
Street Ascensions: A Praisesong in Memory of Maya and Vincent

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In the name of God: *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen!*

Today's scriptures for Ascension Sunday provide an excellent occasion to honor two of our recently ascended elders, the renowned poet, Maya Angelou, and the scholar-activist, Vincent Harding.* And let's begin with ladies first; with Maya Angelou. One of the best examples of Maya's nobility of character was her decision to compromise on her poetry for the sake of city of Savannah back in 2002. Here's the headline from the Associated Press news story dated May 17, 2002; that's 12 years ago this month.

Maya Angelou adds compromise line to black monument in Savannah

SAVANNAH, Ga. - Poet and author Maya Angelou has ended a decade-long stalemate over a slavery monument inscription by adding a line of hope to her graphic description of the brutal conditions aboard slave ships.

The amended inscription for the monument, a bronze statue of a black family with broken chains at their feet, won unanimous approval by the Savannah City Council Thursday.

The wording was one of the final hurdles for black leaders who plan to unveil the monument July 27 on Savannah's cobblestone riverfront where the first slaves came into Georgia.

Though city officials approved the statue last year, Mayor Floyd Adams and others cringed at black leaders' insistence on using the graphic quote by Angelou.

The quote reads: "We were stolen, sold and bought together from the African continent. We got on the slave ships together. We lay back to belly in the holds of the slave ships in each other's excrement and urine together, sometimes died together, and our lifeless bodies thrown overboard together."

In a letter to the monument's planning committee, Angelou added an upbeat coda: "Today, we are standing up together, with faith and even some joy."

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Some city officials had worried that the quote standing alone might be too graphic for public display on the riverfront, one of the most popular tourist spots in Savannah. Black leaders say the stalemate over the quotation

slowed their ability to raise money for the monument, which . . . cost up to \$750,000 . . .

Angelou, author of "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings," said last year she understood why city officials were hesitant to approve her quotation.

"The picture of it, it's so horrible. And yet if we can see how horrible it is, then we might treat each other a little nicer," she told The Associated Press in February 2001.

City Alderman David Jones, who is black, had previously asked for an uplifting sentence to end the quote, which he said was too dark by itself.

Jones said her wanted to personally thank Angelou "for taking her time out, from a world renowned poet, to make the changes we asked for" . . .

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Yes, that was Maya Angelou's gracious decision to accommodate her critics and the city leaders of Savannah. Bless your memory, Maya, for agreeing to moderate the severity of your poem and support the public display of the River Street monument.

Now before I turn to our other celebrated elder for today let me highlight the significance of that monument on historic River St. in Savannah. And I do so by focusing our scriptures appointed for today on this sermon theme—the theme I call, "Street Ascensions." And why the term, "street ascensions?" First of all it's because I see something like a 'street ascension' occurring for enslaved black families by virtue of that monument on River St. on the waterfront of that old slave port of Savannah.

Here's why I say that in relation to our second reading appointed for today: the epistle reading from 1 Peter chapters 4 and 5. "Beloved," the reading begins:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

.....

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time . . .

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever.

Amen. (1 Peter 4:12-13; 5:6,10-11)

Now I know that not all enslaved black families were Christian believers. But by virtue of the faith of those who were we may affirm the prophetic fulfillment of 1 Peter 5:6 where the scripture says, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time . . ." Thus we can testify that something like exaltation—a poetic and spiritual exaltation—has occurred for the collective identity of enslaved families. What has occurred is a kind of 'street ascension,' I prefer to call it, in reference to our Ascension readings this week in the universal church.

Perhaps you were aware that Ascension Day occurred last Thursday, 40 days after we celebrated our Lord's resurrection on Easter Sunday. And next Sunday, you may also know, will be the 50th day of Easter or the Sunday of Pentecost; *pente* as in

the Greek and Latin word for 'five,' as in 'pentagon'). That's the day of course when our churches celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on that day in the Upper Room. The Upper Room was where the disciples were praying and waiting for the spiritual gift that Jesus had promised them just before his ascension. As recorded in Luke's gospel he told them:

See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' (Luke 24.49)

And so we too are here today also waiting—waiting in this in-between time between Ascension Day and Pentecost; waiting between the ascent of our Lord on the one hand and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the other. And while we're waiting let's reflect on this synergy between *ascending* on the one hand, and *descending* on the other. And just as we highlighted the exaltation and street ascension of enslaved families—of all enslaved families as represented by that monument on River Street, now I want to highlight another street ascension theme in connection with the life and legacy of Vincent Harding.

Now Vincent was less well-known than Maya. Scholars understand the liability of being an academic instead of a poet! But in addition to being a historian Vincent was nationally noted as a former speechwriter for the 1960s civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In particular he is known for drafting Dr. King's famous anti-Vietnam War sermon, preached at Riverside Church in New York on April 30, 1967, a year before he was assassinated. In terms of today's ascension theme, however, I want to highlight Vincent as a virtuoso of street ascensions. Just a year ago this month, in May of 2013, he gave the following interview to a Quaker street journal called, "Street Spirit."

"Street Spirit" is sold by homeless people on streets in the San Francisco Bay Area. It publishes reports on homelessness, poverty, economic inequality, and other social justice issues locally, nationally and globally. The Vincent Harding interview put a spotlight on such issues and their importance for the future of democracy here in the United States. In the following section of the interview Vincent focused on Dr. King's leadership in the Poor People's Campaign of 1968 that coincided with his assassination that April of 1968.

At this point in the interview Vincent was commenting on Dr. King's turning from civil rights to even more unpopular issues like the Vietnam War and anti-poverty campaigns. So Vincent acknowledged that turn when he said:

this is not necessarily a popular way to look at things, [but] I think that, at this point in history, Martin was, as much as anything else, a deeply compassionate pastor. He saw himself, ultimately, as pastor to a country, and as one who tried to help the country develop its most humane possibilities. And he understood that we could not become our best and most humane self, as a country, if we ignored the poor.

Martin was very much attuned to the Hebrew prophets, and that was their constant message: Don't talk about loving God or being religious unless you stand with the outcasts and the weak. Jesus said the same thing.

I think that there's no way to understand Martin's urgency about standing with the poor without taking into consideration his deepest religious and spiritual grounding. There's no way to understand King, the human rights leader, without seeing [him] first — as he tried to say in his Vietnam speech — [as] King, the pastor, the follower of Jesus, King, the believer in the family of God, the community of God. (www.thestreetspirit.org/the-street-spirit-interview-with-vincent-harding/)

And now right here, with this evocation of Jesus as the lover of the poor, the weak and the outcast, we arrive at the ultimate foundation for Dr. King's most familiar term for the household of God: the household of God as 'beloved community.' Beloved community: that's a community in which no one is cast out on the outside but all are included in the embrace of a divine love that shows no partiality of persons (Job 34:19, Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6). This is the love of a Father God who makes the sun shine and the rain fall on "the evil and the good . . . on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). (Cf. "Questions of a singular community [a community like the apostles—a singular

community] of a bygone age are still ours today insofar as they [share our same problem of] ‘the universal,’ [the problem of creating] . . . a community with no one on the inside and no one on the outside . . . Christianity arose in response to just such a situation. Hence its original, and originating problematic is open to repetition—not in the form of a [repetition] of ‘the same thing as back then,’ but in its reinvention. F. Eboussi Boulaga, *Christianity without Fetishes: An African Critique and Recapture of Christianity*; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984; pp. 86-87.)

And this is the beloved community that Jesus extols in his parable of the sheep and the goats, we recall, where the king declares to those on his right hand:

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25.31-36, 40)

Now that is the character of that Father God to whom Jesus prays in our gospel appointed for today, where he says:

“[Father,] I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do . . .
[and] I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world . . . and they have kept your word...
I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me . . .
Holy Father, protect them . . . so that they may be one, as we are one.” (John 17.4,6,9,11)

Here’s our challenge as we hear these scriptures appointed for today. Are we so much ‘at one’ with Jesus that we too will do the works that God entrusted to him—the works of descending as well as ascending—descending to the streets and alleyways, the sickbeds and prison cells, the board meetings and even the battlefields—so that the Spirit of God may also be there to empower our “numberless ascensions?” (The phrase was coined by Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*; Devotional reading for April 15; <http://utmost.org/classic/the-relapse-of-concentration-classic/>.)

But to strengthen our hearts and hands to bear ‘the weight of such glory,’ let us recall our opening prayer, the Collect appointed on this Seventh Sunday of Easter—the Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost. Here I invite you to consider how the Spirit may be strengthening you and me to be heralds and mediators of descending and ascending so that, indeed, we too may be exalted “to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before.”

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen. (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 226; www.bcponline.org/ and www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEaster7_RCL.html)