

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Wednesday, August 22, 2007

Subject: Convent Avenue Baptist Church

Location: 420 West 145th Street (at Convent Ave)

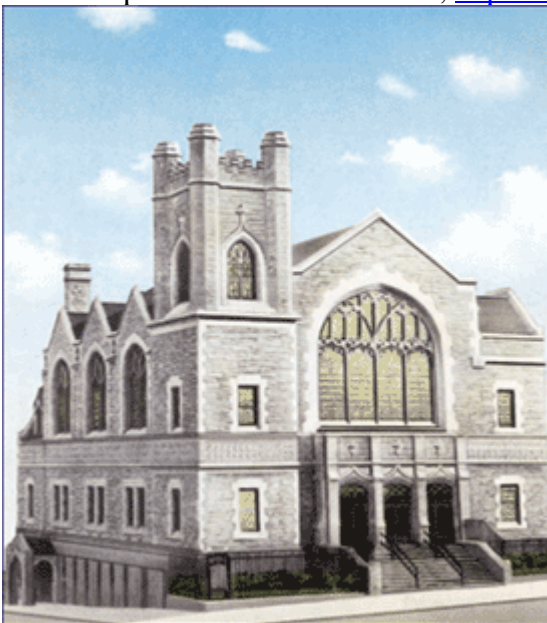
Time: 12:20pm – 1:15pm

Laura, whom I met on the Harlem Gardens Tour, called me this morning around 11:00 and asked me if I was on my lunch hour. I told her I was cooking my lunch and dinner for a friend who was going out of town tomorrow. She invited me to go to the noon service at the Convent Avenue Baptist Church. I told her I'd call her back after I finished cooking lunch. She said that she was leaving soon, so if I didn't catch her on the phone she'd see me there.

I asked her how long it took her to walk there. She told me she was leaving in a few minutes, because she is usually late, and that it took her around 15-20 minutes. "I walk fast," she told me. She reassured me that the service didn't usually start until 12:10 or 12:15. We decided that I'd need about 30 minutes for the walk. I told her that if I'd be really late, I wouldn't show up.

I took an M11 bus without looking at a schedule, and it turned left at 135th St. I didn't react fast enough to get out there; instead, I got out at Broadway and took an M5 to get to 145th Street. I walked the two blocks from Broadway to Amsterdam to Convent. The neighborhood changed dramatically in that walk, from bodegas and shops with Dominican-looking people and Latin music to a quiet residential neighborhood. The church is on the southeast corner.

Here is a photo from their website, <http://www.conventchurch.org/>



114P

115P

116P

445

521

Quite a few older black women were standing outside, dressed in Sunday finery of suits (with skirts) and hats. I felt relieved that was not too late. None of them seemed to be moving toward the door. I climbed the steps and was greeted by a middle-aged female usher, who handed me a program. I walked along the doors (which had glass on top) looking for Laura. A young man in a gray suit and tie was standing near the last set of doors. He opened the door for me.

Inside the sanctuary, I walked furtively along the back row, looking for Laura as a pianist played. Quite a few people were sitting in the back. A young man standing at the piano began singing. I finally spotted her when she turned around. She was sitting in the third-to-last pew. She was wearing the same white cap she wore when I met her. She wore a windbreaker, white with purple and teal, and faded jeans. We greeted one another as she moved over to make a space for me. She asked, "You took the bus?" I confirmed this, saying, "And I'm *still* late." She looked behind her and said, 12:20, not too late.

There were about 50 people sitting in the pews (about 6 people came in after me). Most were elderly women, although there were a few men. Many came by themselves. Some people knew one another and waved across the church. I would say that all were African American, although of course I cannot know this. At least 1/3 of the worshippers were very light-skinned, would pass the paper bag test. I was the only non-African American.

The pews were divided into 4 sections: 2 sections of 15 pews faced the pulpit. Two sections on either side angled toward the pulpit. The pulpit had 2 levels: one with a lectern, and one that looked like a place for a conductor of a choir, with three or four rows of black auditorium-style seats facing the pews. On the left side (facing the pulpit) there was a set of large pipes that did not look connected to an organ. Stained glass windows decorated both walls and higher up, towards the ceiling. Over the choir area there was another stained glass window. [Overall this church gives a much more church-y feel than the nondescript blank white room of the Mormon Church. I wonder if the temple by the Lincoln Center is also like this?]

The young man sung three songs, all lyrical slow songs. He sang well, without too much embellishment, but did not hit all of his notes. Audience members clapped and held up their hands during and between his songs. When he finished he talked about coming to the Lord.

The Rev. Dr. Esteen Tapp thanked someone else and thanked the singer, asking him what his name was. "Thank you, Mr. Young." According to the program, this was the "Songspiration." [This meant that I missed most of the program other than the sermon: Call to Worship, Hymn, Invocation, Scripture, Glory Be To God On High, Greetings and News of the Lord's Work, Offering, and finally, Songspiration, Sermon, Invitational #301, and Benediction.]

The Rev. Dr. Tapp then asked the congregation to pray. I bowed my head. Next there was a reading. Quite a few of the worshippers drew out Bibles and turned to Isaiah

48:something. I pulled out the hymnal instead of the Bible and put it back when I realized my mistake. Laura and the woman sitting next to her did not move.

The Rev. Dr. Tapp then began preaching. She spoke in the measured cadences of an experienced preacher. The theme was to “let go of the past and embrace the new.” The audience kept up a constant patter during her sermon that increased in volume and intensity as her sermon progressed: “Praise the Lord,” “Uh-huh,” “Amen,” and so on. Many people, mostly women, held up their hand(s). One woman in white stood up several times.

At the end we sang the invitational, “Since Jesus Came Into My Heart.” Laura picked up the hymnal but it was nearly over by the time she found it. The Rev. Dr. Tapp asked anyone who was shedding their past and embracing the new to come up to the front to shake the preacher’s hand. Anyone who was “moved by the Spirit of the Lord.” Anyone who wanted to accept Jesus Christ into their heart. People looked around the room or looked down at their hymnals. [I felt as if this was directed against me, but were the other people hiding as well? Or if you are already “saved,” you don’t need to do this?]

On our way out an elderly woman in a canary yellow jacket greeted Laura, and they chatted about someone who had passed away. I’m not sure if this was Laura’s uncle or someone else. Laura introduced me to a middle-aged, light-skinned man in casual clothing, Eldridge or something like that, as we walked south on Convent. He got on a cell phone after Laura asked him if we were walking too fast.

Laura said I didn’t come too late. I said I missed all of the beginning stuff but I got to her the sermon. She confirmed that I didn’t miss any of the preaching. She asked what I thought about the sermon and we talked briefly about it. She then asked about wedding plans. She had remembered quite a bit of detail from our last conversation. I asked her if she had to go through security when she went on her cruise to the Caribbean, but it turns out it left from New York. We talked a bit about airport security. [I got the sense that my current jet-setting lifestyle, however economically done, is largely out of her orbit.]

We stopped at 130th and Convent, where a bunch of plants grew downslope in a triangle made by the corner of 130th and Convent and a parking lot. Laura showed me a sign that read, “Mary’s Garden of Love.” Apparently, somebody who used to live in her building for many years grew flowers in that steep hillside. After she passed, nobody kept it up. Laura said that a car had recently gone through the fence, a black iron fence. She said something like, “They had to put the fence up again.” I asked if the city had put the fence and she said yes. She said that she always stops by whenever she walks by; it’s nice to look at flowers, but nobody is keeping it up. I said something about how for the gardens we saw on the tour on Saturday, several are being maintained by people’s sons and daughters. She pointed to the nearby building, which was white, and said it was a home for seniors. She said she guessed that nobody wanted to keep it up, or they were getting on (in age), or playing Bingo. We laughed at that.

We turned right on 130th toward Amsterdam, and Eldridge was closing a gate to a chain link fence behind a blue minivan. She asked me if I was going to work and told me they'd give me a ride. I told her I was going home first to pick up my lunch. Laura opened the side door for me and closed it. Eldridge asked which way he should go, and Laura pointed him towards Convent. I pointed him towards Amsterdam. He asked, Morningside, right? I told him Morningside Drive, not Avenue, on the top side of the park. He turned left on Amsterdam. We chatted a bit more, and they dropped me off in front of my building. Laura asked if I was going to work, and I told her it was only one block away. We said goodbye and she said she'd call me before I left. Tomorrow, I told her.