.

Living in the new Jerusalem means knowing God firsthand. When we feel God's presence and warmth, then the

black church is able to witness out of God's grace-filled forgiveness. Even in the midst of our iniquity, we can reach out to the poor, the dispossessed, the lonely, the rejected as brothers and sisters and not as a mission project. We must never forget that the covenant God makes with us in the testament of Jeremiah is one to be lived from the inside out—to be lived from our center, our soul, our hearts.

The new Jerusalem, and our lives there, means that if we err in our witness as a community of faith, it is to be on the side of trying to reach beyond what we thought possible and not because we settled for less than what we are capable. We attempt an ornery discipleship with the knowledge that God holds us together, gives us the pith of our community, and graces us with relentless love. This love is so total that all are invited to the welcome table, all are challenged to accept the eternal promise, all are called to service, all affirmed. God's covenant with us overwhelms sepulchral faith operating on tiny motives, meager objectives, belittling goals, silly prejudices, and partial successes.

Our witness is framed in our willingness to name injustice and rejoice in the joy of new life and the resilience found in a true community of hope built not on the sand of suffering, but on the bedrock of the cross. This witness is one of prayer and action. It holds the spiritual and the active witness in dynamic relationship.

Loss, denial, and sacrifice, if used, must be reinterpreted and reimaged if the vision of society and the nature of the black church are to provide more than impotent security. Rather than desirable norms, they must be challenged as hegemonic tools that

serve to maintain African Americans in positions of less than. Such "virtues" assume choice. For the African-American male, loss can mean joblessness, violence, prison, and early death. For the African-American female, denial can mean terror and battering. For African-American children, sacrifice can mean poor education and a cycle of poverty. There may be no choice involved—only survival.

Suffering is outrageous. Suffering does not ennoble, enable, or equip this generation or future generations of black people. A life based on survival and reaction does not produce healthy minds, bodies, or souls. The fragmentation of the spirit and the witness prevents the black church from living in the new Jerusalem. Rather than rest on counterfeit virtues, womanist ethics challenges the African-American community and the Black church to be the true people of God and hang together.

NOTES

¹David Bradley, "Novelist Alice Walker Telling the Black Woman's Story," in *New York Times Magazine* (8 January 1984), 36.

²Joyce A. Ladner, "Racism and Tradition: Black Womanhood in Historical Perspective," in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, ed. Filomena Chioma Steady (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 273. no. 8.

³Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women in Slavery in Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 3–37.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Darlene Hine and Kate Wittenstin, "Female Slave Resistance: The

Economics of Sex," in Steady, *The Black Woman*, 291.

⁶Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977).

⁷W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro American Family* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969). E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (New York: Dryden Press, 1948).

⁸The analyses of Joyce Ladner and bell hooks are representative of this shift. In the early 1980s, Joyce Ladner notes that much of the current focus on being liberated from the constraints of society being proposed by white women liberationists in the late 1960s and early 1970s never applied to African-American women. She posits that black women have always been "free" and able to develop as individuals under the most harsh circumstances. She believes that this accounts for a female personality rarely described in scholarly journals. Joyce Ladner, "Racism and Tradition: Black Womanhood in Historical Perspective," in Steady, *The Black Woman*, 247.

Ladner's image of the African-American woman is one of obstinate

strength and survival. This is not the epitome of the U.S. model of femininity. Ladner's view of the strong black woman contains elements of truth, but is overly optimistic in its assessment. She is equating survival and perseverance in the face of oppression with health.

bell hooks notes, "Usually, when people talk about the 'strength' of black women they are usually referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformations." bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 6.

⁹Audre Lord, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 171-72.

¹⁰*The Fellowship Herald* (22 June 1911).

¹¹Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice*, ed. Alfreda Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 403.

¹²*Ibid.*, 357.

¹³Jer. 31:31-34 NRSV.

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A Look at the Past

"For Zion's Sake I Will Not Hold My Peace"

J. S. Johnson



"For Zion's Sake I Will Not Hold My Peace." This out-cry of a great prophet expressed his love and care for God's people. Those of us who sincerely love the AME Church are greatly concerned about its future; especially about the men in the trenches, who are making bricks without straw. These trenchmen furnish the motivating power of the church. They collect all the revenue in the denomination to pay the salaries of the bishops, and the general officers; also for the overhead operation expenses of the general church. Yet, they are the most ignored, overlooked, and forgotten men of the church. It is now time for the trenchmen to think, the general church to re-think, and make some adjustments in our Zion for the good of the whole concern, and not just for the higher-ups. The highest up is not safe until the lowest down is provided for and protected.

Our 1960 *Book of Discipline* is paradoxical, and classical, but it does not provide for the equal rights of all its adherents. All legislative acts approved by the General Conference should be printed, according to law, without any changes by any person or groups of persons, to please certain people. When such changes are made, the whole *Book of Discipline* is illegal and becomes invalidated.

Our Episcopal Districts

The Laymen in their recent meeting at Atlanta took a firm and progressive stand for our church when they passed a resolution to reduce the number of Districts in the United States to ten and regardless to what may happen between now and 1964, not to elect any more bishops. And whenever Bishops are elected, to consider the qualifications of the aspirants. This resolution could have included the foreign field. When we consider our Zion seriously, we have too many annual conferences, and presiding elder districts, and departments. I do not agree in full with such resolution, but it shows the thinking of the laymen, and it does have some merits.

Our Departments

Our church is top-heavy with departments. We do not have a central headquarters for the general church. In Washington, D. C., we