

The Homiletical Mediation of Liberation

David Latimore, D.Min, Ph.D.

Director of the Betsey Stockton Center for Black Church Studies
Princeton Theological Seminary

Abstract: *The trauma experienced by marginalized communities often results from violence operating on many levels, not the least of which is economic. Victims of economic oppression and exploitation cry out to the church for a balm. That homiletical balm must call the church back to its rightful pursuit of liberation and render its complicity in economic oppression visible. Such a homiletical effort can be anchored in a theology emerging from the Lazarus narrative in John. A re-reading of that text offers a liberative homiletic that speaks to this moment in American culture.*

Need for a New Theological Framework

The ideology of neoliberalism, and its accompanying economism, continues to challenge the Christian church's proclamation. While the concept of neoliberalism is notoriously difficult to define, within this project it refers to a late form of capitalism that first rose to prominence during the 1970s. Its foundational premise is that of the classical liberal idea of the free market as the best instrument for realizing and sustaining individual freedoms.¹ As such, neoliberalism is far more than simply a method of organizing economic existence. Instead, neoliberalism offers alternative constructions of essential concepts such as freedom, choice, community, individualism, and power. The process whereby these neoliberal ideas supplant or mutate similar truth claims existing outside the sphere of economic activity, and in this case within the Christian tradition, is what I refer to as economism.² The church's encounter with economism mutates the church's identity and transforms its homiletical practices such that those practices promulgate economic ideology as the lens through which to interrogate and understand the world. The results are proclamations and praxes of the church which exhibit a diminished focus on resistance to the impact and influence of neoliberalism.³ This is in contrast to homiletical praxes that take seriously the communal trauma inflicted on communities of the poor and seek to overcome the influence and incessant individualism of neoliberalism. Homiletical approaches that resist economism's grasp are all the more difficult to realize because of neoliberalism's instantiation in the very modes of thinking that govern and guide many homiletical frameworks. However, the growing perversity of economic trauma and disparity provides the occasion for preachers to engage a theological framework that can operate within the cultural context of neoliberalism without succumbing to its worst influences. Such a homiletical framework re-imagines life (inclusive of economic existence) in a manner that calls for a revolutionary stance

¹ David. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

² The term 'economism' has been used by political scientists to describe the undue influence of economic considerations in the "determination of social and political relations." This term is utilized within this paper to reference the same phenomenon of the undue influence of economic ideology (in this case that of neoliberalism) on religious institutions and their constituents. See Ashley, Richard K. Ashley, "Three Modes of Economism," *International Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1983): 463-96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2600557>.

³ This decreased focus on responding to the trauma of economic exploitation is not the result of diminishing experiences of poverty that serve as one of the many instantiations of neoliberalism's deleterious impact. See Alan Mallach, *The Divided City: Poverty and Prosperity in Urban America* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5822/978-1-61091-782-7>.

relative to neoliberalism. In response to the persistent presence of economic and social trauma and exploitation, I offer a liberative homiletical theology grounded in the narrative of Lazarus.

Why the Lazarus Text?

This liberative homiletic utilizes the Johannine depiction of the resurrection of Lazarus to shape its proclamation of a Christ-centered liberty offered to those held captive by exploitative economic and communal forces. John's biblical narrative may appear an odd choice given the rich history of liberation theologians' and preachers' reliance on passages such as the fourth chapter of Luke.⁴ However, John's depiction of Jesus's encounter at the tomb of Lazarus provides an efficacious context within which to offer a balm for the trauma experienced by those shut out of political and economic discourse. John's narrative provides a visceral reminder that a liberative homiletic lives within the particular experiences of humanity who are the objects of God's liberating grace. A liberative homiletic requires a theological framework that establishes the boundaries, rules, and expectations of the church and its homiletical and theological praxes. It seeks to render visible those who have been made invisible through the trauma of neoliberalism and to acknowledge their voices as meaningful in understanding and executing the church's mission. More importantly, a liberative homiletic examines the church for possible complicity in the maintenance of economic exploitative practices and calls the church (both white and black) to redirect its indispensable resources toward the eradication of cultural and economic sources of trauma. The theological and homiletical reflections and possibilities immanent within the Lazarus narrative interrupt systems of traumatic exploitation and make visible patterns of non-recognition that have become normalized in American culture, propagated by the church, and even internalized by segments of poor communities and their religious institutions.

The practicality of the liberative homiletical framework is found in its ability to speak to the lived experiences of the poor and oppressed including the trauma they routinely experience. Christian churches who welcome these often serve in communities unimpressed by the frequency or formality of rituals and liturgy. Each week, many such churches gather together the economically exploited who live within the shadows of both ornate cathedrals and humble storefronts. These men and women in the community, who walk daily in the trauma of their impoverishment and live sequestered in fields of deprivation, look upon the practices of the church and listen to its preachers with concern and consternation if not outright contempt. Why? Because they wonder,

...If the God boldly professed by the church is so present when these Christians lift up their voices...why is this God's blessings so absent from our community? Every Sunday, churches congregate in the midst of the residual fragments of broken communities. As ornate and overflowing churches stand in worship and celebration, communities of the poor continue to lift their voices in lament and dismay. And the church fiddles while cities burn.⁵

⁴ Michael Prior, *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4. 16-30)* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Luise Schottroff and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Thomas D. Hanks, *The Subversive Gospel: A New Testament Commentary on Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000); James H Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁵ Excerpt from a sermon by the author (titled, "Worship at the Cross") offered at a community worship service at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church of Joliet, IL on September 7, 2014.

A liberative homiletic responds to these concerns by directing the church to identify and struggle with the oppressed and recognizes that the Christ who is proclaimed is to be found in the midst of the oppressed. Pastors and the congregations they serve should be “in solidarity with the interests and aspirations of the oppressed and the repressed of the world today.”⁶ This stands in opposition to neoliberalism’s intent to deny the persistent presence of the poor or its role in sustaining systemic poverty. When the principles of neoliberalism become ingrained in the preaching and homiletics of the church, the church embraces an individualistic view of poverty that locates the causes and trauma of poverty “in poor persons themselves (e.g., lack of ability, lack of effort).”⁷ When poverty is understood through this lens, theological and homiletical efforts affirm an understanding of poverty as a problem of people and their practices and emphasizes methods for improving the behavior of poor people so that those individuals might, in turn, improve their lot in life. Preaching that is infused with this kind of awareness focuses on the personal behavior of the poor, reflecting and reinforcing the economism at the root of the very problem to which the church believes itself to be responding. Instead, the theology of a liberative homiletic is distinguished by its embrace of a structuralist perspective of poverty that understands the causes of economic trauma, such as experiences of poverty, as systemic and immediately related to the economic and societal conditions in which the poor are trapped.⁸ A liberative homiletic responds to these systemic issues by directing the church to work toward change in the systems responsible for the perversity of poverty.

The Necessity of Liberation

The theology of a liberative homiletic makes a distinct claim regarding the necessity of liberation, given the conditions of those in need and the historical and theological traditions of the Christian church. A liberative homiletic understands the church’s identity as concretized in the pursuit and well-being of life for the most vulnerable.⁹ In this regard, a liberative homiletic refuses to submit to the enticement of neoliberalism to prioritize institutional existence as what constitutes the church’s success. Rather, it anchors individual and institutional identity in solidarity with those who have been rendered invisible and mute and refuses to accept their invisibility and muteness as “givens” of human existence. This homiletical framework repudiates surrender to the intransigence of poverty and the unrelenting and ever-expanding presence of economic disparity. Additionally, a liberative homiletic refuses to render the poor as simply objects of the church’s charitable activity but calls on the church to challenge the very systems that work to ensure the permanence of the poor and their continued exploitation by market forces that are dependent on their existence and submission.¹⁰

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez and Robert R. Barr, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992) 21.

⁷ Matthew O Hunt, “Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty,” *Social Science Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2002): 812, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-6237.00116>.

⁸ Hunt, “Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty,” 812; Lawrence Bobo, “Social Responsibility, Individualism, and Redistributive Policies,” *Sociological Forum*, no. 6 (1991): 71–92, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01112728>.

⁹ Jeremiah A. Wright, “Protestant Ecclesiology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012), 185–197.

¹⁰ Chuck Collins, Juliet B. Schor, Felice Yeskel, United for a Fair Economy, and Class Action (Organization), *Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer On Economic Inequality & Insecurity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 65–99; Néstor Oscar Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key* (London: SCM, 2009), 13.

A liberative homiletic acknowledges the conscious choice required by the church to respond to the systemic and entrenched trauma of economic exploitation, in all of its social, political, and economic manifestations within the communities the church serves. This choice acknowledges that the call of liberation, for a church already in the grasp of economism, often results in the failure of that church to engage in a genuine and authentic pursuit of liberation on behalf of those most in need. Instead, an economistic homiletic (which is formed in the image of the neoliberal principles at the root of economism) serves to re-enforce the very conditions that oppress and traumatize those who might otherwise disrupt systems of exploitation. This leaves these churches with the belief that they are on the side of the poor while their praxes remain passive, their voices silent, and their hands unengaged in actions that might ultimately overturn or threaten the market's continued exploitation.¹¹ The theological impetus for a liberative homiletic lies in a particular reading of the narratives of the Gospels of the New Testament, where the liberation of the poor and oppressed is posited as the central message and mission of Jesus and by extension, of the church.¹²

Resources for a Liberative Homiletic

A liberative homiletic that anchors itself in the particularity of the Lazarus narrative recounted in John's Gospel provides a frame for understanding the conditions it confronts and the role and work of the preacher and the church. Lazarus's entombment can be understood as symbolic of the exploitive conditions in which the poor exist. These conditions, like Lazarus's death and burial, appear inescapable and because of his condition, Lazarus has been rendered invisible and removed from the community. He has been left unseen and unheard while in the grip of the tomb. This is one of the objects of Jesus's concern: to speak to and for the one who is now voiceless.¹³ The preacher recognizes the poor in their community since many have been traumatized and left voiceless - except when their frustration boils over in riots and protests. Even in those moments, their voices may be heard but dismissed as the irrational outbursts of those simply in need of the care of a paternalistic system that knows what is best for them.¹⁴ Or, more tragically, the economically exploited are left in the hands of preachers who revive the error of other-worldliness and insist that the trauma of the exploited needs no immediate or temporal resolution when heaven is right around the corner. Yet, understanding the ministry of Jesus, and by extension, the identity of the church, within the theology of the Lazarus text reminds us that it is indeed the voiceless and unseen for whom Jesus (and preachers) are called to labor. Upon Jesus's arrival, Lazarus's spiritual and material liberation is proclaimed. This, along with the many other glimpses into the ministry of Jesus, provides the opportunity to conjoin Jesus with the plight of the economically exploited. This homiletical framework also renders visible the church's complicity in the maintenance of systems of economic exploitation and the reality that this complicity carries social, economic, and political repercussions for the

¹¹ Míguez, Rieger, and Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire*, 64.

¹² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 35.

¹³ Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015); Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1988).

¹⁴ Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 41, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226768786.001.0001>. The paternalism is even evident within religious institutions dealing with the poor. Jason Hackworth, "Compassionate Neoliberalism?" in *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States*, 48-62 (University of Georgia, 2012), 58.

formulation of genuine Christian theology and praxes. Jesus's radical confrontation with the conditions of the silenced in this text expresses the essence of divine identity and liberative homiletics.¹⁵

The challenge for the liberative homiletic is to operate within the all-too-familiar reality of trauma and pain within which the poor live. In confronting this challenge, the theology expressed within the Lazarus text is prescient. As mentioned above, Lazarus has been separated from the community, and his condition is understood as beyond temporal remedy. John presents Jesus's arrival at the tomb of Lazarus as confronting a temporally hopeless circumstance.¹⁶ The hopelessness of this moment speaks to an analogous circumstance that the preacher confronts. The sheer magnitude of repeated acts of ideological and physical violence experienced by the poor, relentless in their sheer frequency, create a hopelessness similar to that of Lazarus's condition. Nevertheless, this is the very circumstance into which Jesus has stepped. The hopelessness and the finality of Lazarus's invisibility also results from the ritualistic practices of the community. Yet, their rational practice of surrender to his condition has inadvertently made them complicit in Lazarus's separation from the community. Just as the audience pictured in this text might object to the accusation of complicity, one can hear the objections of the church to similar accusations. The economism operative within the church leaves its actions seemingly as rational as that of the community burying Lazarus, but a liberative homiletic has arrived to confront the (ir)rationality of neoliberalism that smothers the decaying smells of the church's abdication to a community's impoverishment. Before there is any action recorded by the writer of this Gospel, one hears from the text the powerful but practically foolish declaration of Jesus's call to Lazarus. In this moment, the liberative homiletic extends an invitation to the church to believe that, even in the presence of seeming hopelessness, liberation remains possible. It calls the church to confront the communal exploitation of others and death present within communities of the poor, not to accommodate these, but to respond and overturn their presence. A liberative homiletic calls the church to speak, fight, and work toward overturning neoliberalism's illusion of infallibility, and to speak life into the particularity of the impoverished.

Overly-spiritualized interpretations of this biblical text adopt a meta-narrative that asserts that the ministry of Jesus represents an overturning of only the spiritual forces impacting the life of Lazarus and, by extension, all of those in need of Jesus's salvific action, robbing this narrative of any material consequence. An earlier exchange in this text between Jesus and Lazarus's sister, Martha, represents an understanding of the claim of Jesus on the life of Lazarus to be within the context of a future resurrection.¹⁷ (John 11:27) However, Jesus's actions within this passage

¹⁵ James H Cone, *God of the Oppressed* Rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 69; Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 57; Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: NYU, 2014), 113-114.

¹⁶ It is understood that the Johannine presentation of the miracle stories operates within the meta-narrative of signs within the earthly ministry of Jesus. As such, even the miracle at Lazarus' tomb can be interpreted within John's larger apologetic effort. Francis J. Moloney, *Signs and Shadows: Reading John 5-12* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Stephen S. Kim, "The Significance of Jesus Raising Lazarus from the Dead in John 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168, no. 669 (January 2011), 59; Sandra Marie Schneiders, "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel: A Key to Johannine Spirituality," in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E Brown, SS*. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), 168-98.

¹⁷ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015); Delbert Burkett, "Two Accounts of Lazarus' Resurrection in John 11," *Novum Testamentum* 36, no. 3 (1994): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853694X00094>.

provide for a homiletical approach that focuses on Jesus offering a direct rebuke of both spiritual and physical forces that rain death upon the most vulnerable. Most importantly, the theology of this text serves as a call to “creative non-violence [which] confronts the powers of death itself and calls humanity to live in the new life of resurrection, here and now.”¹⁸ Both the call to confront death (understood as economic exploitation) and the hope of victory against deathly powers, speak against a spiritualizing of this encounter and open new possibilities for the church’s preaching.

What is at stake in this encounter at the tomb is an understanding of Jesus’s ministry as concerned with the physical and material existence of those whom community has written off as beyond their help. The Jesus presented in this text is interested in the particularity of Lazarus’s condition, and this does not exclude but embraces his material well-being. This narrative posits the theological possibility that a liberative homiletic cannot pursue liberation theoretically or abstractly alone. It must be concerned with the particular and material needs of the vulnerable. It is this emphasis on understanding God’s presence in the material context in which one is situated that is the catalyst for a liberative homiletic. This homiletical approach also challenges congregants immersed in economism’s meta-narrative. It is what Walter Brueggemann describes as the phenomenon of congregations embracing the dominant (and exploitative) narrative (i.e., economism) and having little desire to receive the counter-narrative embodied in a liberative homiletic.¹⁹ Individuals sharing a commitment to living out their faith in difficult places understand that a liberative homiletic asserts that the ministry of Jesus calls followers to a mode of thinking that appears, in contrast to the thinking promulgated by neoliberalism, as irrational. This irrationality is most visible in the exchange captured in the Johannine text between Jesus and Martha (John 11:39).

Having arrived at the tomb where Lazarus lies imprisoned, Jesus makes the simple request of Martha to have the stone removed.²⁰ The stone is not there for the benefit of Lazarus but rather to protect the community from enduring the disease, smell, and unpleasantness of Lazarus’s decaying body and entombment. In like manner, neoliberalism erects barriers that inoculate its operations from the reality and presence of the poor. Challenges to the removal of these barriers can appear as senseless to congregations as Jesus’s request appears to Martha. Given Lazarus’s condition and the length of time he has been deceased, it seems foolish for any action to be taken that ignores his condition or envisions a different possibility for him. Martha’s response in the text is quite understandable and seemingly rational in light of the facts presented. Yet, Jesus’s response to her declaration offers insight for the preacher engulfed in the rationality of neoliberalism. Jesus’s action suggests that the response of the liberative church to the presence of poverty must not align with economism’s rationality. The fight on behalf of the economically exploited or in solidarity with the traumatized and impoverished, as advocated by a liberative homiletic, will be seen as irrational in a world governed by the rationality of the marketplace. Any call for individuals or the church to forgo self-interest and the pursuit of personal aggrandizement will be at odds with a church captive to economism.²¹ Nonetheless, this is the possibility the liberative homiletic asks the church to consider. This encounter between Jesus and

¹⁸ John Dear, *Lazarus, Come Forth!: How Jesus Confronts the Culture of Death and Invites Us into the New Life of Peace* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 2-3.

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22h6srr>.

²⁰ Byron McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003)

²¹ Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy, “The Neoliberal (Counter-)Revolution” in *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (Ann Arbor: Pluto, 2005), 10-15.

Martha offers the church a glimpse into the reality of a liberative theology and homiletic that offers the possibility of envisioning life for the poor that defies conventional thinking. The liberative homiletic invites the church into pursuing a balm for the traumas inflicted on those who are economically exploited. It suggests standards of living for all men and women not determined by their economic utility and rejects economism's declaration that such thinking is irrational. A liberative homiletic suggests that diminishing the disparity between the wealthy and the poor is not irrational. A liberative homiletic suggests that the church and its congregants reject the rampant individualism that drives consumption and insists that this is not irrational.²² The pursuit of equality for the poor and vulnerable, in spite of the continued persistence of economic exploitation, is not irrational. This acceptance of alternative possibilities for human existence made visible through a liberative homiletic is unfathomable within neoliberalism but is what the example of the ministry of Jesus invites the church to consider. A liberative homiletic seems foolish given the magnitude of what confronts so many churches and communities. However, this is precisely what is so visibly posited by Jesus when he stands before Lazarus's tomb. If we envision ourselves standing there among the grieving spectators, we immediately see the apparent foolishness of Jesus's call for the dead man to come forth. In like manner, the church is homiletically challenged to stand with the poor and foolishly trumpet life in the midst of those who are forgotten or believed to be dead.²³

A liberative homiletic calls the church to do more than simply retire to the security of suburban sanctuaries, rest in religious rhetoric, or retreat to the safety of non-threatening rituals that refuse to challenge the powers of the status quo. Instead, the church is called to stand before the sepulchers of poor communities and to cry out (in its preaching and other praxes) in pursuit of an eschatologically defined but materially experienced liberation that gives life and hope to the vulnerable. Like the Johannine Jesus, the church informed by a liberative homiletic musters the strength to stand even amid tears and broken hearts, to lift their heads to heaven, lay their hands to the work of the earth, and to proclaim and pursue life and victory for those in need.

The Homiletical Call to the work of Liberation

A liberative homiletic can accomplish even more than this, as evidenced by the troubling conclusion of the Lazarus narrative. In the narrative, Jesus first mentions the crowd in his prayer, indicating to the reader that he has not lost sight of them in this miraculous moment. Jesus then speaks to Lazarus, calling him by name from the tomb but also speaking in the presence of the crowd, forming an *inclusio*. The individual and the community are joined as Lazarus emerges from the tomb. However, the connection made is somewhat unexpected. Within the framework of the text, Lazarus has been liberated from the tomb by Jesus's action but Lazarus is not yet fully free. He has been restored by divine intervention, but that which renders Lazarus genuinely human, his identity as symbolized by his face, remains covered by the trauma of his entombment.²⁴ Emphasizing the importance of Lazarus's complete liberation, and the critical role of the community, Jesus invites the community surrounding Lazarus to participate in his liberation by helping to remove his grave clothes. A liberative homiletic recognizes that, while the church may hold to the spiritual implications of its service to the community, it is also called

²² Rebecca M. Blank and William McGurn, *Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics and Justice* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2004).

²³ Charles L. Campbell and Johan Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel As a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University, 2012), 18.

²⁴ Rick Moody, "Notes on Lazarus," *Conjunctions*, no. 69 (2016): 94.

to pursue the material liberation of those entrapped. Even if one understands the impact of neoliberalism on the church's mission within a spiritualized framework, the church must also account for the material consequences of its proclamation in word and deed. This realization offers the church an avenue for attending to the material and spiritual consequences of the evils and trauma that neoliberalism presents to the church and its community.

The efficacy of this biblical narrative as a liberative homiletical framework is rooted in the idea that the church is directly called to the ministry of liberation. A liberative homiletic links each congregant's experiences of liberation to the community's need for liberation and calls the congregation into active pursuit of liberation, both spiritual and material, for the entire community. Jesus, as described in this text, surrenders the completion of this miraculous moment to the hands of the very community that participated in the ritual of declaring the end of Lazarus's life. In like manner, the church, complicit in having thrown its hands up in surrender to the conditions which trapped the vulnerable, has been called to serve as agents of liberation. Why does this text present Jesus leaving incomplete the work of liberation if not to affirm that the church is itself instrumental to God's liberating intentions? Without the crowd's actions, Lazarus would be alive but remain tragically trapped in the residuals of his trauma. Without the involvement of the church, the vulnerable remain trapped even though the power of the gospel declares them free. Without the involvement of the church, the most vulnerable never fully experience the freedom that is theirs as persons created by a loving God.

Summary

There is great power in a liberative homiletic informed by the story of Lazarus as it provides vital theological and homiletical grounding for God's liberative purposes among us. It rightly discloses that God in Jesus Christ has chosen the poor and the exploited to be recipients of God's gracious liberation and declares that responding to the traumatization of the poor (symbolized by Lazarus) is the proper pursuit and mission of the church. This text encourages preachers to avoid the temptation of allowing liberation to be myopically warped by the lens of individualism. The preaching of the church must continue to proclaim the importance of congregations responding to the systemic causes of communal trauma. Most importantly, the Lazarus text offers the preacher an opportunity to declare the church an agent of change for its community and a beneficiary of that activity. In the church's service to the traumatized in its midst, it also experiences deeper levels of liberation. While the congregation may be constituted by some who have been freed from the death and bondage of neoliberalism, the congregation only fully experiences its liberation when it is actively engaged in the liberation of its community. This homiletical declaration of mutual dependence ensures that the church and the community are viewed as partners in one another's liberation from the economic bondage so evident around us.