

## STEAL AWAY HOME

### *Sermon for Pentecost 26C—Lk 21:5-19*

LPC, 11/17/13

Most of you will have recognized that *Steal Away*, the song we just sang, is a Negro spiritual, a song created by African-Americans during their years of slavery. These spirituals drew upon the ancient rhythms and harmonies remembered from Africa with the Christian preaching slaves were exposed to in America. The result is some of the most poignant and eloquent sacred music ever sung.

This song is one of those stories I told you about last week: stories that impart identity and values. It serves this purpose most specially for the African-American community, but also for Americans in general, and for Christians in general. Like all stories that give identity and values, this one is marbled. Remember what I said last week: that these stories have layers of meaning that fold over on each other, extruding the past into the present and future.

The first layer of meaning apparent in *Steal Away* is the idea of stealing away to the presence of Jesus in prayer. Prayer and praise represented respite and refreshment for people who labored hard amidst cruelty and injustice. Stealing away to Jesus for prayer and praise was indeed a way of going home for people born into slavery.

This song also refers to the literal flight from slavery. It's no particular stretch to relate stealing away to Jesus not only to freedom of the soul but also to freedom of the body. The references to thunder and lightning at least in part pass on the information that the best time to try to escape to freedom is under the cover of a storm. Not only do thunder and lightning provide a diversion, but the accompanying rain makes it harder for the hounds to track a runaway slave. This is the second layer of meaning.

The third layer of meaning concerns the reason why this hymn is recommended for this particular Sunday, when the Gospel lesson relates some of Jesus' teaching about the end time, the apocalypse. The thunder, the lightning, the opening of tombs, all refer to teaching about the end of time.

All of the Gospels have some kind of apocalyptic teaching. Jesus predicts some kind of cataclysm, during which God's people will undergo tremendous upheaval. This ordeal will usher in the Day of Lord, foretold by the prophets, in which creation will be perfected and God's rule established once and for all.

Luke, from whom today's lesson was taken, wrote for a people who had already seen a fair amount of tribulation. In particular, the great Temple in Jerusalem, a glorious building that represented the center of the Jewish world, if not the meeting place of heaven and earth, had been destroyed, about 40 years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. This event was so traumatic that many followers of Jesus assumed that the apocalypse had already begun. Luke, in this passage, is concerned with several things.

First, Luke wants to establish that Jesus had foreknowledge of the Temple's destruction. This is yet another confirmation of Jesus' supernatural powers: another proof that Jesus really is the Son of God.

Second, Luke is concerned to communicate to his own audience that two things predicted by Jesus, the destruction of the Temple and the apocalyptic cataclysm, are not the same thing. The Day of Lord will occur when God wills. No human can know when that will happen.

Third, Luke wants to let his audience know that following Jesus may make them vulnerable to the powers that be: "They will arrest you and persecute you." However, this is literally not the end of the world. In fact, opposition from the culture around them will give followers of Jesus an opportunity to articulate the gospel of Jesus to the world. Sometimes it is easier to identify what you believe in the context of something that is clearly not what you believe.

Finally, Luke is concerned to assure his audience: "Not a hair of your head will perish." The Gospel of Christ will endure and prevail, but more than that. Despite what anyone does to you, you will be part of Christ's ultimate triumph.

The upshot of all this is that nobody can hurt a true follower of Jesus in any way that counts in the great scheme of things. Yes, flesh is perishable, but we are more than flesh. Pain is not the worst that can happen to us. Death is not the worst that can happen to us. With Jesus, we will prevail; with Jesus, we will triumph. This is the essence of Christian apocalyptic theology.

Modern art does not do too well with the Apocalypse. In choosing a graphic for the front of today's bulletin that would somehow represent today's apocalyptic Gospel reading, I was pretty much stymied. Medieval and Renaissance art did much better with apocalyptic, by showing the Last Judgment with the wicked consigned to the exquisite tortures of hell, while the righteous ascending to play their harps in heaven. The trouble was, the hell part of the composition was always more artistically interesting than the heaven side. Modern art has avoided the problem by completely avoiding the subject of apocalyptic.

This is why I was drawn to a musical expression of apocalyptic, the spiritual *Steal Away*. The thunder and lightning are not simply indicators of when it is best to escape the plantation, they are also references to the great cataclysm, when the trees will bend and the tombs will give up their dead. In the midst of this, the faithful person responds with joy, aware that his or her home is ultimately with Jesus, and that Jesus' reign has begun.

The power of spiritual songs lives. In the lay ministry that preceded my seminary education, I did Bible Study and hymn sings with indigent elderly, many of whom were African-American. Most of them had had very hard lives, and in old age, they really had found very little security and rest. Yet when they spoke of stealing away to Jesus, their faces shone. They knew where they belonged. They knew where they were going.

Stealing away to Jesus may have more appeal to those in tribulation than to those of us who are relatively affluent and secure. But those of us who are affluent and secure get our strength from the same eternal source as our less fortunate brothers and sisters. May we too know where we truly belong. May we know where we are going.