



James Earl Jones Reads The Bible

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The Man With A Voice Of Biblical Proportions Washington Post December 18, 2000 By Phil McCombs

Suddenly, in the midst of Washington rush-hour traffic, a great sense of calm settles over me.

I'm listening to a tape, and it's filling my soul with thoughts and feelings of peace and joy. A guy cuts me off and I let him, equally sorry that he's in such a frenzied state and grateful that--for once--I'm not. As traffic repeatedly grinds to a halt, I seem to be getting happier because it gives me more time to listen to the tape.

"James Earl Jones Reads the Bible" is the title of this work that a pal turned me on to. "The greatest voice of our time reads the greatest book of all time," the jacket blurb says. In 19 hours (12 cassettes), Jones reads the entire New Testament in a stunning, virtually flawless performance.

I've always tended to think of him as the voice of CNN, or the voice of Darth Vader, maybe, or of Simba's father in "The Lion King." Or the guy who answers when you dial 411 with a stirring, "Welcome to Verizon, local and national 411."

What a voice!

Basso profundo, I think they call it. Listening to Jones read the Bible is like unto listening to your grandfather read you stories when you were little--utterly soothing and reassuring.

It has transformed my daily commute from living hell to something like a spiritual experience, and I generally arrive at work now brimming with good cheer. If I happen to interrupt Jones for radio news, verily I say unto you that its gnashing blare and shrieking commercialism come as painful shocks.

Maybe we could set up roadblocks and confiscate drivers' cellphones in exchange for these tapes. Get thee behind me, Road Rage.

Right now, with the holidays approaching, I'm finding refuge in Jones's take on the Christmas story from the second chapter of Luke. The great thing about having it on tape is I can listen over and over, getting deeper into the meaning each time. I even find, later, that I've memorized entire passages without even trying.

"And it came to pass in those days," Jones intones, "that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. . . ."

Screeech! The guy in front of me jerks to a halt. I could care less.

"And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

As many times as I've heard the simple, haunting tale, it's never had a more powerful impact. Jones's rendition sends chills up and down my spine. Somehow that voice of his--calm, deep, powerful: an incredible gift--makes the words seem more thrilling than ever.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. . . ."

By the time the heavenly host is saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men," I'm practically in tears. Who doesn't need a little saving in this stressed-out, coffeed-up world of worry, power, fear and road rage?

Jones has so obviously put his heart into this work that I wanted to call him up and talk about it. For one thing, I wondered how he managed to make the first 16 verses of the first chapter of Matthew's gospel--the "begats" enumerating all the generations from Abraham to Jesus--absolutely mesmerizing.

Alas, Jones declined an interview through an aide. "He recorded it a long, long time ago," she explained. "He's very humble about his own work, and his religion is a very personal thing to him. He'd prefer not to talk about it."

Fair enough. I know he's a lovely, low-key guy, having once talked with him and his beautiful wife, the actress Cecilia Hart, at a Washington party. What I hadn't quite realized, not

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