

GLORY, GLORY

*For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision
availeth anything, nor uncircumcision;
but faith which worketh by love.*

GALATIANS 5:6

The first black man to receive the priesthood in 1978 was named Joseph Freeman. I've always liked that name and thought it just the right one. It reminds me of Joseph of old, who had to wait long years before he could get delivered and before he could deliver others.

I can't say if Len Hope was the first black high priest beyond this world, but I know who the first one was on earth in 1978. That was Brother Ruffin Bridgeforth.

Boyd Packer telephoned him towards the end of June to ask if he had received the priesthood. Ruffin's bishop was in Hawaii when the revelation came, so the answer was, "Not yet."

Elder Packer announced he'd be at Ruffin's ward the upcoming Sunday to ordain him, and indeed he was there. After sacrament meeting, he took Ruffin and Helena Bridgeforth into a little room.

Helena was a pretty Mexican woman, though she was very ill

by this time, crippled with rheumatism, and weighed her to a mere eighty pounds, and she used a wheelchair where. Most often, she used a wheelchair. Boyd Packer's pity, for he wanted to ordain Ruffin. He was about to do so, but Ruffin then pulled back. "No," he said, "I don't want and then you can give your will to me, and then you can give your will to me in that."

He motioned Ruffin to the side, and he touched that gray head.

Now, Ruffin had received the priesthood in his days. He had felt the power of the priesthood move down his scalp and into his mind. Nothing like this. When Elder Packer laid his hands on Ruffin, the Priesthood on him and ordained him, the power of the Priesthood came from those hands, Ruffin's, and it was Jesus' light.

After his ordination, the first thing that happened was the veil stood up and shook Elder Packer's wife and then walked behind her. In all their marriage, he was absent from the power of the priesthood.

Elder Packer anointed her with his hands on her head. "Helena Ruffin, I now begin the blessing. His voice broke through the silence, "by the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood."

He would give many, many blessings. He would give many, many blessings, times pausing to murmur "Praise the Lord." Ruffin always wondered if he was seeing the same familiar words of worship he had known in his youth.

Not long afterwards, Elder Packer was called to the Salt Lake Temple.

Lucile Bankhead was informed by

by this time, crippled with rheumatoid arthritis. Illness had shrunk her to a mere eighty pounds, and it was a chore for her to get anywhere. Most often, she used a wheelchair. She must've summoned Boyd Packer's pity, for he wanted to bless her before he ordained Ruffin. He was about to do so, even had his hands in position, and then pulled back. "No," he said. "Ruffin, I'm going to ordain you, and then you can give your wife a blessing. I'll be pleased to assist you in that."

He motioned Ruffin to the wood chair and laid his hands on that gray head.

Now, Ruffin had received many a blessing or a setting apart in his days. He had felt priesthood hands and the warmth of that power move down his scalp and body. But never had he felt anything like this. When Elder Packer conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood on him and ordained him a high priest, something so mighty came from those hands, Ruffin felt himself being folded into Jesus' light.

After his ordination, the first black high priest on this side of the veil stood up and shook Elder Packer's hand. Ruffin embraced his wife and then walked behind her wheelchair. For the first time in all their marriage, he was about to give her a blessing by the power of the priesthood.

Elder Packer anointed her with oil, and then Ruffin set his hands on her head. "Helena Romero Bridgeforth," he said, and began the blessing. His voice broke only once, as he spoke the words "by the power of the Melchizedek priesthood, which I hold."

He would give many, many blessings from that time forth, sometimes pausing to murmur "Praise the Lord" between sentences. I've always wondered if he was seeing visions and couldn't resist the familiar words of worship he had known since his child days.

Not long afterwards, Elder Packer sealed the Bridgeforths in the Salt Lake Temple.

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policy change, but she didn't believe it and got perturbed at the caller. Her voice was shrill, for she was not about to be mocked, and she hung up like the phone was her personal exclamation mark. She stared that telephone down, daring it to ring again—which it did. That caller must've been one brave man. Or maybe he was just so joyful with the news that not even Lucile Bankhead's wrath could stop him from calling a second time. It took some doing, but he persuaded her that the news was true.

Once she believed, Lucile didn't waste no time getting herself to the temple and then doing genealogy work. Before long, she had discovered a life history dictated to Elizabeth J. D. Roundy by a certain Jane Elizabeth Manning James.

When a child only six years old, I left my home and went to live with a family of white people. Their names were Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Fitch. They were aged people and quite wealthy. I was raised by their daughter.

In that history, Jane had listed not only her brothers and sisters but all her children too. Lucile helped make arrangements for their temple work to be done.

As for Gene Orr, he received the priesthood in Canada.

Monroe Fleming passed away before too long, but he was alive and ordained in 1978. When folks asked how he felt about the long wait, he showed that sweet smile and said, "What we do now is join hands and move forward. Just forget about the past."

Aidan Gray, though, was still bound to the past. He did not receive priesthood in 1978, for he was not active when the revelation came.

He heard about it, however, before it was even public knowledge. He was working for a paper company, and one of his co-workers said, "Hey, Aidan, the Mormons are going to give priesthood to the Negroes."

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He didn't even look up at her, so she said it again.

"Get out of here, Dixie," he answered. "That's not funny." It was a sensitive matter to him. True, he had only occasionally set foot inside a Mormon chapel in several years and was smoking once again, but he had never forgot that Christmas gift God gave him in 1964. He had never lost his testimony, though he hadn't shared it in years. It had become as private to him as the life he was living.

Dixie told him she wasn't joking.

He turned on his office television and radio but heard no news about priesthood. The word hadn't broke yet. Dixie had heard about it early, from someone over at the Church Office Building.

Well, he did the logical thing: He called President Kimball's office direct. The prophet's secretary told him President Kimball was back in the temple and that yes, what he had heard was true.

Aidan's eyes filled. He was not in a position to receive the priesthood himself, but God had heard the prayers of so many Saints. All he could say was, "God is good."

The news hit the airwaves shortly after that, and Aidan wanted to share the joy with his friend Heber Wolsey. When he went to the Public Affairs office, Heber wasn't there. The secretary called him at home. She didn't tell him who was waiting to see him.

Heber lived close. Only a few minutes later, he walked into the room where Aidan was standing. They hadn't seen each other in years and fell into a long embrace. Then through the window, they gazed at the Salt Lake Temple with tear-filled eyes.

There it was, that great, spired building which Elijah Abel had helped build and which Jane James had begged to enter. At last, at last, all its doors were open to us.

But Aidan had to face his own life. It was no policy keeping him outside the temple, it was just him and his habit. And the bitingest truth stung deep: He had prevented himself from receiving those blessings he'd longed for. And he couldn't know what good things never happened because he hadn't been around to do them.

"I'm seeing a beautiful future," Ruffin answered. "And I'm so grateful."

Well, it would be some years before that prophecy would bear fruit for Aidan. It would be some years before he could free himself and find his way to the place where all his blessings were held in reserve.

NOTES

The chapter title is from the traditional Negro spiritual "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" listed at <http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/index.htm>.

Joseph Freeman was also the first black man sealed to his wife. Elder Thomas S. Monson performed the ceremony to seal Joseph Freeman and Isapela Toe Leituala Freeman on June 23, 1978, in the Salt Lake Temple.

The account of Ruffin Bridgeforth's ordination to the priesthood is from his videotaped account (in the possession of Anne Camomile Reeves). A letter written on August 30, 1978, by Helena Romero Bridgeforth to her niece Shirley Romo, says this [spelling standardized]: "As you can imagine, we were just as happy as you about the revelation. Yes, your uncle . . . was on cloud nine and stunned. . . . He was ordained as a high priest. We have also been married in the Salt Lake L.D.S. temple on July 12. Now, he is a high councilman in our Riverside stake. You know he has served as president of the Genesis Group, a group for black members of the L.D.S. Church for six years. . . . Shirley, the experience we had when we went through the temple is something you cannot even imagine unless you go through it. It's so beautiful. You know we have waited 25 years for this. The rest of the family are not active in the Church, but we hope now they will all come back. Pray for us, my dear. . . . By the way, I only weigh 80 pounds, so send me the pounds you have to spare."

Regarding the news of the priesthood revelation, Lucile Bankhead says in "All Worthy Males": "I heard it word of mouth. I was called . . . and at first I didn't believe it and so they had to call me back again. I was a little bit perturbed about it when they first called me, and then they called me back again . . . and . . . I realized what it was all about." The caller was male, possibly a general authority or a missionary, for Lucile says he was "an elder."

Monroe Fleming's words are quoted from the *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 10, 1978, 2A.

Brother Fleming died on July 31, 1982. Elder Thomas S. Monson spoke at his funeral. President Monson described Monroe Fleming in a letter as "a

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wonderful human being, a faithful member of the Church and a dear friend of mine" (Monson to Young, May 21, 1999).

Nate Womble says that he searched for and found Jane's life story for Lucile Bankhead (conversation with Margaret Young, October 19, 2001).

Lucile Bankhead was very active in genealogy work and claimed that her research "went back clear to Africa and I couldn't get no further than that" ("All Worthy Males").

That Lucile Bankhead participated in the Manning and James temple work is verified by Ron Esplin's journal, (Esplin to Young, March 5, 2003). The endowment and sealing were performed 31 August 1979. Ron Esplin recorded in his journal: "Judy [Esplin] and I first picked up Lucile Bankhead at her home. She is a descendant of Green Flake of the original pioneer company and enlightened us with a lot of information about her family and background. . . . Ruffin Bridgeforth, without his wife (who was just released from the hospital and is not well) joined us at the temple. Six men, five women. . . . During the session, I ended up sitting between Lowell [Bennion] and Ruffin, two men I admired greatly. Judy sat next to Lucile and aided her. Being part of this was important for us, in other words, because of who we were with but also for who Jane James was." Brother Esplin's communication also notes that Jane James was sealed to Isaac James, Judy Esplin standing in for Jane and Ruffin Bridgeforth for Isaac.

Linda King Newell, who had written a story with Valeen Tippetts Avery for the *Ensign* (published August 1979, 26–29) about Jane James, requested permission to do her temple work. Linda wrote to Margaret Young (October 2, 2002): "I did do Jane's temple work—and that of her entire family. Jack, Ron Esplin and his wife Judy, Lowell Bennion, Ruffin Bridgeforth, and I believe a couple of others all helped. It was just before the *Ensign* article came out. Of course, I had to get 'special permission' at that time for doing work for someone whose name was not already in the endowment pipeline or a member of my own family. I can't remember who I went to for permission—it was the highest up guy I could get an appointment with, but someone below the General Authority level. What I do remember is that I told this guy about Jane, that the *Ensign* was publishing an article on her and that I did not want it to go to press without a footnote saying her much desired temple work had been done. He listened without comment and then smiled. 'If you had come to me last week, I would have told you no,' he said, 'but I just received word that members can now do temple work for "special friends." I would classify you as a "special friend" of Jane's.'"

Jane's work was also done by Susan Easton Black, who has since lectured

on Jane all over the world from Nauvoo to England. Sister Black spoke at the dedication of the Elijah Abel monument in the Salt Lake Cemetery, September 28, 2002.

That President Bridgeforth frequently said "Praise the Lord" while giving priesthood blessings is from an interview with Jan Christensen by the authors on September 19, 2002. According to Sister Christensen, when Brother Bridgeforth blessed Emmeline Bergon, who had lost much of her eyesight and appeared destined to lose it completely, he frequently repeated the phrase. After that particular blessing, he promised Sister Bergon that she would not lose her eyesight. And indeed, she played the organ at Ruffin Bridgeforth's funeral.

Maria Helena Romero Bridgeforth died March 16, 1980, not long after she and Ruffin had been sealed in the temple. Ruffin subsequently married Betty Johnson on June 6, 1981. Betty was a member of the Tabernacle Choir. She endured many health problems of her own prior to her passing on June 8, 2000. Only a few hours before her death, she provided some enthusiastic sentences about *One More River to Cross*, which were quoted on the back of the book jacket.

Ruffin Bridgeforth's account of his quitting smoking are from his own words recorded on a videotape in the possession of Anne Camomile Reeves.

The conversation between Ruffin Bridgeforth and Aidan Gray is recreated from the memory of Darius Aidan Gray.

THE WELC

*Deal with thy serv
mercy, and tea*
PSAL

At the time he was talking
Aidan's own life was looking b
and more to himself. He began
and alone. He'd come late, sit i
wasn't ready to talk to anyone. N

On occasion, he'd meet som
side and still wanted to congrat
they could go too far with their
many memories, he'd simply hol
was a long time ago," he'd say, "a

Maybe someone should've r
God. You might try, but you won

On a Saturday night, while
strong thought came to him: *To
Sunday, and you will bear your test*

STANDING ON
THE PROMISES

A TRILOGY OF HISTORICAL NOVELS
ABOUT BLACK MORMON PIONEERS

BOOK THREE

The Last
Mile of the
Way

MARGARET BLAIR YOUNG
AND DARIUS AIDAN GRAY



BOOKCRAFT
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

To M
Elder M

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Young, Margaret Blair, 1955-

The last mile of the way / Margaret Blair Young, Darius Aidan Gray.

p. cm.—(Standing on the promise ; v. 3)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57008-904-3 (alk. paper)

1. African American Mormons—Fiction. 2. African American pioneers—Fiction. 3. Nauvoo (Ill.)—Fiction. 4. Mormons—Fiction. I. Gray, Darius.

II. Title.

PS3575.O825L375 2003

813'.54—dc21

2003002354

Printed in the United States of America
Publishers Printing, Salt Lake City, UT

72076-7044

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1