

Rise Up, Shepherd!

Advent Reflections on the Spirituals

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Sharon Adams

Cover design by designpointinc.com

Cover illustration: Blessings, 1992 (oil on canvas) © by Bernard Stanley Hoyes / Private Collection / Bridgeman Images

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Powery, Luke A., 1974– author.

Title: Rise up, shepherd! : Advent reflections on the spirituals / Luke A. Powery.

Description: First edition. | Louisville, KY : Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017013695 (print) | LCCN 2017027428 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781611648287 (ebk.) | ISBN 9780664260323 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Advent—Meditations. | Spirituals (Songs)—Meditations.

Classification: LCC BV40 (ebook) | LCC BV40 .P69 2017 (print) |

DDC 242/.332—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017013695>

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Contents

Preface	ix
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Week One

Day 1: Ain't Dat Good News?	3
Day 2: 'Tis the Old Ship of Zion	6
Day 3: Come Out de Wilderness	9
Day 4: Hold Out to the End	12
Day 5: Swing Low, Sweet Chariot	14
Day 6: Good News, the Chariot's Coming	17
Day 7: I've Been 'Buked	20

Week Two

Day 1: I Want to Be Ready	25
Day 2: Standin' in the Need of Prayer	28
Day 3: Free at Last	31
Day 4: Go, Tell It on the Mountain	33
Day 5: Bye and Bye	36
Day 6: I'm Gonna Sing	39
Day 7: Glory, Glory, Hallelujah	42

Week Three

Day 1: Certainly, Lord	47
Day 2: Oh, Rocks Don't Fall on Me	50
Day 3: Live a-Humble	53
Day 4: Good News, the Chariot's Coming	56
Day 5: Climbin' Up d' Mountain	58
Day 6: The Day of Judgment	61
Day 7: Somebody's Knocking at Your Door	63

Week Four

Day 1: Done Foun' My Los' Sheep	69
Day 2: Mah God Is So High	72
Day 3: Freedom Train a-Comin'	75
Day 4: Balm in Gilead	78
Day 5: I Hear from Heaven To-day	81
Day 6: Study War No More	84
Day 7: Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow	87

Preface

We live in a fractured world. Read the newspapers or an Internet story or the latest blog, and it is easy to see how divided society is—politically, racially, economically, and religiously. These societal splinters can create a sense of hopelessness and despair with no end in sight. This is where the Spirituals come in, those songs sung by weary throats, created in a brutal historical setting of slavery by the enslaved, yet resonating with hope through all the sinister splinters of social sin. They are musical memorabilia of hope in seemingly helpless situations. These songs, these musical lifelines, reveal the possibility of hope in hellish circumstances, light in the midst of darkness, love in the face of hate. When brutally treated in slavery, the enslaved, the unknown black bards, still sang out, “there’s room for many a mo’!” It is this future present hope embedded in the Spirituals that led me to put them into conversation with the historic Christian liturgical season of Advent, a season that is itself built on the hope of the coming of Jesus Christ.

Bringing the Spirituals and Advent together is a way to pray for a double blessing of hope. Like with an espresso,

sometimes one shot is not enough; you need a double or triple shot to lift you from the malaise of the day. In similar fashion, these brief daily meditations on the Spirituals for the season of Advent are a double shot to lift our spirits that might be low due to the tension in the world. Joining the message of the Spirituals with the overall narrative and movement of Advent is also a way to bridge worlds that do not normally converge—a cultural musical literature of faith born in slavery and pervasive in the Black Church and a high liturgical sensibility of the church calendar, in this case, Advent. This book bridges my own background in music and the Church with the rich and meaningful liturgical tradition of my current pastoral call, Duke University Chapel. This intermingling of cultures and traditions is a sign of the Spirit and unveils that the divisiveness of the day need not be the way forward. The twain can meet.

Just as the Spirituals, songs of the Spirit, traversed cultures for many years, initially out of the bowels of enslavement to the concert halls of Europe, and continue to be sung all throughout the world in different settings and languages, this book attempts a similar boundary-crossing of past, present, and future, with the aim of instilling Advent hope in the readers. Of course, the aim is to nourish spiritually those who encounter the words on these pages through Advent reflections on the historical cultural literature of the Spirituals. But the subtext of this main text is to remember the future God has for us—a blending of time, culture, tradition, race, gender, and class into a beautiful bouquet of unity where all walls of division vanish. This daily devotional has an eternal gaze toward the reconciliation of all things, the bringing together of difference in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirituals as expressions of the Spirit are perfect for bridging the worlds of the past, present, and future

through the season of Advent. The method is simple. Every day of Advent will have a Spiritual chosen as the main text for reflection, nodding to a historical understanding of them as a “Third Testament.” Options of canonical Scripture readings are offered for each day with a portion of one included after the reflection on the Spiritual of the day. Each day closes with a short prayer that can also be used. The hope is that you will discover hope afresh through these words. Priority is given to the Spirituals, the voices of the enslaved, the unlettered, the forgotten, the illiterate, as a way to learn from those whose voices are not often heard in society, church, or academy. Thus, it is critical to learn from these marginalized voices in a liturgical season where hope is found in a humble baby Jesus born in poverty. My approach is an implicit call to remember that hope may be found on the edges of society.

These daily reflections will help us to remember the Spirituals and Advent, and the worlds they represent, together. This talk about remembering and memory would be much thinner if I did not remember those who nudged this project forward. Many educational institutions and conferences stoked the fire of the Spirituals in my bones through their generous invitations to present; the comments, questions, and overall feedback from these various sessions showed me how relevant the Spirituals are for today and not just yesterday. Also, early on in my tenure at Duke, Sam Hammond, “the living legend,” Duke University’s carillonneur for over 50 years, sat in my office to discuss the Spirituals and one of my other books. It was in that conversation that Sam, unbeknown to him, confirmed the deep sense I had prior to coming to Duke, by suggesting that I write some daily meditations on the Spirituals for the liturgical year. He encouraged such a project as this and encouraged me; thus I dedicate this book to Sam, a man who rings bells

in the Spirit at Duke Chapel every day. Sam is a part of the Duke Chapel staff and community. This spiritual community has been my home for the last five years, and it is one immersed in the liturgical year and thus in the pattern of Christ, upon which the church calendar is based. These brothers and sisters from diverse walks of life have given me a deeper appreciation for the liturgical calendar, which is why I focus on Advent. In addition, Duke Divinity School has also encouraged teaching on the Spirituals, which only keeps the fire burning for these songs! Furthermore, I cannot forget my brothers and sisters from the African diaspora in the church and academy who nurture my love for the Spirituals, the Spirit's song, through performance and study.

Since this project is not created in a vacuum but among a cloud of witnesses, past and present, I have to remember Tim Buskey, my extraordinary research assistant, who worked tirelessly on organizing this book in its early stage; he was meticulous and always curious and without him, this book may have never made it to the publisher's desk. Of course, there would be no published work without a publisher, and Westminster John Knox graciously jumped on board for this project, ushered into their system by the wise hands of executive editor Robert Ratcliff, to whom I am grateful for his ongoing cheerleading throughout the years. Intellectual communities, spiritual communities, cultural communities, research assistants, editors, and publishers are key to making a book come to fruition, but even more so, in my case, is the family unit of my dear wife, Gail, and my precious children, Moriah and Zachary, who sustain me. I can speak about and sing the Spirituals because they make me sing and blow sweet music into my life. Without them, without God, none of this is possible.

Divisions will not cease without the intervention of God. That being said, dear reader, I leave you with a prayer: May the words of my mouth on the written page and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in the sight of God, who is our Rock and Redeemer. May these daily words for Advent become the Word of God for you and fan the flames of hope, filling your hearts with anticipation for the coming of God into the world. The early church said, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22). This book, along with the Spirituals, says the same thing in another way: “Rise up, shepherd.”

Luke A. Powery

Week One

Day 1

Psalm 25:1–10; Nehemiah 9:6–15; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Ain't Dat Good News?

Got a crown up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?
Got a crown up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?

Refrain

I'm a goin' to lay down dis world,
Goin' to shoulder up mah cross,
Goin' to take it home to Jesus, ain't dat good news?

Got a harp up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?
Got a harp up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?

Refrain

Got a robe up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?
Got a robe up in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?

Refrain

Got a slippers in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?
Got a slippers in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?

Refrain

Got a Savior in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?
Got a Savior in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news?

Refrain

—*Songs of Zion*, 114*

As we yearn for the future kingdom of God and gaze toward the other world, it is true that our hope for “de Kingdom” doesn’t relieve us from “mah cross.” The images of future crowns, harps, robes, and slippers provided good news, especially for those who didn’t have the economic privilege to purchase crowns, harps, robes, or slippers. Those who had no shoes could rejoice in the heavenly slippers that were to come. Most of all, that a Savior was in the kingdom was good news. Moreover, the cross one carried could be given over to Jesus in the end as eternal relief, bringing joy and a sense of gladness, even if the world’s situation was currently burdensome. To know that what one did not have in this world would be provided in the next gave hope in the present.

One doesn’t want to be so otherworldly that he is no earthly good, but it’s clear that, despite our shrinking from emphasizing a future home with “mah Jesus,” there is a home prepared for us. This eternal home is our ultimate destiny. Good news is our end. Today may not be full of good news but we are marching toward it, and what we lack today will be given to us tomorrow. This is good news. Crowns as children of God. Harps to express the joy of our hearts. Robes to be clothed in light and righteousness. Slippers to walk all around the kingdom. A Savior to save us from ourselves and our pain. No more crosses to bear, just joys to share. Ain’t dat good news? It is great news. Rejoice today.

**Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1981), 114.

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

(1 Thess. 5:9–10)

Prayer for the Day

Good news God, thank you for a kingdom where we can lay down our crosses and find eternal rest.

Day 2

Psalm 25:1–10; Nehemiah 9:16–25;
1 Thessalonians 5:12–22

'Tis the Old Ship of Zion

Refrain

'Tis the old ship of Zion,

'Tis the old ship of Zion,

'Tis the old ship of Zion, Git on board, Git on board.

It has landed many a thousand,

It has landed many a thousand,

It has landed many a thousand,

Git on board, Git on board.

Ain't no danger in de water,

Ain't no danger in de water,

Ain't no danger in de water,

Git on board, Git on board.

It was good for my dear mother, . . .

It was good for my dear father, . . .

It will take you home to Glory, . . .

—*Songs of Zion*, 131

Water can be refreshing. A cool drink on a hot day. A reviving swim in a pool when wearied after a long day's work. Moisture for plant soil after several dry days of the hot sun. Yet water can also be dangerous. Children drown in pools or in the ocean. Shark attacks take place near the beach shores during hot summer days. Celebrities have been found dead in bathtub water.

Waters can be treacherous from storms or, with those enslaved in mind, it is known that during the Middle Passage, many were thrown overboard from slave ships and left to drown in the seas. Water became a natural grave. No wonder we are told "ain't no danger in de water." To know there is safe passage in waters that have been detrimental is an encouragement.

Also, it is "the old ship of Zion" that will carry one safely. It is God who is faithful to lead the way and transport us to the other side, to home. And we know this isn't the first time God has done this. It has been done for the thousands, including our mothers and fathers. That cloud of witnesses calls to us across the waters, beckoning us to take the risk with God. Will you git on board and trust God, knowing that God has a history of helping? Ain't no danger on God's ship.

[Y]ou in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the wilderness so that they lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell.

(Neh. 9:19–21)

Prayer for the Day

Faithful God, though the seas can be sinister, help us to realize that your ship will keep us safe.