God's Trombones by James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was an American author, educator, lawyer, diplomat, songwriter, and civil rights activist. Johnson is best remembered for his leadership of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), where he started working in 1917. In 1920 he was the first African American to be chosen as executive secretary of the organization, effectively the operating officer. He served in that position from 1920 to 1930. Johnson established his reputation as a writer, and was known during the Harlem Renaissance for his poems, novels, and anthologies collecting both poems and spirituals of black culture. His books include Along This Way, his autobiography, Saint Peter Relates an Incident, Black Manhattan, and God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse.

He was appointed under President Theodore Roosevelt as US consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua for most of the period from 1906 to 1913. In 1934 he was the first African-American professor to be hired at New York University. Later in life he was a professor of creative literature and writing at Fisk University, a historically black university.

Johnson composed the lyrics of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." (Hymnal 1982 # 599) originally written for a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday at Stanton School. This song became widely popular and has become known as the "Negro National Anthem," a title that the NAACP adopted and promoted. "

Before the session

As James Weldon Johnson writes in the Preface (page 7), “These poems would better be intoned than read…” If you would like to watch and listen to the poems being performed, The Negro Ensemble Company performs each of the poems. Go to YouTube.com and in the search box put “The Negro Ensemble Company God's Trombones” and all 8 poems will be listed. Each individual poem is between 4-10 minutes long.

Read the Foreword by Maya Angelou and the Preface to God's Trombones. If you are going to show any of the YouTube videos, set up your equipment and link to the video.

Guidelines for a session

Start with prayer. One suggestion: use the prayer written for James Weldon Johnson in The Episcopal Church A Great Cloud of Witnesses (the day designated for him is June 25):

Eternal God, we give thanks for the gifts that you gave your servant James Weldon Johnson: a heart and a voice to praise your Name in verse. As he gave us powerful words to glorify you, may we also speak with joy and boldness to banish hatred from your creation, in the Name of Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

1. Read or watch one or two of the poems from God's Trombones.
2. Get reactions from the group on content and/or delivery: What comes up for each of them?
3. Use the pertinent questions below for the poem that you are focused on to guide your discussion. Please note that some prompts from the Go Speak Reconciliation Edition cards are offered in each of the sections.

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Section 1 The Power of Worship

1. Johnson composed *God’s Trombones* after hearing a sermon that was particularly moving for its lyrical qualities. Recall a worship experience that you found particularly inspiring. What action did it prompt you to?


3. “Tell a story about a time you worshipped with people very different from you – perhaps from a different ethnic group or a different faith tradition. How did this help you understand your relationship to God in a new way?”

Section 2 Relationship with God

1. In “The Creation,” Johnson describes God creating the world. How is God’s relationship with man described and how does this description relate to your understanding of God?

2. Johnson begins his sermon “The Prodigal Son,” saying “young man/your arm’s too short to box with god.” What does that phrase mean? Can you relate this idea to a contemporary challenge to God or to our contemporary situation?

3. “You are made in the image of God. What do you like about yourself? How do you use it to show forth the glory of God?”

Section 3 Fears and Suffering

1. Several of these sermons – “Noah Built the Ark” and “The Judgment Day” come particularly to mind – speak about human frailty. Where can you see Johnson depicting human beings as flawed and vulnerable?

2. In the sermon “Go Down Death,” Johnson localizes and personalizes death, telling us the story of Sister Caroline who is in “. . . Savanah, Georgia, / Down in Yamacraw.” How does personalizing the experience of death with a particular story shape how we see death in the sermon?

3. These sermons describe many experiences of suffering and fear. Where is God in these times of suffering and fear?

4. “Our fears become less powerful when we share them with others. What is something you fear and how does sharing it in the context of your faith strengthen you to experience it differently?”

Section 4 Forgiveness and reconciliation

1. Johnson ends “The Crucifixion” with a direct reference to the spiritual “Were You There When They Crucified my Lord?” (Hymnal 1982, # 172) And of course, Johnson wrote the words for “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” What do you recall when you hear these hymns?

2. After “The Crucifixion” comes “Let My People Go” where Johnson invokes another spiritual “Go Down Moses.” The story of the Exodus is always read during the Great Vigil of
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Easter. What ties these two scriptural moments (the Crucifixion and the Exodus) together? How do these two spirituals tie those moments together?

3. Taken together, Johnson’s sermons trace the beginnings of the world and of man to their end on judgment day. What spiritual journeys of faith have you had that connect with these individual sermons? “It is sometimes said ‘faith is a journey.’ What if your favorite biblical journey story and why? How does it connect to your journey of faith?”

4. “‘Be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (Rom 12:2). Share a story about the time you allowed God to change your mind about someone.”

5. “Christ taught us to forgive others as we have been forgiven. When in your life have you asked God or another person for forgiveness? Did the forgiveness lead to reconciliation?”

Section 5 Protest

1. In writing these sermons, Johnson wove together his political work on behalf of racial justice and social equality. Describe the role of endeavors for equality in the church community today. Does the church continue to represent the African American protest tradition? May other concerns for equality be added to this tradition to enrich and empower many?


3. “Share an experience when your faith helped you to stand up for something in which you really believe, even when you knew it was difficult.”

4. “What does it look like to express your faith through action?”

Section 6 The communion of saints

1. Reverend Joseph Lowery began his inaugural benediction for Barack Obama by reciting part of “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” How does this invocation frame his prayer for the country? What role do figures from the past play in how you imagine the future? (The full text of the benediction can be found at http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/stevenwaldman/2009/01/rev-lowery-inauguration-benedi.html; for more on Revered Lowery see https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99268371)

2. In A Great Cloud of Witnesses the prayer for Johnson’s feast day reads, “Eternal God, we give thanks for the gifts that you gave your servant James Weldon Johnson: a heart and a voice to praise your Name in verse. As he gave us powerful words to glorify you, may we also speak with joy and boldness to banish hatred from your creation, in the Name of Jesus Christ; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.” How do Johnson’s writings inspire you to speak with joy and boldness?

3. “In the Episcopal Church liturgy, we praise God with ‘the communion of Saints’ and with ‘all the company of Heaven.’ Share a story of someone who has died with whom you still feel connected when you pray.”