

Haunting Echoes for Homiletics: Why the Spirituals Matter for Preaching¹

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Abstract: *Despite the historical connection between intoned black preaching and the creation and performance of the Negro spirituals, there is silence in homiletical literature about how the spirituals may serve as a resource for the theory and practice of preaching today. This article argues that the spirituals as musical sermons can be a helpful homiletical resource for thinking about preaching, death, and hope, particularly in highlighting the critical relationship between death and the proclamation of the gospel. In light of prosperity gospel preaching and other forms of proclamation that deny the critical role of death in preaching Christian hope, the spirituals offer a healthy and constructive way forward. Thus, remembering them can help re-member preaching.*

Introduction

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois refers to the melodic phrase of a Negro spiritual that begins each of his chapters as a “haunting echo”² through which the soul of black slaves spoke to the world. These echoes were sounds from the past that still resonated, spoke, in the present, even without words. These haunting echoes of the spirituals reverberate even today if one’s ears are carefully tuned to that soulful cultural sound of the past. However, this may be difficult in our present day due to the cacophony of preaching sounds shouting out through various media outlets. In particular, there is a specific theological school of thought that controls the homiletical airwaves, namely the so-called prosperity gospel. This brand of gospel preaching muffles many other constructive homiletical voices, including the preaching sounds of the spirituals, or what I call “spiritual preaching.”

This article is an initial attempt to explore the spirituals as a critical resource for the field of homiletics. Despite the historical relationship between intoned preaching and the creation and performance of the spirituals, there is basically silence about how the spirituals may help shape the contemporary theory and practice of preaching. Due to the limits of this article, I will focus on the integral relationship between death and the proclamation of the gospel and how the spirituals may assist in maintaining this relationship. First, I will demonstrate how prosperity preaching mishandles the reality of death by denying its important role in preaching Christian hope and in the Christian life generally. Second, I will briefly introduce the spirituals as a helpful homiletical resource in relation to thinking about preaching, death, and hope. Third, I will explore four reasons why remembering the spirituals is significant for the ministry of preaching.

This article will argue that the spirituals are sermons that function as a countermemory to popular forms of preaching, such as prosperity gospel preaching because they are a cultural pneumatological voice that takes death seriously. This *spiritual* homiletical tradition

¹ The ideas presented in this article are part of a larger project, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

² W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1969), 264.

demonstrates that “it is not possible to explore the spirit of life without facing squarely the reality of death.”³ Because of this, the spirituals provide homiletical wisdom for maintaining substantive preaching today. Thus, if we forget, ignore, or mute these haunting spiritual echoes, preachers may preach deathless, bloodless sermons, which means their sermons will also be lifeless and Spiritless. This article is an attempt to challenge homiletics to face death directly when it may be easier or more popular to do otherwise.

“Candy” Prosperity Preaching

Preaching has become a big business in various sectors of today’s Christendom. Glamour and glitz glare through various media forms as some preachers pimp the gospel for financial profits. When high-tech marketing or branding of a certain type of spiritual beauty dominates, then “an aesthetic of prosperity becomes an ethic of prosperity.”⁴ In this spiritual marketing strategy, the flaunting of one’s material wealth and physical health is a validation of the Christian faith. This so-called prosperity gospel, which has become an important part of North American Christianity, is a version of consumer culture. Thus, the more one possesses materially, the more it is obvious that one is blessed by God and is doing God’s will. Because of this lens of prosperity, one continually asks for more to get more. It is a love affair with more. Marvin McMickle observes in a critical way that, in prosperity gospel churches, “every passage of scripture [serves] as a passport to a bigger house, a larger car, or an expanding bank account.”⁵ He questions “the apparent celebration of the exorbitant and self-indulgent lifestyle that is avidly pursued by an increasing number of preachers in America, often as a result of milking and bilking their congregations through some prosperity gospel scheme.”⁶ McMickle is not alone in his criticism. Social ethicist Robert Franklin declares that the implicit muting of prophetic ministry by the proclamation of prosperity has helped to create a “crisis in the village.” He writes, “If most black preachers—and other preachers for that matter—are preoccupied with pursuing the ‘bling-bling’ life of conspicuous consumption, then poor people are in big trouble.”⁷ I would add that not just poor people are in trouble, but that anyone experiencing existential pain and suffering on any level is in big trouble.

This theme of prosperity threaded through some preaching also finds its way in the music ministries of many of these congregations such that great emphasis is placed on “praise and worship” or celebration without the same acknowledgement of lament and death in real life or what Gordon Lathrop calls “little deaths.”⁸ “Little deaths” foreshadow our last death and reveal how we are dying on a regular basis even in the midst of our living. These little deaths may be physical sickness or disabilities, moments of transition and loss, failures, manifestations of violence, and experiences and corrupt systems of injustices. These deaths occur daily to demonstrate that we are dying a slow death. As St. Augustine has written, “everyone is in death

³ John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 99.

⁴ Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 207.

⁵ Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷ Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 116. For more of Franklin’s critique of the prosperity movement, see pp. 112-126.

⁸ Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 125. For my own critique of the overemphasis on celebration in preaching at the expense of lament, see *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

from the moment that he begins his bodily existence.”⁹ This article, in discussing death, will have in mind “little deaths” while not ignoring the “big” death at the end of life.¹⁰

Prosperity preaching appears not to take any type of death seriously as a crucial component of the Christian life. This could be because the prosperity gospel promotes a kind of “pain-free religious experience.”¹¹ Within its spiritual purview, pain is not a part of prosperity. Critiquing this camp of Christendom, Melissa Harris-Lacewell notes that “Christ is an investment strategy and a personal life coach whose power can be accessed by believers to improve their finances, protect their families, strengthen their faith, and achieve personal authenticity.”¹²

Despite the numerous critiques of prosperity preaching, it is still the case that these preachers, in some way, answer a longing of many people. I say this not to endorse this “pain-free” preaching enterprise but to highlight the complexities that are involved. For people who have been disenfranchised economically and socially for centuries, prosperity preaching can be appealing. It offers a message of personal and individual empowerment for those who desire upward mobility in society. The prosperity message can be viewed as an “ideology of socioeconomic transition”¹³ that meets the longing of many who want to achieve success and social acceptance. This “spirituality of longing” finds its answer in “prosperity as realized spirituality,” the concretization of a faith rooted in overcoming social rejection by accumulating wealth.¹⁴ Monetary cash flow is implied to be that which can fill spiritual emptiness and quiet the longing in a hurting people. The problem with this approach is that God is perceived to be a Santa Claus delivering monetary gifts to consuming children who always want more than they have. In addition, the biblical witness asserts that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6:10), suggesting that prosperity preaching may be leading some Christians down the wrong path.

In a prosperity-driven ecclesial environment, whenever the community gathers it is primarily as a means towards greater health and wealth, to get more. “Mo’ money, mo’ money, mo’ money” takes on new religious meaning in this setting. But the obvious tension with all of this is that this prosperity gospel appears to meet the needs of people in the pews, at least on the surface. One cannot deny that masses of people adhere to the prosperity gospel and that it is popular as is evident through its permeating presence on different media outlets. After all, who

⁹ Saint Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIII, Chapter 10 (ca. 413-426; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 519.

¹⁰ Tom Long talks about three kinds of death in the Christian faith: small-*d* Death, capital- *D* Death, and death in Christ. The first is natural death. The second is a “mythic force, as the enemy of all that God wills for life.” The third is death in Christ as already noted. Long’s use of capital-*D* Death resonates with what I call “little deaths” in this paper because it is destructive in different ways be it individually, communally, or socially. His small-*d* Death would be what I refer to as our last death or “big” death. See Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 38-41.

¹¹ Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 122.

¹² Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, “Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics,” *Cross Currents* (Summer 2007): 187. This approach to the Christian faith is not surprising when one considers the core beliefs and practices of a key proponent of the prosperity gospel, the Word of Faith movement. At the core of this wing of the prosperity gospel is to know who you are in Christ, positive confession or positive mental attitude, and emphasis on material prosperity and wealth and physical health. See Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8-12.

¹³ Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 156.

¹⁴ Mitchem, 33, 49.

would not want “Your Best Life Now”¹⁵ in this world when all one has possibly known is suffering? As Jonathan Walton says, “Though in my mind God offered liberation from racial and gender injustice and capitalist exploitation, I saw other preachers seemingly get further with a Jesus who provided the keys to the Kingdom in the form of a four-bedroom house and a Mercedes-Benz.”¹⁶ For have-nots, to finally have something, especially in the way it is just described, could be perceived as a divinely-sanctioned physical blessing. The issue becomes what it means to “get further” with Jesus, that is, what it means to live the life of Christian discipleship, including the content of our proclamation.

In a 2006 *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* interview, legendary prince of the pulpit Gardner Taylor was asked to assess the current preaching scene. What he says is illuminating. He declares the following:

...there is now a tendency, I think, more than ever, to make it a kind of Sunday Chamber of Commerce exercise — motivational speaking, which has its place but is not the Gospel. It becomes a kind of opium, if opium is a stimulant, for people, which gives them often a false notion of what life is all about. I think much of contemporary preaching does not prepare people for the inevitable crises of life. When we talk constantly about prosperity, well, life is not constantly prosperity. It has adversity and difficulties, and if one is trained, conditioned to see only the bright side of things, then one is not prepared for living in this world.

...Of course, people want to hear it, because candy is a very pleasant thing. My daughter lives out in Harbor City, [California]. When she was a little girl, I suppose we could have fed her candy morning, noon, and night, and she would have taken it morning, noon — and enjoyed it. Soon she would have had no teeth, and soon we would have had no daughter, I think, because candy is wonderful. I love it, but one needs in one’s diet more than candy.¹⁷

Taylor’s notion that a prosperity-only message is like “candy” suggests that this type of theology and preaching is initially sweet to the taste, a “pleasant thing,” but in the end it is detrimental because life is not just about the “bright side of things.” If one chews on this prosperity message enough, one will end up with “no teeth” because “one needs in one’s diet more than candy.” Prosperity preaching may be sweet like a candy cane at first but it will eventually be sour for the soul and bad for one’s spiritual teeth and nerve. “Candy” homiletical theology does not sustain people’s lives in the end because it does not take into consideration “what life is all about.” The hardships and pain of life tend to be muted in this bright, sunny gospel. It is a false, distorted picture of the gospel, if death and sorrow are ignored. The prosperity gospel proclaims a hope but its version of hope erases death. This in fact is not hope at all because Christian hope is not hope without death. Real hope is discovered in the midst of death, created on the anvil of

¹⁵ Pastor Joel Osteen wrote a popular book with this title, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (FaithWords, 2004). In his positive thinking and confession approach, he encourages readers to improve their attitudes, keep their chins up, etc. and God will rain down blessings on them.

¹⁶ Walton, xiii.

¹⁷ Interview with Gardner Taylor, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, July 24, 2006.

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/august-18-2006/reverend-gardner-c-taylor-extended-interview/1881/>, (accessed February 23, 2011).

adversity. Or, in the sermonic words of J. Alfred Smith, “Hope is a tiny sprout growing in cracked concrete.”¹⁸

Denial of Death

One of the major flaws of prosperity preaching is its attempt to proclaim hope while avoiding or denying death, the “little deaths,” the “cracked concrete.” To follow Jesus Christ through our Christian preaching does not equate to proclaiming bigger and better material goods, but it involves taking up crosses and following him in his death and life. Preaching entails truthfulness about his crucifixion and resurrection, his death and life, and the hope found in him. To follow Jesus through our preaching means that one must take suffering seriously. Thus, one cannot preach prosperity hope without being honest about human pain and agony, “little deaths.” I do not aim to denigrate this prosperity gospel segment of the Church but I do want to highlight what I think is a huge theological hole in this form of proclamation, and any other contemporary approach to preaching that avoids dealing with death substantively.

Within prosperity gospel teaching, pain of varied kinds is deemed a problem, stemming from a person’s lack of faith or the devil. Shane Lee notes, “Word-of-faith teaching asserts that Christians have the power to control their physical well-being and financial fortunes through their faith... However, God’s ‘hands are tied’ from blessing many Christians who lack faith and misappropriate biblical principles, thus explaining why all Christians are not experiencing prosperous and healthy lives.”¹⁹ Wealth and health are the proper inheritance for God’s children, according to this philosophy. If this material and physical prosperity are absent, it is the individual’s fault in some way or the devil is at work. The realization of systemic sin through structures that keep the poor poor and others oppressed is not even acknowledged. There is a clear disregard for or ignorance of what Chuck Campbell calls the “powers of death.”²⁰ Positive confession and right faith with proper handling of the scriptures is the right equation to win the prosperity lotto. Some do see a “glimmer of hope”²¹ in this type of gospel preaching; but, at the same time, one of the harshest criticisms of this doctrine is how it implies the condemnation of those who are not healthy and wealthy. Many times, sickness and suffering are no one’s fault or due to a lack of faith but come as a part of what it means to be human in a broken world. This is often denied in a pain-free preaching approach. The perceived glimmer of hope through prosperity preaching is actually a false sense of hope because of its disconnection from the crucible of death, little deaths in life. Any preaching that denies death will ultimately be hopeless because it does not engage earthly realities.²²

¹⁸ J. Alfred Smith, “Foundations of Our Faith,” *Power in the Pulpit: How America’s Most Effective Black Preachers Prepare Their Sermons*, ed. Cleophus J. LaRue (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 143.

¹⁹ Shane Lee, “Prosperity Theology: T.D. Jakes and the Gospel of the Almighty Dollar,” *Cross Currents* (Summer 2007): 228.

²⁰ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 31.

²¹ Lee, 230.

²² Such realities include a world brewing with ongoing trouble—war, famine, genocide, governmental corruption, economic instability, drugs, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, domestic violence, and rising poverty rates among children. To ignore these expressions of death is to be homiletically blind and irrelevant.

In light of these realities, these “specters of death,”²³ it is preposterous to think how some preachers can separate the gospel from the presence of death in the world as a way of avoiding it in the pulpit. Preaching itself is a part of a larger liturgical framework permeated by images and symbols of death. Through the rite of baptism, we die and rise with Christ (Rom 6:4-5). Baptism is life but it is also a death. Likewise, the Lord’s table is a table of death and life. In the words of Apostle Paul, “for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The Eucharist proclaims a death. At the heart of Christian worship is death. This is unavoidable though many times this is not accented or recognized. “We all live under a death sentence.”²⁴ But this should not be a shock because Christianity is about a Jewish man who died and eventually conquered death.

Existential and liturgical realities demonstrate that death is prominent as a context for preaching. Death has historically been denied in culture and “alienated from the normal compass of daily experience.”²⁵ Preachers have followed this trajectory by alienating death and anything that might have its smell from sermons. This might be called the homiletical quarantining of death but preaching that ignores death is irresponsible, a theological lie and unable to declare real hope. In fact, it is Spiritless preaching. If this prosperity approach to preaching is theologically faulty, what then does it mean to preach Christian hope in a meaningful way? It means that one proclaims death. To experience life, resurrection, or hope, one must go through death. In fact, the Spirit leads preachers to a milieu of death each Sunday in order to proclaim a word of life that ultimately breathes hope into the lives of people. If a preacher avoids dealing with death, as discussed above, he or she will not be able to preach Christian hope in any meaningful way; yet, in many contemporary churches, preachers do that very thing—avoid death because they are at a loss for what to say and do not realize its vital connection to the substance of Christian hope. Because of this denial of death, in general, we are left with sermons that possess a weak pneumatology and are fundamentally hopeless.

Spirituals as Homiletical Resource

In light of this contemporary theo-homiletical problem, the spirituals, historical and cultural musical “sermons”²⁶ produced in the midst of death, may serve as a critical resource to help remedy some of these shortcomings. There are several books that provide insight into the theological themes of the spirituals or other historical or musicological studies of the spirituals, but none provide a homiletical lens.²⁷ Viewing the spirituals as musical sermons and integrating

²³ James W. Perkinson, “Rap as Wrap and Rapture: North American Popular Culture and the Denial of Death,” *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 134.

²⁴ John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 291. For his insights into the connections between death and weekly and annual liturgical practices, see pp. 296-300.

²⁵ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond: Friends United, 1975; reprint, Richmond: Friends United, 1999), 18.

²⁶ Due to the limits of this article, I cannot elaborate on the spirituals as musical sermons here. But in my book, *Dem Dry Bones*, I elaborate on this notion due to the historical linkage between the creation of spirituals and preaching events. Both spirituals and preaching are musical, (con)textual, and communal in nature. One might even say that singing (spirituals) preaches and preaching sings.

²⁷ Some of those works include James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking, 1969; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1977). Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993); Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on*

the spirituals as a significant theological and cultural resource for contemporary preaching makes a distinct contribution to homiletics. No work on preaching explores the spirituals in any substantive fashion with the aim of enhancing the theory and practice of preaching despite the rich historical link between intoned preaching and the spirituals.

In particular, for thinking about preaching, death and hope, the spirituals are important because the reality of death permeates them. Unlike those who engage death at a distance or not at all, the creators of the spirituals, these singing preachers known as the unknown black bards, had “immediate, inescapable, dramatic” contact with the dead.²⁸ These musical sermons were born out of deathly experiences of slavery. Thus, a conversation about preaching, death, and hope will be served well by their inclusion as a dialogue partner. Homiletical lessons about death and hope can be learned from the spirituals, though in this paper death is the primary focus. The presence of death is obvious in these songs but so is hope and life, even if just represented in the phenomenon of singing itself. In his classic text, *Black Song*, John Lovell notes, “...the African blood has always sung....”²⁹ This singing was a sign of life within environs of death. Despite the blatant hardships, the “haunting overtones”³⁰ of life and hope rang out. A good example of this is “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See.”

The expression of hope comes not only in situations of death, but despite death being so pervasive.

Nobody knows the trouble I see,
Nobody knows my sorrow;
Nobody knows the trouble I see,
Glory, hallelujah!

In this classic spiritual, the little deaths are noted the most—three times in this refrain. That one is in trouble is made clear through lyrical and melodic repetition. However, *despite* the fact that “nobody knows,” this singer seems to suggest that there is Someone who does and concludes with a note of triumph and praise “Glory, hallelujah!” In fact, the melody rises on “glory” suggesting that hope triumphs ultimately, rising above the pain and trouble. That particular note is the highest in the refrain. It is almost as if the music leads the singer to that climax of hopeful sound, prefiguring the final resolution of God for the world. There is hope but it comes in the midst of death; the two are inseparable in *spiritual* preaching. Thus, preachers will do well to pay attention to these songs that preach. Remembering them will help re-member broken contemporary preaching theories and practices that neglect death as critical to preaching hope. The following section will present four reasons why remembering the spirituals is important for preaching.

the Spirituals (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997); John, Lovell, Jr. *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1972); Yolanda Y. Smith, *Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004); John W. Work, *Folk Song of the American Negro* (1915; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).

²⁸ Thurman, 19.

²⁹ John Lovell, Jr. *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1972), 112.

³⁰ Thurman, 12.

Remembering the Spirituals, Re-Membering Preaching

There is a proverb that says, “Don’t forget the bridge that brought you over.” Remembering the past sheds light on the present. The past possesses rich pedagogical wisdom. The hymn declares, “We’ve come this far by faith” but we still have much further to go in our preaching because “every shut eye ain’t sleep, every good-bye ain’t gone.” The door of the past cannot be closed and in the case of the spirituals, it should not be because there is further development and growth needed in our theory and practice of preaching. To forget them is to lose the deep *spiritual* roots of preaching. To keep the history of the spirituals open for contemporary knowledge is to notice that African American history is partly brutal and inhumane. Some want to forget slavery because “Slavery is the site of black victimage and thus of tradition’s intended erasure.”³¹ For these, slavery is best left behind, including the beautiful aesthetic creations of the spirituals. Some are ashamed of remembering or singing the spirituals because of their connection to slavery. They are considered unsophisticated musical ditties that weaken African Americans. Those who support erasure of the past slavery will also cry that slavery was not the totality of the black experience in the past, but that there was also dignity. This is true but the dignity was held in the midst of slavery, death. “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.”³² To forget that wet path, to forget the tears, would be a sign of disrespect to the ancestors, the “many thousand gone.” To remember is to honor them.

As one remembers, one re-imagines, even re-members, the essence of preaching for as Toni Morrison reminds us, “The act of imagination is bound up with memory.”³³ This reimagining leads us to the domain of death. The human history of the spirituals teaches lessons on life and bestows homiletical wisdom that shapes a certain perspective on the ministry of preaching. Remembering the spirituals provides numerous lessons for understanding preaching.

Remembering Human Tragedy

The first lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that human tragedy, death, pain, and suffering are a part of human life, thus a critical component of the context for preaching. No one escapes “de troubles of de world.” To remember the spirituals means that one remembers a deadly, bloody, and tear-filled past in human history unless one suffers from cultural amnesia. “We have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered.”³⁴ Tears, blood, and death, not health, wealth, and prosperity, have been the heart of the existential journey of oppressed people in the world. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith,”³⁵ says historian Albert Raboteau, and for my homiletical purpose, the blood of the martyrs fertilizes the soil of our preaching. Black preachers stand in their blood to preach. Their blood cries out from the pulpit every time we stand to preach because they have paved the path of proclamation for so many people.

³¹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 189.

³² See the hymn, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 32.

³³ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 98.

³⁴ See “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Songs of Zion*, 32.

³⁵ See Albert J. Raboteau, “The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of Faith: Suffering in the Christianity of American Slaves,” *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption*, eds. Quinton Hosford Dixie and Cornel West (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 22-39.

These martyrs teach us “that suffering must be lived through.”³⁶ Preaching tells the truth about tragedy and death as aspects of the gospel. If not, it is a doxological lie that promotes homiletical dishonesty because African diasporan cultural memory is moist with bitter blood. *Spiritual* preaching is not sorry for the sorrows of humanity because this is the way life was and is for many. As the spirituals did, pain is lamented thus preaching laments the sorrows without forgetting the joys. The spirituals remind us that death must be dealt with in our preaching and not ignored. Our lives depend on it because “to pass over these sorrows imperils humanity as well as theology.”³⁷ Shawn Copeland can say this because even Christian theological memory includes a God who suffers.

Remembering God’s Pain

The second lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that pain is even a part of God’s story. To remember the spirituals reminds us of a God-in-the-flesh, Jesus Christ, who “never said a-mumblin word” as he suffered, bled, and died on a cross. The spirituals intone “Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, surely he died on Calvary.” When one sings the spirituals, one has to deal with the reality of a God who dies because death is no respecter of persons. Even the Christ dies. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they pierced him in the side? Were you there when the sun refused to shine? Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?” The mantra of “were you there?” brings you there, to the place of suffering and pain. It cannot be avoided even when one follows Jesus unless “with our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,”³⁸ including the memory of suffering and blood.

Our theological memory is washed in the blood of the Lamb. Preaching is not spoiled by tears for at the heart of the proclamation of the Christian Church is a bloody death. As I noted earlier, eating the bread and drinking the cup of communion is a proclamation of the Lord’s death. The eucharistic table is a table of death about a “lynched word,” a “lynched black body.”³⁹ Jesus died gangsta style like all of the crucified peoples of the world. If the cross is our homiletical lens, then catastrophe and tragedy are at the heart of gospel preaching. This theological perspective suggests that preaching has drops of blood all over it as preachers proclaim “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5). Death keeps Christianity real and connected to the way it really is in the *spiritual* life. There are no resurrections without crucifixions.

This divine and human suffering, which is an aspect of God’s story, is critical because it is the context of preaching. God enters the world and takes on its suffering, “not just regular suffering of all creatures that grow old and die, but the suffering of the innocent persecuted by the unjust, the suffering of abandonment and seeming failure, the suffering of love offered and refused, the suffering of evil apparently triumphant over good.”⁴⁰ To avoid this kind of suffering is to ignore what it means to be human and what it means to serve an incarnate God, even through preaching.

³⁶ Ibid., 37.

³⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 3.

³⁸ “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Songs of Zion*, 32.

³⁹ James Cone, “Strange Fruit: The Cross and the Lynching Tree,” *The African American Pulpit* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 24.

⁴⁰ Raboteau, 37.

Remembering the Collective (Un)Known

The spirituals also reveal that suffering and death are a communal experience. This is the third lesson that the spirituals teach preachers—tragedy, pain, struggle, and death are felt in the collective body, the entire community. *Spiritual* preaching includes everyone in the joys and sorrows. A collective memory of the spirituals reminds preachers that all experience suffering on some level. The scars of the past remain in the present for a people as memories are passed down from one generation to the next. As humans we belong to “communities with histories”⁴¹ thus so-called individual experience is really a part of a larger communal narrative. The performance of call and response of the spirituals reveals the communal essence of African American communities that when one suffers, all suffer. All engage in the pain because of what Paul Gilroy calls the “ethics of antiphony” that permeate the black Atlantic.⁴²

In this collective recollection, what is most important is the radical inclusive nature of community such that there is a rich intersubjective dynamic in a preaching community that goes beyond the performative dimensions. James Weldon Johnson’s 1922 poem, “O Black and Unknown Bards” points to the communal creation of the spirituals with its unknown authors and origins. There are no specifics about the composer or lyricist because they are the community’s sermons. The common good is more important than selfish individualism thus the unknown ones matter. The black bards, the creators of the spirituals, themselves, were “forgot.” The fifth stanza of Johnson’s poem states:

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and service toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who’ve sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.⁴³

These singers, preachers without portfolio,⁴⁴ preach “far better than they knew” because their sermons sing on today for the life of a community. They did not preach for fame or fortune but for the survival of a people. Their lives call into question why preachers preach today. Is it for ministry to those, like the black bards, who are “gone, forgot, unfamed...untaught, unknown, unnamed”? These whose names or faces are not known are the ones who have contributed to the history of the world, music, and preaching. They teach homiletical pearls of wisdom. Those who are “unlettered,” the underside, the marginalized, the other, teach preaching quite unlike any seminary or divinity school.

⁴¹ Fred Craddock, “Preaching: An Appeal to Memory,” *What’s the Matter With Preaching Today?* ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 64. Lisa Lamb also argues that ethnic groups are communities of memory. See her article, “To Remember Well Together: Preaching and Memory in Ethnically Diverse Congregations,” *Word & World* 28, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 424-432.

⁴² Gilroy, 200.

⁴³ See Preface of James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 11.

⁴⁴ In the “Introduction” of *History and Memory in African American Culture*, Robert O’Meally and Geneviève Fabre call the black bards “historians without portfolio.” See “Introduction,” *History and Memory in African American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150-163.

Remembering the spirituals causes one to recognize that long line of unknown human beings as a valued part of the community. The preaching bards call us to remember the suffering of those forgotten, unwanted, and unneeded, and challenge our sermons to include those who are left out many times and bring the stories of the marginalized into the larger relational story of humanity and God. To forget the “forgot” is to forget what preaching is all about and who is at the heart of the gospel—an executed God on crucified lockdown. The spirituals help preachers remember the most vulnerable among us so that no one would ever say “I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:21) because each member of the human community is indispensable, even if they are unknown.

The wisdom of the *spiritual* preachers is unmatched though some may think otherwise. They expand notions of community and preaching and remind us of the humble roots of the gospel in the face of economically exploitative preaching practices. At their wellsprings of knowledge and at the altar of their souls, preachers may drink and bow to learn what one did not know or could not know about preaching without them. These voices preach from the past with melodies that should haunt our homiletical memory. They haunt homiletics because they call contemporary preachers to reclaim the weightiness of the call to preach.

Remembering the Weight of Preaching

The fourth lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that the ministry of preaching is a matter of life and death. In other words, it is a weighty task. For the bards, they sang and preached to fight for life in the domain of death. Words were weapons of freedom and dignity. Just the “legacy of inhumanity”⁴⁵ that shapes the musical sermons should be enough to add weight to the task of preaching. To know that there was nothing humorous about the nature or performance of the spirituals requires preachers to take preaching seriously.⁴⁶ Preaching is not the latest joke to be told or funny story to be imagined or a hysterical shout to be heard. Remembering the spirituals reveal that there is much more at stake behind the sacred desk, the pulpit. Life and death are in the balance.

Preaching as a form of resistance to deathly powers and a lifeline to an enslaved community reclaims the urgent impulse of proclamation. The weight of preaching suggested by the spirituals indicates that God is needed and God is actually the one who provides preaching with the most weight. As Samuel Proctor says, “We deal with the deep center of human existence and the extreme outer perimeter. We are concerned with things that are ultimate.”⁴⁷ God is ultimate and preachers who proclaim the gospel discern and name the Eternal in our private and public affairs, Life in the domain of little deaths. Even when facing the gallows of death, one could sing of the ever-present God, “Over my head, I hear music in the air. . . . There must be a God somewhere.” The spirituals affirm the presence of divinity in the midst of tragedy because preachers “traverse terrain having to do with life and death.”⁴⁸

The spirituals challenge nonchalant, casual preaching in which nothing appears to be at stake except the newest and coolest illustration or technological trick. The spiritual homiletical tradition wants preachers to gain weight, that is, the conviction that preaching is a matter of life

⁴⁵ Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 56.

⁴⁶ Johnson and Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 13.

⁴⁷ Samuel D. Proctor, *How Shall They Hear? Effective Preaching for Vital Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1992), 81.

⁴⁸ Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching: How to Preach with Great Freedom and Joy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 21.

and death in which everything is at stake because spiritual preaching is a “ministry of raising the dead.”⁴⁹ But to gain weight, one must not be afraid or hesitant to remember the past for there is much to be learned from it as the spirituals reveal. If a preacher celebrates forgetting the past, this is something to be lamented because in that forgetting, the gospel story itself will be forgotten because “the entire substance of Christianity, since Christ has not reappeared on earth, consists in the remembrance of his life and teaching.”⁵⁰ One might say that “remembering is the preacher’s *duty*.”⁵¹

Homiletical amnesia bypasses human tragedy and death, God’s story of death, the forgotten ones in the human community, and the weighty nature of preaching, for lighter and brighter sermon possibilities; but to re-member the future of the Church and preaching, one must remember the past depicted by the spirituals. “Memory is . . . a force in creating the future.”⁵² Remembering (death) provides life in the present and for the future. This is a “hermeneutics of memory”⁵³ that actually leads to what I call a “hermeneutics of hope.” To remember the dismembered is to re-member the future of preaching because memory funds Christian preaching. A preacher remembers “the days when hope unborn had died”⁵⁴ in order to prevent another miscarriage of hope. *Spiritual* preaching midwifes hope into the world and when it is born it will not disappoint (Rom 5:5). Thus, the spirituals may at first haunt (hopefully not taunt) homiletics with their echoes of death, but in the end, one will realize that resonating out of the same echo of death is the sound of hope. We can then proclaim in the vein of the spiritual homiletical tradition of the unknown black bards, “Glory, hallelujah!”

⁴⁹ James Forbes, *The Holy Spirit and Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 100.

⁵⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 88.

⁵¹ David Fleer and Dave Bland, “Introduction,” *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative for Preaching*, eds. David Fleer and Dave Bland (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 3.

⁵² Karen Fields, “What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly,” *History and Memory in African American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 161.

⁵³ Gilroy, 71.

⁵⁴ “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Songs of Zion*, 32.