

# Were You There?

## *Lenten Reflections on the Spirituals*

LUKE A. POWERY

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## Preface

There is no lack of pain and suffering in the world. Look around. Read the newspaper. Click on the Internet. Scroll Facebook or read a tweet. Suffering is always present like the paparazzi. It seems to stalk its human prey. Suffering is a part of the broken, sin-sick world. And if there is a theomusical genre that reminds us of this, it is the Spirituals. They are musical memorabilia created on the anvil of misery by enslaved Blacks. They are sorrow songs. They are suffering songs. However, to sing can be a sting to the reality of suffering. It can be a sign of hope and the presence of God in the midst of agony. This is why they are called the “Spirituals” because they are the Spirit’s song and the Spirit will not be stopped and will blow through every season of life, even liturgical seasons like Lent.

This little book of daily meditations on the Spirituals for the Christian season of Lent merges these two worlds (cultural-historical Black music with the church calendar) in order to help the reader travel the forty days of the Lenten wilderness with courage and honesty. Lent is a season of penitential reflection and repentance on the

path toward the hope of Easter. That path walks in a dry desert where there is no water. The enslaved lived in their own inhumane wilderness for years, yet still sang songs of hope. From these cultural wells, we still drink.

These honest musical expressions—the Spirituals—in a Lenten mode quench our spiritual thirst and make up the main text of each day followed by a brief reflection. There are options given for daily Scripture readings as well as a portion of Scripture included. Each day closes with a short prayer. My prayer is that even in the laments, the reader will see the tiny sprout of hope springing from the page.

Furthermore, no book is an island. There have been so many influences, experiences, and people who have made this book possible. As I reflect on this, my heart is a eucharist, full of thanksgiving to God and every person who has encouraged me, especially in this work on the Spirituals. None of us are self-created, so hearty thanks goes to the great cloud of witnesses, seen and unseen: Duke University Chapel staff and community, Duke Divinity School colleagues, and all of the institutions and churches that have been patient enough to allow me to share my passion for the Spirituals. Jack Adams, my excellent administrative assistant at the Chapel, administered my schedule so I can minister through these pages. Tim Buskey, my research assistant for this project, was fabulous, and without him, there would only be a blank page. Bob Ratcliff, executive editor at Westminster John Knox Press, has been undying in his support of my work; he has made this book even better!

Beyond these, I thank God for my nuclear family—my wife, Gail, and children, Moriah and Zachary; I may have caused them much lament during this book process, but they fill me with hope. Speaking of family, this book is dedicated to some of the sweetest women I have known

throughout my life—my mother and three of her sisters. They all were acquainted with grief, sorrow, and suffering yet their lives vibrated with laughing hope.

For many, life is a Lent. But I pray that this small offering would bring you into God's presence to know that Jesus is right there with you in your suffering and pain. He is there, a God with us, even with his scars of cruciform salvation. See his hands. See his feet. See the mingled blood and love flow down from his crowned head. Walk to him. Run to him. He's calling you. He's calling you there. Go there, to the cross where they crucified my Lord. Go there, so when someone asks you, "Were you there?" you can say, "Yes." This will change your life, because in Christ's dying, we discover what it means to live.

Luke A. Powery

# Week One

## Day 1 (Ash Wednesday)

Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 or Isaiah 58:1–12; Psalm 51:1–17;  
Matthew 6:1–6, 16; 2 Corinthians 5:20b–6:10

### **Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?**

*Refrain:*

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel  
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel  
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel  
An' why not-a every man.

He delivered Daniel f'om de lion's den  
Jonah f'om de belly of de whale  
An' de Hebrew chillun f'om de fiery furnace  
An' why not every man.

De moon run down in a purple stream,  
De sun forbear to shine  
An' every star disappear,  
King Jesus shall-a be mine.

De win' blows eas' an' de win' blows wes'  
It blows like de judg-a-ment day,

An' ev'ry po' sinner dat never did pray'll,  
 Be glad to pray dat day  
 Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel

I set my foot on de Gospel ship,  
 An' de ship begin to sail,  
 It landed me over on Canaan's shore  
 An' I'll never come back no mo'.  
 —*The Books of American Negro Spirituals*\*

At the beginning of this season of Lent, on this Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we will return. We are reminded of human fragility and failure. We are reminded that we are human, *humus*, from the soil of the earth. Though we are God's creation, we are dingy and dirty and dusty and are often in need of cleansing. *We* are. Not someone else, but we are. I am in need. I need deliverance. I need freedom. Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel f'om de lion's den? Didn't my Lord deliver Jonah f'om de belly of de whale and de Hebrew chillun f'om de fiery furnace? So why not every man?

The spiritual basically raises the question, "So why not me? I'm in need of deliverance, maybe not from a lion's den or the belly of a whale or a fiery furnace, but I'm trapped." Wherever you might be or whatever it might be, God's mighty acts throughout history reveal the liberating power of God. What God did for Daniel, Jonah, the Hebrew children, and so many others, God will do for you this Lent. God will deliver you. Can't you see it coming?

\*James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds., *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1940), 148–51.

Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of the LORD, weep.  
Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD,  
and do not make your heritage a mockery,  
a byword among the nations.  
Why should it be said among the peoples,  
‘Where is their God?’”

(Joel 2:17)

**Prayer for the Day**

*Dear God, deliver me, even from myself.*

## Day 2 (Thursday)

Exodus 5:10–23; Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16; Acts 7:30–34

### Many Thousand Gone

No more auction block for me, No more, No more,  
No more auction block for me, Many thousand gone.

No more peck o' corn for me, No more, No more,  
No more peck o' corn for me, Many thousand gone.

No more driver's lash for me, No more, No more,  
No more driver's lash for me, Many thousand gone.

No more pint o' salt for me, No more, No more,  
No more pint o' salt for me, Many thousand gone.

No more hundred lash for me, No more, No more,  
No more hundred lash for me, Many thousand gone.

No more mistress' call for me, No more, No more,  
No more mistress' call for me, Many thousand gone.  
—*Songs of Zion*\*

\**Songs of Zion: Supplemental Resources 12* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 137.

As this spiritual emphasizes there are “many thousand gone.” It speaks to the true and harsh reality of many who suffered and died under the brutal force of human slavery. If we can’t face the truth of the past, we will not be able to move forward into a brighter future. This spiritual tells the truth of the inhumane system of slavery, and if you can’t tell the truth during Lent, when can you? It is true—the auction blocks, the peck o’ corn, the driver’s lash, the hundred lash, the pint o’ salt, the mistress’ call. And through all the pain and toil and danger, many thousand were gone. They died and are no more. This is pure lament and a declaration that “enough is enough.”

Maybe you are at that point of “enough is enough” and you are saying “no more” over and over again, just like this spiritual. No more suffering. No more pain. No more injustice. No more death. What have you had enough of? Tell the truth to yourself and others. “No more” is a linguistic form of resistance to death. If you don’t want to be gone like the many thousand, then today declare, “no more.” Tell God what it is and what you want more of. Tell the truth, because although it may make you sick at first to say it, it will eventually set you free!

So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, “Thus says Pharaoh, ‘I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.’” So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them,

were beaten, and were asked, “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?”

(Exod. 5:10–14)

### **Prayer for the Day**

*Lord, I can't take it anymore. You know what it is and today, I say with courage, “No more, no more.”*

## Day 3 (Friday)

Exodus 6:1–13; Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16; Acts 7:35–42

### **Let God's Saints Come In**

Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
Come down, angel, and trouble the water,  
And let God's saints come in.

Canaan land is the land for me,  
And let God's saints come in.  
Canaan land is the land for me,  
And let God's saints come in.

There was a wicked man,  
He kept them children in Egypt land.

God did say to Moses one day,  
Say, Moses go to Egypt land,

And tell him to let my people go.  
And Pharaoh would not let 'em go.

God did go to Moses' house,  
And God did tell him who he was,

God and Moses walked and talked,  
 And God did show him who he was.  
 —*Slave Songs of the United States*\*

Lent is a time of reflection, penitence, repentance, and even spiritual wandering or wondering. It is a journey accompanied by ashes. Often, it seems to put focus on individuals and our own spiritual lives and need for growth. What this spiritual does, however, is call us out of ourselves to a larger vision. It not only stresses the “children in Egypt land” and “my people,” thus, the children of Israel who were in bondage in Egypt, but it emphasizes “God’s saints.” What this does is push us toward a communal sensibility and recognition of the community of faith who are also on this same journey with us.

Canaan land may be “the land for me,” but there’s a clear desire to be joined by others by declaring “and let God’s saints come in.” This spiritual calls us to move beyond a selfish spirituality toward a selfless one, one that wants all of God’s people to reach Canaan too, all of God’s children to be delivered out of Egypt. It also suggests that the singer/speaker doesn’t want to be alone but in community. The singer wants others to experience the freedom and joy of Canaan land. Let God’s saints come in. It is a spirit of welcome and inclusion that is so often missing. This spiritual compels us toward “we” instead of “me.”

Then the LORD said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he

\*William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867), 76.

will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land.”

(Exod. 6:1)

**Prayer for the Day**

*Come down, God, and trouble the water. Not just for me, but for all of God's saints. Free me toward inclusivity. Let the saints come into your promised land. Let them enter your joy and freedom, just as I have.*

## Day 4 (Saturday)

Psalm 91:1–2, 9–16; Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; John 12:27–36

### Hold Your Light

What make ole Satan da follow me so?  
Satan hain't nottin' at all for to do wid me.

(Run seeker.)  
Hold your light,  
(Sister Mary)  
Hold your light,  
(Seeker turn back,)  
Hold your light on Canaan shore.

—*Slave Songs*, 10

In the Lenten wilderness, there is temptation, darkness, and doubt. The wilderness can get us weary and worn out. When tired and weak, Satan, the evil one, may follow us, seeking to devour us, turning us away from Jesus. It happened to Jesus when he was tempted. On the journey, there are ups and downs. It is dark, but there is also light.

The light is Jesus Christ. To “hold your light” as we travel means to hold on to Jesus, the Light of lights, for

he will direct our paths and way forward. He will show us where to go. He will show us Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. Lent is never too dark for Christ to shine on our path. Even in the wilderness, there is a light that we can hold because this Light holds us. We can keep running and keep seeking and keep discerning the way as long as this light shines. Are you holding it as your guide, or are you holding something else?

Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.”

(John 12:35–36)

### Prayer for the Day

*Let this “little light of mine” shine but let the light of Jesus shine even brighter and lead me where I need to go.*

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