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TELLING THE STORY: A BRIEF SURVEY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PREACHING

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Introduction

Scholars of African American[1] religion have long noted the central position of the pastor in the life of the black church.[2] From its inception as "The Invisible Institution"[3] to the present, the black church has succeeded in meeting the needs of its beleaguered constituents, in large part because of the vision and prowess of its leadership.[4] Little wonder James H. Harris contends that the black preacher "is the most visible, listened-to spokesman in the black community,"[5] and this in spite of the fact that he may not always be formally educated. Yet, if the black pastor has occupied a central position in the black church, it was the preacher's ability to expound the word of God that generally made for his or her success. It has long been understood in the African American community that what qualified and

[1]In this article, I use the terms "African American" and "black" interchangeably, if not synonymously. I am quite aware that in the United States there are people of African descent who do not resonate with the term "African American," this being especially the case among those who were not born in the United States. I am also aware that the terms by which people of African descent in the United States have been called have changed over the years, and include "Negro," "colored," and "Afro-American."

[2]For a trenchant treatment of the subject, see Charles V. Hamilton, *The Black Preacher in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972); H. Beecher Hicks Jr., *Images of the Black Preacher* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1977); and Emerson Boddie, *God's "Bad Boys"* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1972).

[3]Among the excellent works on the black church as the "Invisible Institution," see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); and Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Built* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 159-284.

[4]According to James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Penguin, 1927), 2, the black slave preacher was a "vital factor" in the black community, providing a "sense of unity and solidarity" to the disparate groups of Africans who landed as slaves in the American colonies. Calling the black preacher "the first shepherd of this bewildered flock," Johnson claims that "it was the old-time preacher who for generations was the main spring of hope and inspiration for the Negro in America." Ibid.

[5]James H. Harris, *Preaching Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3.

distinguished an individual to lead a black congregation was his or her ability to "tell the story."[6] In fact, "'telling the story' is the essence of black preaching."[7]

In this article, I survey African American preaching, beginning with an examination of the religious heritage of African Americans. I follow with a historical exploration of black preaching dealing with periods extending from slavery to the end of the twentieth century. In each era I examine the content and contours of black preaching, uncovering the aims and goals of the genre of that time, followed by a profile of some of the outstanding black preachers in each time period. I then examine the theology and stylistic elements of historic black preaching, concluding with a brief exploration of contemporary trends in black preaching.

A study of black preaching is crucial because it provides clues to broader social, economic, and political themes. This is not because the African American sermon has ever been a social and political commentary bereft of biblical and theological underpinnings, but rather, because black preachers seldom, if ever, ignored the social context in which their sermons were crafted. Stubbornly refusing to offer "pie-in-the-sky," "sweet-by-and-bye" discourses that did not reflect a meaningful response to present, troubling realities, black preachers have always sought to ground their sermons in the immediate context. Further, given the history of people of African descent in America, the objectives of African American preaching are far from surprising. Indeed, it is difficult, if not impossible, to drive a wedge between African American preaching and the social context. Undoubtedly, African American preaching cannot be fully understood outside the context of African American history.

The African Religious Heritage

Unlike most other ethnic groups, Africans who landed in North America during the seventeenth century did not come voluntarily. They did not come full of optimism and in search of a better life. Nor did successive waves of Africans arrive in response to tales from families already in America that this was a glorious land of opportunity. Moreover, for the most part, Africans seldom arrived as close-knit family units bent on improving their lot in life. The first wave of Africans were people who had been plucked from their homeland and packed into slave ships for a transatlantic trip known as the "Middle Passage." Those who survived the brutal voyage landed on strange, alien soil to face hostile conditions. They came as slaves. It was not until the dawn of the twentieth century that people of African descent

[6]James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 57, 58, 60.

[7]James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 24.

migrated voluntarily in significant numbers to the United States, and then those who came did so overwhelmingly from the West Indies, not Africa.[8]

Scholars of African American religion are divided on whether or not African religious beliefs survived the "Middle Passage" and the effects of slavery. One school of thought, championed by E. Franklin Frazier, asserts that slavery in the United States erased all the religious myths that the slaves brought with them.[9] Conversely, others, among them Melville Herskovits, argue that residual elements and "Africanisms" are still evident in African American culture, especially in its religious practices.[10] Striking a balance between these two extremes are scholars like Albert J. Raboteau, who, though admitting that the gods of Africa all but died in America, posit that early African American religion was a syncretism of African and European religions. This school of thought contends that the brand of African American Christianity that remains to this day is a reworked Christianity crafted to meet the unique social context of the African American.[11]

One Africanism that survived in the New World was the oral tradition. Indeed, the African American preaching tradition had its beginning in the oral tradition, that is, preaching from memory and without notes. Early African American preachers followed in the footsteps of African griots and storytellers, for whom storytelling was the "equivalent of a Western fine art."[12] Cornel West refers to the oral tradition as kinetic, explaining it as "the fluid protean power of the word in speech and song" that includes "rich Africanisms such as antiphonality (call and response), polyrhythms, syncopation, and repetition."[13]

[8]Ibid., 85, 86.

[9]E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken, 1964), 6.

[10]Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1941), 207-60.

[11]Raboteau, 58, 59, 86. Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 43, states that the black appropriation of Christianity was "an attempt to make sense out of a meaningless and senseless predicament."

[12]Olin P. Moyd, *The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1995), 43. Moyd bemoans the tendency of Western society to view illiterature with illiteracy, and illiteracy with inferiority. He points out that African griots were people of "superior intelligence," arguing that "this oral tradition is no indication of mediocrity." Ibid., 44. He is quick to assert that in stressing that the oral tradition is in no way inferior to others, he is not saying that preachers should resort to ad-hoc, knee-jerk, preaching. Yet, neither is Moyd promoting manuscript preaching. He believes that an internalization of the truths of the story is what makes for effectiveness in the pulpit.

[13]West, 43.

Pre-Civil War Black Preaching

During slavery, African American preaching was primarily concerned with dispensing hope to a people caught in the clutches of disenfranchisement and powerlessness. Blacks daily struggled to find meaning and purpose in life. Separation from homeland and family made for a tenuous, precarious social existence, and the future did not bode well for the steady stream of slaves that poured into the American colonies. In several narratives of the Old Testament, especially the Exodus event, the slave preacher found hope embedded. Bringing home-spun exegetical skills to bear on these passages, slave preachers found much with which they could resonate. More particularly, they saw parallels between the experience of Israel in Egypt and their situation in North America, and they early dismissed the notion that the God of the Exodus would not act in a similar way to ameliorate their situation.

Dismissing some early portraits of the slave preacher as a "semi-comic figure" lacking in intelligence, James Weldon Johnson ascribes more than average intelligence to the slave preacher, even saying that not infrequently the slave preacher was a "man of positive genius" who succeeded in committing to memory the Bible stories he had heard read on the plantation. Often, slave preachers had to augment the missing elements of the stories they heard. Using imaginations that were "bold and unfettered," these preachers were adroit at painting passionately with words, often lifting their hearers off their feet as a result of their picturesque oratory. Not surprisingly, slave preachers were among the first in their social group to develop competency in reading the Holy Scriptures being their main, if not, only text.[14]

Slaves expected slave preachers to know the Bible. To be sure, the slave preacher's knowledge of the Bible did not have to be complete, perfect, or accurate. Any knowledge of the Scriptures, considered by people of the time to be the domain of whites, increased the credibility of the slave preacher. Yet knowledge of the Bible was not enough; the slave preacher had to be able to 'tell the story,' one reason being that "preaching rather than instruction" was what was needed to meet the needs of the slaves. Slave preachers also had to be able to sing and the combination of preaching and singing was known as "moaning."[15]

[14]J. W. Johnson, 4-5. Although they were by no means academic intellectuals, slave preachers were preferred over white preachers by slaves. Cf. Lawrence Devine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 44. See also Genovese, 261-62.

[15]Frazier, 17-18.

Early black preaching was primarily narrative.[16] Lacking the tools necessary for eye-opening exegesis, slave preachers used Bible texts mainly as points of departure, their sermons often having little to do with their main texts. Still no text was off limits; if it was in the Bible, it could be referenced, if not preached. And the slave preacher was not averse to declaring his freedom and latitude in explaining the imponderables of Scripture. Indeed, the preacher's declaration that he was going to do just that heightened interest in the sermon, and authenticated the call of the preacher.[17]

Another reason slaves expected black preachers to know the Bible was so that the preachers could correct the many falsehoods and innuendos associated with Scripture that white preachers had foisted upon the slaves. Plantation owners had often retained white preachers who asserted that there was warrant and backing for slavery in Scripture, and that blacks were inherently inferior to whites. Some white preachers even went so far as to purport that God was not at all troubled by the diabolical institution. Correcting the biblical misrepresentations of white preachers was an expectation slaves and freed blacks had of African American preachers, whom, they believed, were uniquely qualified for the task on account of their special 'call' and dynamic preaching style.[18]

Slave preachers could divulge a doctrine of egalitarianism, but had to be careful their white masters were out of earshot. Albert J. Raboteau relates anecdotes of a Sarah Ford whose Uncle Lew preached once that God "make everyone to come to unity and on de level, both white and black." Uncle Lew found himself back in the field with the rest of the slaves the next morning all because his master had been in the audience. Another slave preacher, caught up in prayer at the end of his sermon, talked about blacks being "free from work, free from the white folks, free from everything." When he was threatened with losing his ability to preach, the preacher ceased from talking about freedom.[19]

Noteworthy among pioneer black preachers were George Liele, Black Harry, Nat Turner and John Jasper. The content and styles of their preaching reflect the rich variety of African American preaching. Liele was born in Virginia around 1750 but moved to Georgia prior to the Revolutionary War. He started preaching shortly

[16]According to Raboteau, 236-37, the slave sermon was "built on a formulaic structure based on phrases, verses, and whole passages the preacher knew by heart . . . characterized by repetition, parallelisms, dramatic use of voice and gesture, and a whole range of oratorical devices." The sermon "began with normal conversational prose, built to a rhythmic cadence . . . and climaxed in a tonal chant accompanied by shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior. . . . The dynamic pattern of call and response between preacher and people was vital to the progression of the sermon, and unless the spirit roused the congregation to move and shout, the sermon was essentially unsuccessful." Ibid., 237.

[17]J. W. Johnson, 4, 5.

[18]Valentine Lassiter, *Martin Luther King in the African American Preaching Tradition* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2001), 24-25.

[19]Raboteau, 23.

after joining the Baptist church, commanding the respect of both black and white congregations, and continued to do so after migrating to Jamaica. Yet Liele's message did not rouse the slaves. Indeed, he refused to preach to slaves who had not received permission from their masters to attend his services, and to them he preached "the mere message of Christ" instead of "directing attention to their wrongs."[20]

Black Harry was a Methodist who learned to preach from his master. Though illiterate, Harry was considered "the greatest orator in America" during the late eighteenth century, and it was said that announcing that Black Harry would preach somewhere would guarantee a standing-room-only crowd.[21]

Nat Turner was born in 1800 and, from the earliest, was repulsed by slavery, viewing it as diabolical. A self-taught preacher, Turner claimed he had received visions from God, including one that motivated him to plan his infamous 1831 revolt that left approximately sixty whites dead. Today, Turner is memorialized by blacks as slavery's most revolutionary preacher, and vilified by others as a lunatic who fancied himself a modern-day messiah who used violence to pursue freedom. Either way, Turner, without doubt, ranks high among notorious slave preachers.[22]

Born into slavery in 1812 in Richmond, Virginia, John Jasper was fifty when he gained his freedom. By then, he had been preaching for twenty-five years, and had already earned notoriety as the consummate slave preacher. Blacks as well as whites flocked to listen to Jasper, whose uncommon skills as a homiletician were self-taught and self-styled. Jasper was "imaginative, innovative; crudely eloquent, and apparently self-confident."[23] Although the sermon for which he is best known, "The Sun Do Move," is rife with scientific inaccuracies, it is still viewed as a classic, due in large part to Jasper's ability to use his imagination as a hermeneutical device.[24]

[20]Carter Godwin Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921), 47.

[21]Ibid, 57.

[22]Full treatment of Nat Turner may be found in Herbert Apthekar, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities, 1966); F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story* (Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson, 1970); and Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 62-73.

[23]Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 142.

[24]Ibid. LaRue says that although Jasper's sermon has an interesting title, his real purpose in the sermon was "to demonstrate the truthfulness and reliability of the power of God." Moreover, "this is not a sermon delivered solely to demonstrate the superiority of religion over science. Rather, it is a sermon about the power of God to act versus the power of humankind to perceive and to believe." Ibid.

For a full account of Jasper, see William E. Hatcher, *John Jasper: The Unmatched*

Valentine Lassiter asserts that early African American preaching, whether emotional, soul-searching or spirited, was a "major aspect of theology, spirituality, and social expression."[25] Further, long before the term black theology came into vogue, the slave preacher was dispensing it in a "non-academy style."[26]

In analyzing early African American preaching, David T. Shannon posits that it contributed to the development of an African American hermeneutic in terms of contextuality, with preachers using the biblical text synchonically and diachonically; correlation, with preachers harmoniously correlating "the ancient biblical stories and changing historical situations"; confrontation, with preachers using double entendre and humor as methods of confrontation; and consolation, with preachers presenting "the basic biblical theme of divine presence in the midst of oppression and suffering as a basis of hope."[27]

Post-Civil War African American Preaching

The Emancipation Proclamation did not significantly change the meaningless and senseless predicament of millions of blacks. Discrimination and de facto segregation still confronted them, conspiring to make their life difficult. Nevertheless, with Reconstruction focusing on black uplift in theory if not in practice, black preaching after the Civil War emphasized teaching the Bible with emphasis on Christian behavior and morals. A theology of personal responsibility was highlighted, with black preachers encouraging their listeners to improve their quality of life. During this time organized religious life developed, and in the early twentieth century, with the mass migration of blacks from the South to the North, which saw a rise in urbanization, black preaching became more urbane and sophisticated.[28] The result of black preaching during this era was that concepts of evangelism and nurture began to emerge, schools and institutions were developed, people became more conscious of behavioral and societal norms, and there was spiritual growth in the African American community.

In the three decades leading up to the Civil War, African American preachers had been challenged to "bring the people to a higher standard of thought."[29] But with no black schools of higher learning, and having been denied access to existing

Negro Philosopher and Preacher (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1908); and Richard Ellsworth Day, *Rhapsody in Black: The Life Story of John Jasper* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1953).

[25]Lassiter, 25-26.

[26]Ibid.

[27]David T. Shannon, "An Ante-bellum Sermon: A Resource for an African American Hermeneutic," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress), 119-23.

[28]Felton O. Best, ed., *Black Religious Leadership from the Slave Community to the Million Man March: Flames of Fire* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 2001), 6-7.

[29]Woodson, 169.

institutions, acquiring an advanced education posed severe challenges for black preachers. Exacerbating matters was the fact that in the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion, black preaching had been banned in many southern jurisdictions.

Illustrative, if not representative, of late-nineteenth century black preaching was Daniel Payne, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) bishop who firmly believed in an educated clergy. Payne focused on teaching more than preaching, all in the name of hoisting the level of scholarship in the black pulpit. To be sure, not all AME preachers were ecstatic about the bishop's emphasis, and some introduced their sermons by stating that they had not "rubbed their heads against the college walls," a disclaimer that was generally greeted with a resounding "Amen!" from the congregation. Yet Payne pursued his goal of educating the AME ministry, and by the end of the nineteenth century his denomination had an impressive number of degreed clergy. According to Cleophus LaRue, Payne was "from the school of thought that believed moral virtue was foremost in the Christian life." His sermons were filled with "admonitions to thrift, education, and discipline," and his preaching did not abound in "agitation or stridency directed towards whites or those in powerful government positions."[30]

Henry Highland Garnett and Alexander Crummell are two other erudite late nineteenth century African American preachers worth mentioning. Garnett was a presbyterian who pastored in Washington, DC, New York City, and Jamaica, West Indies. He was an exceptional orator. Crummell, denied admission to General Theological Seminary of the Protestant Episcopal Church of New York, ultimately earned a degree from Cambridge University in England in 1853.[31] Payne, Garnett, and Crummell dispel the charge that nineteenth century African American preachers were illiterate charlatans who repudiated the notion of education and preyed on their congregants.

Twentieth Century Black Preaching

In the twentieth century, African American preachers continued to speak to the social situation of their communities.[32] As the century began, millions of blacks

[30]LaRue, 66.

[31]Ibid., 36-44.

[32]This is illustrated in the records of preaching during that era. Consult the following volumes of twentieth century black sermons: Jini Kilgore Ross, ed., *What Makes You So Strong? Sermons of Joy and Strength from Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1993); William D. Watley and Suzan D. Johnson Cook, *Preaching in Two Voices* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1992); William D. Watley, *From Mess to Miracle* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1989); William D. Watley, *Sermons on Special Days: Preaching Through the Year in the Black Church* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1987); J. C. Wade Sr., J. C. Wade Jr., and M. V. Wade Sr., *These Three: A Collection of Sermons* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1985); Samuel D. Proctor and William D. Watley, *Sermons from the*

streamed into the industrial cities of the North in search of work, creating conditions that threatened an already volatile racial climate. By mid-century, several cities erupted in race riots, and the Civil Rights Movement was born. As cities burned, African American preachers preached a doctrine of accommodation and resistance.[33] Three notables among twentieth century black preachers were Howard Thurman, Gardner Taylor and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The author of twenty-two books, Thurman served as dean and professor of theology at Howard University, the flagship black educational institution in the United States. He eschewed the life of political activism for that of mysticism, opting to pursue liberation from racism and all forms of oppression by taking the road less traveled–the inward journey.[34] Gardner Taylor was pastor for fifty years at the historic, venerable Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York, taking his congregation from a fledgling group to a powerful bastion of several thousands. His poignant, penetrating preaching is legendary. Known for his incredible intellect and ability to preach an entire sermon on one verse of Scripture, Taylor is considered the dean of black preachers. His delivery is the classic "start slow, rise high, strike fire, sit down in a storm"[35] style.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a twentieth century social and religious American icon whose influence on race and culture is fundamentally significant, if not legendary. Born into a middle class family, King attended prestigious schools, finally earning a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Boston University. Yet King's theology was not a product of his schooling but the result of his experiences in the black church. Refusing to shun or downplay his heritage, King stated that as the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers, the church was his life and that he had given his life to the church.[36] From his grandparents and parents, as well as from the black church, King derived courage that he linked with the theme of hope in Scripture to frame his message of non-violence, love and inclusion. King's

Black Pulpit (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1984); Milton E. Owens Jr., ed., *Outstanding Black Sermons,* vol. 3 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1982); Walter B. Hoard, ed., *Outstanding Black Sermons,* vol. 2 (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1979); J. Alfred Smith Sr. ed., *Outstanding Black Sermons* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1976); William M. Philpot, ed., *Best Black Sermons* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1972);

[33]Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

[34]Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).

[35]LaRue, 11. For a study of the content of Taylor's sermons and his method of sermon preparation and delivery, see Gardner Taylor, *How Shall They Preach* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1977).

[36]Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1963), 87.

message of hope sustained him and his beleaguered constituency through intense hardship and disappointment.[37]

According to LaRue, twentieth century African American preaching was characterized by three broad dynamics: (1) an attempt to situate God in the text, (2) the linking of the biblical text to the real-life experiences of the listening community, and (3) an analysis of the end to which God's power is used.[38] He underscores that in twentieth century black preaching, God's power was used to "liberate, deliver, provide, protect, empower, or transform."[39]

The Theology of Black Preaching

The theology of African American preaching emerges from the firm conviction that the Bible is the word of God. It was not always so. When they were first introduced to the Bible, the reaction of the slaves was "an admixture of rejection, suspicion, and awe."[40] They were suspicious of "Book Religion" and were not oblivious to the fact that their masters were "Bible Christians."[41] But in time they came to accept the Bible as the unfailing word of God. It functioned as a "world into which African Americans could retreat, a 'world' they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-affirmation."[42] Frazier asserts that the Bible was the "means by which the slaves acquired a new theology . . . (that) provided the Negro with the rich imagery which has characterized the sermons of Negro preachers and the sacred folk-songs of the Negro."[43]

The concretizing element in the theology of black preaching is the belief that preaching is the primary medium for conveying God's revelation to God's people. Neither abstract nor esoteric, the theology of black preaching holds that "preaching

[37]For a collection of King's sermons on the theme of love, see Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963). For a compelling analysis of King as a preacher, see Mervyn A. Warren, *King Came Preaching: The Pulpit Power of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

[38]LaRue, 69-71.

[39]Ibid., 71.

[40]Vincent Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation,* ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 84-97, deftly outlines a metamorphosis of sorts in the reaction of blacks to the reading of the Bible. According to him, on their first reading blacks responded with rejection, suspicion and awe of "Book Religion." Their second reading brought about transformation while the third resulted in the establishment of the Bible as the Sacred Canon. Esoteric and elitist hermeneutical principles came with the fourth reading, and fundamentalism with the fifth.

[41]Ibid., 85.

[42]Ibid., 83.

[43]Frazier, 11-12.

is vehicle and theology is content."[44] The mission of the preacher is to bear the good news of redemption and be an ambassador for God. Fundamental to this is the preacher's call and every African American preacher has had to supply confirmation of his or her call before he or she gained credibility. Olin P. Moyd aptly sums up the theology of African American preaching this way: "The preacher is a *special* person with a *special* calling, with a *special* message of hope to a *special* people from the underside of life in America."[45] The preacher may be male or female.[46]

For African Americans, preaching is God-inspired; that is, God inspires the message by way of Scripture, nature, and life experiences. The preacher delivers the message to a congregation that helps in creating and sustaining the sermonic encounter. Stated simply, the sermon is a special encounter with God in time, with the preacher speaking in, for, and through the congregation. The sermon is not simply God's message, but also the preacher's reflection on God's message, and the

[44]Moyd, 11.

[45]Ibid., 58 (Emphasis mine).

[46]Historically, a nettlesome issue in the black church was whether or not women should preach. Black women were shut out from the regular pulpit for most of the nineteenth century, utilizing their preaching gifts as independent evangelists during the time. Over twenty women are known to have preached in the nineteenth century, with the number increasing in the twentieth century. A woman known only as Elizabeth is thought to be the first black woman to preach. She was a Methodist who had been born into slavery and who gained her freedom in 1796. She started preaching in 1808 and continued for half a century.

Jarena Lee is considered as the second black female preacher. Born free in 1783 in New Jersey, Lee joined the AME church in Philadelphia and after some difficulty had a successful preaching career from 1818-1849. Lee published her autobiography in 1836.

Other black women preachers include Zilpha Elau, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Amanda Berry Smith, and Sojourner Truth, who is considered the standout among the group. Born Isabella Baunfree, Truth is known for her work in the temperance and woman's suffrage movements, and her "I Am Woman" speech ranks as a classic among great American speeches. These women overcame daunting challenges to proclaim God's word.

After wrestling with the question of whether or not women should preach, Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed., *Women: To Preach or not to Preach: 21 Outstanding Black Preachers Say Yes* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1991), 17, concludes that they should, basing her response on what she calls a "theology of gifts." E. P. Mitchell states that the "gifts needed to restore the Bible to its rightful place are abundantly available, both among women and among men bestirred to preach with power by a new and fruitful mix of cultures and genders." Ibid.

For volumes of excellent sermons by black women see: Ella Pearson Mitchell, ed., *Those Preachin' Women: Sermons by Black Women Preachers* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1985); idem, *Those Preaching Women: More Sermons by Black Women Preachers* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1988). Cf. Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988); Marcia Y. Riggs, ed. *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Woman, An Anthology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

congregation's message as well. A sermon is the witness the preacher demonstrates to the world that God has been with him or her. It is an experience of truth, not just a notion of truth.

Like Scripture, the context of preaching functions as both source and norm for the African American preaching experience. Preaching is a re-enactment of the Gospel story. It is not simply retelling the old, old story, but reliving and reanimating it. Preaching is propelled by an other worldly hope (the second coming of Jesus Christ), but grounded in a this-worldly reality.

Among other theological realities, the doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to black preaching. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

God

From slavery to the present, the hermeneutics of black preaching has reflected four major themes or elements: (1) God is in full control of the cosmos, in spite of the negative realities that plague our world; (2) there is a moral ecology at work in the world, so that right will always triumph over wrong; (3) God sustains the world and is able to do so because He is omnipotent; and (4) God is a God of infinite love and mercy.[47] Black preachers have always viewed God as a God of justice who is wholly concerned with the plight of His creation and who is committed to their ultimate liberation. God is not conceived of in metaphysical terms, being far removed from people's condition; rather, He is a God who, though "high and lifted up," stoops low to be their Friend, Helper, and Comforter. Clothed in omnipotence and omniscience, the God of the black sermon has also been mysterious in a compelling and awe-inspiring way. God's ways are beyond comprehension. They are "so high, can't go over (them); so deep, can't go under (them); so wide, can't go around (them)."[48]

The God of the African American sermon has been a creator God, and nowhere is this view more powerfully captured and conveyed than in a sermon by

[47]Lassiter, 8-9. See also Warren H. Stewart Sr., *Interpreting God's Word in Black Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1984).

According to Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1997), 3, the black preacher has historically placed a premium on experiential explanations of the realities of evil and pain, not just cognitive ones that might satisfy rational minds but leave the heart still broken and yearning. He says that black preachers have always known that the "word from the Lord" for which the black congregants yearned, was one that underscored the power and presence of God with them in their struggles, and also emphasized that God's promises and power would ultimately bring about their liberation.

[48]William H. Pipes, *Say Amen, Brother! Old Time Negro Preaching: A Study in American Frustration* (New York: William-Frederick, 1951), 17. In his sermon, "De Sun Do Move," John Jasper says "My Lord is great! He rules in de heavens, in de earth and down under de ground." See John Jasper, "De Sun Do Move," in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, ed. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead , 1966), 228.

Johnson entitled "The Creation." Following is the poetic conclusion of this masterpiece.

> Up from the bed of the river
> God scooped the clay;
> And by the bank of the river
> He kneeled him down.
> And there the great God Almighty
> Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
> Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
> Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
> This great God,
> Like a mammy bending over her baby,
> Kneeled down in the dust
> Toiling over a lump of clay
> Till he shaped it in his own image
> Then into it he blew the breath of life,
> And man became a living soul.
> Amen. Amen.[49]

Jesus

Jesus has always been central in the black preaching tradition, and historically, black preachers have seldom, if ever, had troubling issues with Christology. Indeed, their view of Jesus has been so high that one detects little cleavage between their views of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ fully reveals God the Father, and demonstrated His omnipotence consummately in His triumph over death and the grave. Yet it is in Jesus' identification with the oppressed, and in His stance of solidarity with them, that Jesus shows Himself to be truly a "Man of Sorrows." His incarnational commitment to the poor is evidenced in His suffering, death, and resurrection, and holds out hope for the personal and corporate liberation and transformation of humankind.[50]

[49]J. W. Johnson, 20. A full and trenchant treatment of God in black preaching may be found in Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Athenaeum, 1938).

[50]William B. McClain, *The Soul of Black Worship* (Madison, NJ: Multiethnic Center, Drew University, 1980), 32. Liberation has been, without question, an abiding theme in African American preaching. At times explicit, at other times implicit, liberation has been lifted up by not a few black preachers. Harris, 38, says that Jesus "embodies the perfect paradigm for preaching liberation."

The Holy Spirit

No black preacher will discount the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who calls the preacher,[51] and it is the Holy Spirit who empowers the preacher, making any attempt to preach without the Holy Spirit's aid a foolhardy and dangerous act.[52] Black preachers know that a sermon without the anointing of the Holy Spirit is bound to fall short of changing lives, eloquent though it may be. It is the Holy Spirit who energizes preaching, giving the sermon compelling content and contours, and both congregant and preacher know when the anointing has not taken place. Preachers are known to elicit the Spirit's power with call and cries. "I can feel the Spirit moving/coming on" may be uttered by the preacher, often in response to a plea of "Help him, Holy Spirit!" from an anguished listener.[53]

The Delivery of the Black Sermon

Robert M. Franklin claims that historically, black sermons have been "poetic masterpieces that are biblically rooted, politically prophetic, intellectually stimulating, emotionally evocative, rhetorically polished, pastorally sensitive, and reverently and joyfully delivered."[54] Even today, *how* the black sermon is delivered is as important as *what* is delivered, making style a critical issue in black preaching.

Style is the medium that transmits the assurance of grace that is central to African American preaching. It is "the way in which manner, method, word, tone, and feeling are appropriated"[55] and conveyed. Elements of style in African American preaching include "rhetoric, repetition, rhythm, rest, spontaneity, tone, chant, cadence, melody, drama, and epic,"[56] all of which are impacted by the audience context. In authentic black preaching, style is not a contrivance utilized for the sake of showmanship. Almost always, personal style is genuine and dynamic, and it is not style that energizes the African American sermon but the word of God itself. To be certain, black preaching would not be black preaching without style.[57]

In black preaching, style and substance come together "in an ideal marriage, thus creating a union of all past and present experiences."[58] When a wedge is driven

[51]Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 23.

[52]Pipes, 37.

[53]For an impartial and enlightening look at the role of the Holy Spirit in preaching, see James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989).

[54]Robert M. Franklin, *Another Day's Journey: Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 68.

[55]Moyd, 88.

[56]Ibid., 89.

[57]Ibid., 111.

[58]Harris, 62.

between these two, black preaching loses its punch and people tend to become bored and call the preacher "a lecturer or intellectual."[59] Yet black preaching is "more than a form of rhetorical style; it is a function of content. . . . It is possible to say not only that Black preaching is substance as well as style, but that its substance determines its style."[60]

One element of style in black preaching is the call and response dynamic. Some observers see deep theological and spiritual elements that represent yearnings of the human heart and reflect motions of the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of God's people. Common verbal responses of the black congregation indicate a hierarchy of sorts: "Help 'em, Lord!" is on the lowest rung; the listener is searching for a connection with, and is praying for, the preacher. The rhetorical "Well?"is on the second and suggests that the preacher is hinting at something, whatever that may be. The third level is the ecstatic, "That's all right!" indicating that the sermon is becoming persuasive. That some truth is being affirmed is conveyed by the "Amen!" on the fourth rung. The expressive "Glory! Hallelujah!" is at the top and represents the highest form of praise.[61]

Black preachers have always known that there is much useful theology in hymns and songs. Consequently, they have exploited music to the fullest, utilizing it to drive home truths otherwise too difficult to articulate, as well as to engender emotion in their hearers. Recalling a sermon preached at the funeral of a convicted thief around 1866, Ned Walker says that the preacher had the congregation sing the well-known hymn "There is a fountain filled with blood." When the congregants got to the second verse with the words, "The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day," they exploded in emotion.[62]

To underscore the importance of emotion in black preaching is not to denigrate substantive content. The best of black preaching has always linked emotion and content, and a sermon that seeks to appeal only to the emotions, without feeding the intellect, has always been frowned upon in the black church. Yet black preachers are as quick today to bifurcate emotion and emotionalism as in

[59]Ibid., 64. For an insightful study of personal style in black preaching, see Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 88-99.

[60]Calvin B. Rock, "Black SDA Preaching: Balanced and Binding or Betwixt and Between," *Ministry*, September 2003, 5.

[61]Evans E. Crawford and Thomas H. Troefer, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 13-24. They refer to this broadly as "Homiletical Musicality." Three excellent studies on musicality in black preaching are Gerald Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It You Know* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Michael Spenser, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987); and William C. Turner Jr., "The Musicality of Black Preaching: A Phenomenology," *Journal of Black Sacred Music,* 2, no.1 (1988): 21-34.

[62]Quoted in H. Mitchell, 34-35.

years past, dismissing emotionalism as cheap and unworthy of solicitation from the pulpit.

Black preachers early learned to eschew the "three points and a poem" method so characteristic of deductive/rationalistic preaching. Central to this style is the notion of a proposition rising out of the text, and the task of the preacher is to deductively unpack the proposition. Along the way, the preacher seeks to illustrate, demonstrate, and elucidate the truth of the pericope, with a view to leading hearers to accept it. The very nature of this Eurocentric approach makes for emotion to be discounted. It is thought that emotion tampers with the integrity of the thinking process. But African American preachers have known intuitively that a sermon that does not contemplate the emotions is destined to bore.

According to Frank A. Thomas, the emotional process is facilitated by five factors: (1) use of dialogical language, which causes listeners to invest in the sermon; (2) appeal to core beliefs; (3) concern for emotive movement; (4) unity of form and substance, which accepts that both are inextricably and reciprocally linked; and (5) creative use of reversals, key to creativity in the sermon.[63]

Closely linked to emotion in black preaching is celebration. Moyd points out that the traditions of Israel were characterized by celebration, and that God authors, ordains, expects, and honors celebration. He adds that "authentic African American celebration embodies spiritual transcendence and spiritual and social empowerment."[64] It is "not merely sound without substance and shouts that are shallow" but the "joyful and ecstatic overflow of the hearts of those who proclaim and those who hear and internalize the redemptive melodies in the proclamation." Moreover, if there is celebration in the sermon, it is because there is "substance in the proclamation that elicits the celebration, and that substance is the keryma."[65]

Celebration actually fosters cerebration, so that the sermon that fails to trigger celebration is counter productive.[66] In fact, celebration and cogitation are "two sides of the same coin, that is, mutually related and interdependent."[67] Celebration is at its best when it saturates the entire sermon, not something that comes as an appendage at the end of the sermon. To be sure, toward the conclusion of the sermon celebration serves as the "joyful and ecstatic reinforcement of the truth already taught and delivered in the main body of the sermon."[68] Its goal then is to cement and drive home "meaning in core belief."[69]

[63]Thomas, 7-18.

[64]Moyd, 112.

[65]Ibid., 99-105, passim.

[66]H. Mitchell, 121. For his instructive study of celebration in black preaching, see Henry Mitchell, *Celebration and Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990).

[67]Harris, 41.

[68]Thomas, 61.

[69]Ibid.

Contemporary Trends in African American Preaching

Historic African American preaching, especially of the folk type, is currently at an intersection, and many blacks, particularly the young and urban, are eschewing it in favor of a lecture-style type of preaching that places a premium on biblical truth and personal sanctification.[70] While quickly affirming the primacy and value of Bible study and teaching, Franklin is worried that along the way this emphasis may cause the loss of two critical features of historic African American folk preaching, namely, its creative use of poetry and its unapologetic focus on issues of justice. He states that both Christianity and the English language will lose if black preaching surrenders poetry and art to become "more cognitive and discursive" since preaching "is not philosophical argumentation but an invitation to take an imaginative journey, to visit ancient places, and to overhear the conversations of Moses, Esther, and Jesus."[71] In this regard, Franklin has an ally in Harris, who laments:

> Unfortunately, black preaching today is more evangelical than evangelistic, more soothing than troubling. It is more "spiritual and imaginative" than it is indicting of the framers of injustice and unrighteousness. Consequently, it needs to become more bold, prophetic, and searing, both in substance and form, in order to expedite the quest for freedom and social change. Preaching liberation is an ethical responsibility of both black and whites. . . . And for preachers to preach anything less is to be in complicity with sin and evil.[72]

Citing and expanding on current and looming twenty-first century challenges to black preaching, which include technological advancements, urbanization, globalization, secularism, and neofundamentalism, Moyd admonishes twenty-first century African American preachers to preach the whole counsel of God from a "stance of obedience to the call of God." He asks preachers to base their preaching on a practical theology that appeals not only to the head but to the feet as well. As such, they must engage in "situational preaching with eternal consequences." Preaching of this nature will be "true to the text, applicable to life situations, and always relevant." Moyd wants contemporary African American preachers to keep their sermons logical, coherent, and cohesive, even as they remain so free that "spontaneity under the Holy Spirit" is not diminished or eradicated.[73]

[70]Franklin, 69. For an enlightening analysis and clues as to how the burgeoning black middle class population perceives preaching, see Marvin A. McMickle, *Preaching to the Black Middle Class* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2000).

[71]Franklin, 71.

[72]Harris, 52-53.

[73]Moyd, 120-21 passim. For insightful studies of how several contemporary African American preachers craft their sermons, see Cleophus J. LaRue, ed., *Power in the Pulpit: How America's Most Effective Preachers Prepare Their Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster/

Summary and Conclusions

Black preaching was born in slavery, weaned in Jim Crow segregation, raised during the Civil Rights era, and came of age toward the last half of the twentieth century.[74] Black preaching has always been a response to the harsh realities blacks have encountered as they sought meaning and purpose living in an alien land. Since it is virtually impossible to drive a wedge between preaching and culture, black preaching has been markedly different from other types of preaching.[75] The differences are in both substance and style, and to acknowledge and cite them is not to say that one style is inherently better than the other. Black preaching is unambiguously and unapologetically biblical, and the hermeneutical methods utilized by black preachers have not been so much those "derived from an intellectual encounter with the text but from a gift of the Spirit."[76] Harris puts it eloquently:

> Black preaching is indeed exciting and jubilant, but it is also sad and reflective. It represents the ebb and flow of the Holy Spirit that correlates with the ups and downs of life. It reflects the reality of context and experience. Additionally, it is creative interplay between joy and sorrow, freedom and oppression, justice and injustice. It is art, style, form, and substance. It reflects the power of the church in the presence of the Holy Spirit.[77]

From slavery up to the present, African American preaching has been a veritable balm in Gilead, delivering hope and comfort to a people caught in the clutches of disenfranchisement and squeezed in the throes of powerlessness. At once exegetically sound and contextually relevant, African American preachers have been people of indefatigable courage and uncommon wisdom who were skilled in crafting sermons that powerfully impacted their hearers. Though their sermons reflect a complex and diverse breed, they give evidence of a unifying thread, that of calling blacks, indeed, all people, to respond creatively and courageously to the

John Knox, 2002); and E. K. Bailey and Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching in Black and White: What We Can Learn from Each Other* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

[74]In seeking to define black preaching, Thomas, 13, says that "the nature and purpose of African American preaching is to help people experience the assurance of grace (the good news) that is the gospel of Jesus the Christ." La Rue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 9-12, conceives of the genre as a "rich and varied tradition, covering broad configurations of motivations, theological points of view, art forms, structures, and styles of delivery. . . . The integrative thread that ties this type of proclamation together is a distinctly biblical hermeneutic, which is grounded in and related to the African American experience."

[75]H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 11-16.

[76]Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 138.

[77]Harris, 52.

evil in the world by living harmoniously with others. Since African American preaching has focused on the joys of living in heaven, challenging people to reach forward eschatologically to the heavenly experience, not a few detractors have labeled it 'other-worldly' and 'pie-in-the-sky' absurdities that have hindered the black quest for empowerment. But nothing could be farther from the truth. Black preaching has always been two-dimensional, pointing to a world to come, even as it deals with the challenges of contemporary existence.

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