The Message of the Hush Harbor: History and Theology of African Descent Traditions

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On March 27, 1871, just eight years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation wherein African-American slaves were given their freedom, the Rev. Samuel Watson and eight of his members purchased two acres of land in Sumter County to be used for building a church that they would later call Good Hope Methodist Church.

Although March 1871 is the date the church was officially established on the property, its congregation is thought to have worshipped there for many years before in a secluded space called a hush harbor.

It was on this land that James M. and Mary Louisa Davis, Alexander and Elias Dessassuare, Junis and Sara Davis, John Desassuare and Lloyd Dessassaure and others gathered under the cloak of night to worship God in song, dance and prayer.

In 2002, Good Hope Methodist Church merged with Wesley Chapel Methodist Church, another church with plantation roots, to form Good Hope Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church, per a history by Jewell R. Stanley. This unified church maps its beginnings to a time when slaves were not allowed to worship unsupervised by their masters. Yet, in spite of restrictions and life-staking repercussions, they

stole away to hush harbors where their faith was continued from Africa and strengthened in the New World.

Today, I serve as the second female pastor of Good Hope Wesley Chapel UMC in its 147-year history, a history that began in the secrecy of a hush harbor and continues amid changing times.

But what was the hush harbor? Who were some of those who risked it all to worship the God of their ancestors and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? What was worship like in these sacred spaces?

And what is the message of the hush harbor for us today?

What was the Hush Harbor?

The hush harbor, also known as a brush harbor or a bush arbor, was "a secluded informal structure, often built with tree branches, set in places away from masters so that slaves could meet to worship in private," according to Paul Harvey's "Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity." During the Antebellum period, and subsequent to the Great Awakenings, Christianity grew rapidly in America. This growth included a number of African Americans who assumed the Christianity of their masters and shaped it into what author Albert J. Raboteau and others call the "Invisible Institution." This institution, which was characterized in large part by the hush harbor, enabled slaves to worship in spirit and in truth in thickly forested areas which were hidden from their masters, wrote Raboteau. In parallel to the invisible institution of worship, there was a visible one.

To this end, Harvey explains there were actually three ways in which African-American worship took shape during this period: Firstly, in segregated biracial churches where white ministers preached. Secondly, in African-American churches such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church founded in 1816. And thirdly, in hidden hush harbors where slaves were free to combine both African and Christian worship practices.

It was in the hush harbor, buried deep within the untended woods on the plantation that slaves remembered the forests of their homeland. As Noel Leo Erskine wrote in "Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born in Caribbean Slavery," it was there that they escaped the confining worship of segregated chapels and were able to practice African rituals and to rest in knowing that the spirits of their ancestors followed them—even into slavery:

"It was primarily through religious rituals and the carving out of black sacred spaces that enslaved persons were able to affirm self and create a world over against the world proffered by the master for their families."

The hush harbor would eventually serve as not only a place for worship, but also as a place where unrelated slaves would become a sustaining family of faith.

Hush Harbor Worshippers

Leaders within the slave community announced hush harbor gatherings or “meetin’s” with the use of coded language or songs, which traveled from one slave to another until the appointed time of the gathering.

Singer and preacher Melody Bennett Gayle explains that on the day of the meeting, slaves would work all day in the hot sun, gather at night in the hush harbor to worship until the sun came back up, and then return to the fields in the morning renewed to begin work again. These worshippers risked being severely beaten, sold off from their families and even killed if they were caught; however, the risk was worth it because of the liberating power of the unfettered Gospel that was preached in the woods.

To this end, former slave Lucretia Alexander explained that in the white church, the preacher would tell slaves to obey their masters and they had to sing softly. Further, per Raboteau’s “African American Religion,” escaped slave Henry Atkins lamented that “white clergymen don’t preach the whole Gospel there.” It was in the hush harbor that slaves could hear stories of the children of Israel and their exodus from the slavery of Egypt and envision their own freedom in this world and the world to come.

It was also in the hush harbor where plans for freedom where hatched in the hearts and minds of those like Nat Turner.

On August 22, 1831, history records that the largest slave revolt in America was waged by slave preacher and organizer Turner. On this fateful day in Southampton County, Virginia, Turner led a group of some 20 other slaves to kill the family of his owner, John Travis, and 60 other whites. Turner’s plans were born as a result of visions received, prayers rendered and plans made in the seclusion of the hush harbor.

PBS.org records the following about the signs that Turner received from the Lord: “In May 1828, he experienced a vision of a serpent. In February 1831, he witnessed an eclipse of the sun. Then on Aug. 13, 1831, the final signal was revealed to him: a second “black spot” on the sun. He told his followers, ‘As the black spot passed over the sun, so shall the blacks pass over the earth.’”

After the insurrection it became even more difficult for slaves, especially those in the South, to escape the grip of their masters—yet they could not be deterred for long. Erskine affirms that “where ever Black people were they had an irrepressible need, a desire to worship in their own way.”

Worship in the Hush Harbor

In their beautifully written and illustrated children’s book, Freddi Evans and Erin Banks reveal the intricacies of hush harbor worship. Once the coded call had been made to “Steal Away to Jesus” or “There’s A Meetin’ Tonight” worshippers would leave their slave cabins under the veil of night and make their way through the woods to a designated spot.

Upon arrival, a person would be designated to watch out for the “paterollers” (patrollers) who were always lurking in the woods looking for runaway slaves. Wet Quilts and rags would be used to form a tabernacle and wash pots would be turned over to catch the sounds of the worshippers singing, weeping, dancing, praying and preaching. When the Holy Spirit fell upon the worshippers they were free to dance and shout because there wasn’t anybody there to put them out! Songs such as: “Kum bah yah,” “Go Down Moses” and “Have You Got Good Religion?” were sung. On occasion, Evans wrote in “Hush Harbor: Praying in Secret,” the elderly were prepared in prayer offered by the gathered community to meet the ancestors.

It was also there in the hush harbor that the African ring shout, or circle dance, continued from Mother Africa.

The ring shout is a dance that continues today in some black churches, especially in the Sea Islands and the surrounding areas. In the dance worshippers gather in a circle and dance in a counter-clockwise manner, and a song leader leads the song as the circle moves and the dancers echo a rhythmic chorus. Without consideration for time, the worshippers are united with God, with their ancestors and with one another, per Flora Wilson Bridges’ “Resurrection Song: African American Spirituality.”

The Message of the Hush Harbor

On June 26, 2015, a grieving nation leaned in to hear words of hope offered by President Barak Obama following the horrific murders of the Hon. Rev. Clementa Pinckney and eight of his fellow disciples while attending Bible Study one evening at Mother Emanuel Church.

In his eulogy, the president invited the nation to remember “when black churches served as “hush harbors” where slaves could worship in safety; praise houses where their free descendants could gather and shout hallelujah—(applause)—rest stops for the weary along the Underground Railroad; bunkers for the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement. They have been, and continue to be, community centers where we organize for jobs and justice; places of scholarship and network; places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart —and taught that they matter. That’s what happens in church.”

As our nation continues to groan under the weight of violence and intolerance, we are reminded by the first African-American President and the voices of our ancestors to remember what happens in the hush harbor of Christ’s Church—where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Amen.

Rooted in Resilience: Embracing the Fullness of Spiritual Formation Across Sacred Histories

The stories of enslaved Africans in the United States reveal a powerful testament to the resilience of sacred space; where external circumstances could not sever the internal connection with God. Despite

relentless hardships, many found creative ways to nurture their spirituality, often at great personal risk, embodying practices that sustained their souls and reinforced their faith.

In secluded natural areas, known as **"hush harbors,"** enslaved individuals would gather to pray, sing, and share faith. Shielded by the woods or ravines, they would **soften their voices or place wet quilts or blankets** around them to muffle the sound—these moments of "stealing away to Jesus" were quiet acts of resilience and devotion, reflecting an unbreakable bond with the Divine even in captivity.

For many, these practices extended beyond gatherings. They would **pray in silence**, wear small crosses, or **carry symbols of faith** throughout the day, **creating a sacred rhythm that upheld them amid suffering.** These small acts of devotion became lifelines, strengthening them spiritually and building a sense of community in struggle.

In their ingenuity, enslaved Africans even used large iron **pots or cisterns as makeshift sanctuaries**. Placing these vessels upside down or with the mouth toward the ground, they would speak or sing into them, muffling the sound so it would not carry and risk retribution. Here, they poured out their deepest prayers and hopes, protected by this symbol of resilience.

These sacred practices in struggle, whether whispered in a hush harbor or spoken into a pot, show an unyielding commitment to faith, courage, and spiritual endurance. This legacy reminds us of a sacred defiance, where the power of sacred space holds firm, even in the face of unimaginable oppression and circumstances.

Often the spiritual formation framework in the U.S. draw heavily from from Ignatian practices and other European Christian disciplines. However, **the fullness of spiritual formation emerges when we draw from a broader, more diverse history of spirituality.** Enriching this framework by integrating traditions from the spiritual resilience and creativity seen in African American history, for example, or the mystical practices of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, brings a depth that more fully honors the varied ways people have encountered God across cultures and generations.

This history of spirituality reveals how sacred pauses and disciplines took root in places of hardship and resistance, where people found God in hidden, communal acts of worship and personal resilience. Embracing this fuller history creates a more inclusive, authentic framework for spiritual formation; one that celebrates God's work in all communities and affirms that sacred spaces and pauses have long been forged in diverse ways, across generations.

Mini Hush Harbor Practices for Today

These practices honor sacred resilience and affirm that God meets us in every pause, every hidden sanctuary, and every act of faith.

1) Hush Harbor
   Find a secluded place in nature or a private room. Pray or sing softly, reflecting on God's presence and the resilience of those who gathered in hidden spaces to find strength in community (Matthew 6:6).

2) Cistern of Prayer
   Use a muffling practice, like speaking into a pillow or covering yourself with a blanket. Pour out your innermost prayers and fears in this quiet sanctuary, symbolizing God's presence surrounding and hearing you (Psalm 62:8).

3) Sacred Blanket
   Wrap yourself in a blanket or shawl, breathing deeply. Reflect on God as your shield and comfort. Consider ways to protect and nurture others who face hardships, just as communities shielded each other in faith (Psalm 91:1-2).

4) Bathing in Nature
   Spend time in nature, whether a park or a quiet garden, and immerse yourself in the sights, sounds, and smells. Allow the natural world to remind you of God's presence in all creation and the sanctuaries it has provided (Genesis 2:8).