

CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH  
THROUGH THE SPIRITUALS



During the month of February 2022, our parish will focus on the 'Spirituals' and the impact they have on our lives and faith. Each week, we look at a specific theme and provide some history and clarity in relations to scripture. To reflect on the **third week (Feb. 20)** of African-American History Month, we look to the theme of **READINESS**.

One of the great qualities of the African-American Spirituals is to treat serious subjects in a clear, memorable, and almost joyful way. This is true even of very weighty matters like sin and readiness for judgment day. They cover the judgment, but in a way that is playfully bright while at the same time deeply soulful.

Let us remember that Spirituals were written in the cauldron of great suffering. If any people might be excused from thinking that the Lord would exempt them from judgment day, it is surely the enslaved in the deep South. And yet the Spirituals are almost wholly devoid of self-righteousness. Enslaved blacks sang in ways that looked also to their own sins and need to be prepared. If they were prepared, God, who knew their trouble, would help them to steal away to Jesus. They did not see themselves as exempt from the need to be ready.

So let's sample some of these lines from numerous spirituals that speak to judgment. Some of these

first quotes occur in many of the Spirituals:

*I would not be a sinner, I'll tell you the reason why. I'm afraid my Lord might call my name and I wouldn't be ready to die.*

*Some go to Church for to sing and shout, before six months they's all turned out!*



*Better watch my brother how you walk on the cross! Your foot might slip and your soul get lost!*

*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water but the fire next time!*

*Old Satan wears a hypocrite's shoe, If you don't watch he'll slip it on you!*

*Knock at the window knock at the door, Callin' brother Noah, can you take more?! No said Noah cause you're full of sin! God's got the key you can't get in!*

*Oh sinner man better repent! Oh you'd better repent for God's gonna call you to judgment There's No hiding place down there!*

*Sinner please don't let this harvest pass And die and lose your soul at last.*

The words as one can see are memorable and poetic; they are playful and piercing. Other memorable songs of readiness and judgment are some of the following:

*My Lord, what a morning, When the stars begin to fall. You'll hear the trumpet sound, to wake the nations underground Looking to my God's right hand, When the stars begin to fall. You'll hear the sinner moan, When the stars begin to fall. You'll hear the Christian shout, when the stars begin to fall!*

*No signal for another train, to follow in this line. Oh sinner you're forever lost. when once you're left behind, she's nearing now the station, oh, sinner don't be vain, but come and get your ticket and be ready for that train!*

*Nobody's fault but mine. So if I die and my soul be lost, it's nobody's fault but mine. My mother taught me how to pray, so if I die and my soul be lost, it's nobody's fault but mine.*

*Where shall I be when the first Trumpet sounds, Oh where shall I be when it sounds so loud, when it sounds so loud as to wake up the dead, Oh where shall be when it sounds. How will it be with my poor soul, Oh Where Shall I be?*

Well I went to the rock to hide my face, the rock cried out, no hiding place, Oh the Rock cried I'm burnin too! I wanna go to heaven just as much as you. Dere's no hiding place down there.

Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia. The River Jordan is chilly and cold, chills the body but not the soul. The river is deep and the river is wide, milk and honey on the other side! Michael row the boat ashore, Alleluia.



Most of these songs are deeply scriptural and make serious appeals to the human soul, but they do so in a way that is creative. They get you tapping your foot and invite you to a joyful consideration of the need to repent before it's too late. Others are more soulful, even mournful, in their pentatonic scale.

Given all the reluctance to discuss the four last things (*death, judgment, Heaven, and Hell*), songs like these may help to reopen the door to necessary conversations between preacher and congregation, parents and children. They are a valuable masterpiece and the great treasure for the Church and for the world.

Note too, some of these Spirituals had a double meaning we should not ignore. The Gospel Train surely referred to the journey to heaven, but it too many it was also code for

the Underground Railroad. Michael Row the Boat ashore speaks also the journey to the other side but it also images crossing the river from slave states to the free North.

We cannot conclude this reflection on readiness Spirituals without reference to one of the greatest and most spirited of them all: *In Dat Great Gettin' Up Morning*. It is a tour de force of the last Day when the trumpet blows and the dead rise. It is joyful—a real toe-tapper—and makes a serious point along with a wish: "*In That Great Gettin' Up Mornin Fare You Well!*" *I'm Gonna tell ya 'bout da comin' of da judgment! Der's a better day a comin', Fare you well, fare you well!* Chorus:

*In dat great gettin' up mornin',  
Fare you well, fare you well  
In dat great gettin' up mornin',  
Fare you well, fare you well*

*Oh preacher fold yo' bible,  
For dat last souls converted,  
Fare you well, fare you well*

*Blow yo' trumpet Gabriel,  
Lord, how loud shall I blow it?  
Blow it right and calm and easy,*

*Do not alarm all my people,  
Tell dem all come to da judgment,  
Fare you well, fare you well!*

*Do you see dem coffins burstin,  
do you see dem folks is risin'  
Do you see dat fork of lightenin',  
Do you hear dat rumblin'  
thunder ??? Fare you well, fare  
you well!*

*Do you see dem stars a fallin',  
Do you see da world on fire???  
Fare you well, fare you well*

*Do you see dem Saints is risin',  
Fare you well, fare you well  
See 'em marchin' home for heaven,  
Fare you well, fare you well*

*Oh! Fare you well po'r sinners,  
fare you well, fare you well  
Fare you well po'r sinners, fare  
you well, fare you well!*

There are many good versions of these Spirituals on YouTube. **NOTE:** visit our website ([hscchurch.org](http://hscchurch.org)) for links to these songs and prior week flyers.

Thank God for the Spirituals, and thank those he inspired to craft them!

