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**Special Issue: Spirituality, Preaching & Bridging Racial Divides: Exploring Black
Contemplative Preaching**

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Introduction to the Essays of the Consultation on Black Contemplative Preaching

David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda D. Barnes

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Introduction to the Consultation on Black Contemplative Preaching

Deep down, preachers must sense that preaching is certainly more than just talking *about* God. For contemplative preachers, preaching is deeply rooted in and facilitates an *encounter* with God through the Holy Spirit. We begin our exploration of Black contemplative preaching mindful of that unique homiletical vision.

For this reason, as we were planning and implementing a Homiletical Theology Project (HTP) research consultation at Boston University (BU) on Black contemplative preaching, we project co-editors aimed for an encounter that would let the spirit move in academic and ecclesial spaces. And move she did. The contributors include Donyelle McCray, Edgar “Trey” Clark, Shively Smith, Anna Carter Florence, Frank Thomas, and La Ronda Barnes, whose work is set forth in this special edition gathered in Boston over three days in October 2023. We shared meals and afternoon tea together, traveled to various venues, including BU's Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center where Thurman's papers are housed, and Marsh Chapel together, and literally sat *around* a table to engage the presentations and responses. Presentation sessions began with reflections from poets and other spiritual writers and time was built-in for rest and individual reflection. Presentation sessions were also open to the public with questions and comments received from students, local and out-of-state pastors, and researchers from a variety of disciplines. Presenters and respondents reworked their papers based on the feedback received for inclusion herein. We hope that the ideas generated throughout this process will continue to be reflected on, expanded, honed, and implemented in keeping with the Spirit that birthed them. Our heartfelt thanks go to each of the presenters and respondents and to every person who helped to organize, support, and conduct the research consultation.¹

We invite you, learned reader, to explore this special issue of *Homiletic* with wonder and curiosity. Put aside what you have heard or thought about contemplative preaching or Black preaching or even how you define preaching. Allow yourself to journey with the writers as they explore what these terms have meant and can mean for anyone who feels called to say a word about the Divine, about spiritual realms, and about our embodiment of the spiritual as earthly creatures. Give yourself permission to be transported to the 19th century with Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, to the 20th century with James Baldwin, Pauli Murray, and Howard Thurman, and to a 2021 U.S. presidential inauguration with Amanda Gorman. Each of us, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender identification can be inspired by the lives of these individuals, learn from the engagement by this issue's contributors with those individuals, and contribute to the inclusive, spiritually-grounded, and ever evolving research into Black contemplative preaching.

What is Black Contemplative Preaching?

¹ Special thanks go to BUSTH's Center for Practical Theology which graciously underwrote the consultation through the gifts of the Brown Fund.

Studying Black contemplative preaching requires careful and discerning work. Within Black preaching traditions, scholars and practitioners alike sometimes regard *contemplative* preaching as a more marginal phenomenon. Those operating in Euro-American ecclesial traditions, by contrast, may sometimes try to shoe-horn Black contemplative preaching into a *Western* understanding of contemplative preachers, especially of the Medieval period. A consultation on *Black* contemplative preaching must find its way to discern not only its subject matter, but its *purpose* in relation to different Black bodies in particular. That means a deep dive into what counts as “contemplative” needs to be tested in light of an intersectionality that impacts Black preachers within their communities and marginalized preachers in dialogue with their own communities *differently*. In short, to name Black contemplative preaching is itself an act of spiritual discernment that is scholarly and accounts for experiences of White racism *and* sexism.

The difficulty described above might seem disconcerting on its face. However, our consultation benefitted from the careful work of scholarly forerunners who had already begun to grasp the uniqueness and importance of this hitherto neglected tradition within Black preaching generally. We therefore explore the definition of Black contemplative preaching by retracing the steps of Martha Simmons, Frank Thomas, and more recently, Edgar “Trey” Clark.

Simmons and Thomas describe an African American genre and method of contemplative preaching

With the publication of their landmark sermon anthology, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas compiled a wide variety of sermons across a number of historical epochs that shaped the emergence of African American preaching. In doing so, they traced the resilience of Black preachers and their communities in the crucible of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the Great Migration, the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States, and beyond. Tucked into Simmons and Thomas’s description of sermon genres from the Civil Rights period was their treatment of the genre and method of contemplative preaching.² The key identifiers of that genre for Simmons and Thomas were (1) a mystical theology or spirituality marked by “philosophical reasoning, careful observation and attentiveness” and (2) a practical engagement that leads more deeply into the world. Their brief, two-page section on the African American contemplative sermon from the mid-twentieth century period was of course inspired chiefly by the work and influence of Howard Thurman, Dean of Chapel at Howard University, Boston University, co-founding pastor of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, and spiritual advisor to some of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. There was both a profound spiritual depth and a social-political reach to Thurman’s contemplative life. The same insight and deep debt to Howard Thurman was likewise felt by members of our consultation. We gathered at the BU School of Theology and explored Marsh Chapel, where Thurman had the reputation for preaching not just *about* God but for an encounter *with* God. With moments of mystic silence and profound public, prophetic questions, Thurman preached in a unique way and as a deep expression of his own contemplative heart. He

² Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas, Eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons 1750 to the Present* (New York: WW Norton, 2010), 493-94.

aimed homiletically to connect hearers with the ineffable God and to help hearers imaginatively and practically connect with each other and their world in the Spirit.

And yet, as one leafs through Simmons and Thomas's massive volume of sermons, one would have to admit that Black contemplative preaching does not likely emerge *ex nihilo* in the middle of the 20th century in the person of Howard Thurman. Indeed, Simmons and Thomas are careful to mention other contemplative preachers who helped to carry the banner with him. The editors mention Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Gardner Taylor, Vernon Johns, William Holms Borders, and Benjamin Mays as preachers who likewise hold together contemplative spirituality and/or mystical theology coupled with deepening practices of social and political engagement.³ Yet when one probes the epic compilation of African American preaching in Simmons and Thomas's edited volume, one encounters a similar though perhaps not identical interdependence of the mystical and embodied worldly engagement in other preachers as well. In the final section of their anthology, for example, Pauli Murray's sermon appears.⁴ While Murray's sermon in these pages does not fully bear witness to their own mystical interests, the research of one of our consultation members, Donyelle McCray, is devoted to understanding a similar relationship of the mystical and the public that undergirds Murray's life and work. Pauli Murray, we are learning, is propelled by the contemplative life as well. In a similar way, other researchers like Anna Carter Florence and La Ronda Barnes have been gravitating to the sermons and lives of Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, whose preaching we learn of in the early 19th century section of Simmons and Thomas's volume.⁵ Lee and Elaw, too, have mystical visions or experiences--and in the very face of the double threat of White racism and sexism hold to a high sense of preacherly vocation rooted in their experience of God's call. This vocation likewise links a mystical theology/spirituality to an embodied engagement that leads them to preach not only against slavery, but in the case of nineteenth-century preacher Zilpha Elaw, *to slaveholders, too*. Their contemplation included a deep experience of God that led them as preachers to cross divides in the world.

All this is to say that Simmons and Thomas's labor of love in *Preaching with Sacred Fire* was for our 2023 consultation more of an *opening* than a mere delimitation of the genre of Black contemplative preaching. Contemplative preaching well may be a thin strand within Black preaching traditions, but it is long and durable and variable! And there is a particularly enduring strain of the contemplative preaching tradition in the Black church that must be accounted for along the lines of race, yes, but also gender and gender identity.

Trey Clark's emerging definition

In his 2022 article in this very journal, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers," Clark aims to offer a definition of Black contemplative preaching that builds on Simmons and Thomas's insights. In doing so, Clark is also interested in identifying present preachers who evidence elements of a Black contemplative perspective. The chief example, however, remains Howard Thurman whose work is paradigmatic. Indeed, Clark finds in his study of Thurman's preaching ample evidence of the

³ Ibid., 494.

⁴ Ibid., 786-93.

⁵ Ibid., 161-71.

three features he posits as central to his definition: “*Black contemplative preaching is sermonic discourse that (1) emerges from a habitus or disposition of prayer, (2) employs a mystical hermeneutical lens, and (3) embodies a meditative homiletical style in order to lead listeners into an inner divine encounter that contributes to the outer flourishing of African Americans and all creation (ital. ours).*”⁶

With this definition, Clark succeeds in affirming the central criterion that emerges from Simmons and Thomas. There is a deep connection between the mystical theology and spiritual practices of contemplation that facilitates an “encounter” among hearers and leads to social and worldly engagement. It can be said at the same time that Clark also broadens aspects that Simmons and Thomas have named. Clark prioritizes first the “habitus” of prayer. For Clark, contemplative practice and mystical theology deeply form the person of the preacher. Clark’s mention of the telos of the more meditative homiletical style of encounter represents a somewhat broader umbrella in what he calls “the outer flourishing of African Americans and all creation.” Yet what joins the two definitions is a concern that Black contemplative preaching be deeply focused on the divine encounter while never failing to connect that contemplative life to the outward realities of human connection, sociality, political life, and creation itself.

With the second part of Clark’s definition, the “mystical hermeneutic,” however, our definition becomes both more specific than Simmons and Thomas’s and yet also potentially open to a kind of Black contemplative preaching that is not always mentioned and brought into view. Of course, Clark’s “mystical *hermeneutic*” certainly finds resonance in very many of the sermon examples anthologized by Simmons and Thomas and identified in Clark’s important article. Most of these sermons start with a biblical text and are unfailingly *hermeneutical* in that sense. Indeed, the insightful work of consultation member Shively Smith gives great weight and depth to this notion in her close reading of biblical texts by some of the nineteenth-century Black women we mentioned above. But what if the term “mystical hermeneutic” contained an even wider valence than the Bible per se? Clark mentions in passing in his article that Thurman’s preaching would not always rely on a scriptural source, but sometimes on a *person* whose inner life of encounter or action was generative. Clark writes, “some of his sermons encouraged the contemplation of spiritual exemplars and mystics in history as seen in his sermon series entitled ‘Men Who’ve Walked with God,’ which explored the spiritual wisdom of figures such as Buddha, St. Francis, and Meister Eckhart.”⁷ Implicit here is the notion of a mystical hermeneutic also capable of interfaith *and* interreligious depth!

Going forward as collaborative researchers

All this is to say that the HTP Consultation on Black Contemplative Preaching was aware of the strides made in naming and defining the phenomenon under study. Even so, the encounter of leading and emerging scholars around the consultation table was sufficiently loving, other-regarding, and spiritually discerning that it began to celebrate those gains by pushing the definition even further along. Shively Smith emphasized that the study of the genre of Black contemplative preaching would benefit by dialoguing with the deep and persistent work on genres in the biblical guild. More than one consultation member certainly resonated with Clark’s own

⁶ Clark, “Hidden in Plain Sight,” Vol.47.2 (2022), 6.

⁷ Ibid.,10.

stated concern that “the meditative nature of Black contemplative preaching may reinforce the silencing of Black women.”⁸ It was telling that so many of the consultation’s members focused in their articles on Black contemplative *women*. In addition, Clark’s extension of the mystical hermeneutic to include Thurman’s own tendency toward “contemplation of Scripture *and other sources*, (emphasis ours)”⁹ proved generative in more than one of the articles to follow.

In short, the desire to press forward with the definition of Black contemplative preaching, despite its neglect both in African-American communities and in the Euro-centric tradition, is important because it remains an *unfinished task*. We profited from having Thomas and Clark at our common consultation table. We rejoiced in pressing the definition together and ultimately putting our own oars into the water.

Our Consultation’s Telos: Bridging Racial Divides

Howard Thurman did more than provide a focus to genres and definitions for Black contemplative preaching. Thurman’s drive to connect across racial divisions offered us an embodied instantiation of the Black contemplative desire for renewed praxis in the world as a *telos* for preachers in this thin tradition. Thurman’s work in connection with the Civil Rights movement, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, and his preaching at BU’s Marsh chapel kept reminding us all of *what was really at stake* for a Black contemplative pulpit. We as a consultation took that to heart and sought to integrate as a central telos for our collaboration on Black contemplative preaching. There is something about Black contemplative preaching that aims toward connecting in the midst of racial divides. This affected deeply the kind of papers produced and the ways in which respondents held our academic work accountable.

A Preview of Our Work: Opening Up to Black Contemplative Preaching

With the publication of these articles and responses, we aim to invite you readers around the table to join this emerging scholarly discussion about Black contemplative preaching. Along the way, you will see an overriding concern for how Black contemplative preaching holds together mystical theology and spirituality with different embodied engagements in the world. Black contemplative preaching, in other words, links the contemplative encounter with God deeply to the desire to bridge racial divides in embodied praxis. Beyond that, readers will note how Clark’s more developed definition of the habitus of prayer, a mystical hermeneutic, and a meditative style that leads to a divine encounter and flourishing, calls forth exchanges around the consultation table that are key for the work ahead. What all is encompassed in a mystical hermeneutic? What is the range of sources that a mystical hermeneutic interprets? And how does the marker of a meditative style interact with those whose chief struggle is to come to voice in the first place?

The conversation in the pages to follow begins with Donyelle McCray’s article, “Contemplative Agitator: Tracing the Contours of Pauli Murray’s Black Contemplative Homiletic.” The Civil Rights figure Pauli Murray has been long known as an activist and attorney who became an Episcopal priest later in life. McCray digs deep into Murray’s life and ministry to bring to light the ways in which Murray’s vocation was marked by bridge building

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

through the vehicle of preaching. McCray then explores three elements of Murray's contemplative homiletic: a "posture of wonder" about human identity, drawing intercessions for Murray's listeners in the sermon, and highlighting saints and Ancestors as sources of wisdom. A response by BU practical theologian Claire Wolfteich affirms and expands upon McCray's interest in studying Murray's life *and* preaching and presses the question to include the role of biography in spirituality studies as a source alongside Scripture, tradition, and reason.

The second article by Edgar "Trey" Clark carries the conversation forward by considering 2021 Presidential Inauguration poet Amanda Gorman as a contemplative preacher. Clark's article, "Spirit, Spoken Word, and the Search for Common Ground," does so by invoking the bridge-building work of Howard Thurman in relation to what Richard Rohr calls Gorman's "poetic prophecy" on that day. Understood pneumatologically, Gorman's poem is "Spirit-inspired, contemplative proclamation outside the traditional pulpit that bridges various racial, religious, and cultural divides." Clark then returns to his definition of Black contemplative preaching and helpfully enlarges some of his three elements—especially noting the importance of drawing on sources in Scripture but also "ancestral wisdom, philosophy, poetry, hymns." This allows Clark to envision a fluidity to Black contemplative preaching that provides a sufficiently open description so that its identifiable features can be recognized as "configured" outside the pulpit. It further allows Clark to unpack Gorman's own formation and "sermon" and to identify how preachers can learn from her. In response, Donyelle McCray finds Clark's alignment of poem and sermon as fruitful and promising. She wonders whether there is something unique about the rhetorical space that they open—like Thurman's common ground, yes, but also like a "clearing" as Tony Morrison narrates in *Beloved*. In short, McCray sees Clark's paper as opening *questions* for deeper scholarly engagement of Black contemplative preaching.

In the third article, New Testament scholar and preacher Shively Smith takes us deeper into the work of Howard Thurman. Her article, "Preaching [and Teaching] Thurman's New Testament Spirituality," Smith becomes aware that she is engaging in a consultation that brings homileticians and New Testament hermeneuticians alongside each other. A similar notion grounds her treatment of Thurman's work which she understands as a "hermeneutical and homiletical New Testament spirituality." For Smith, this does not mean interpreting the Bible on its own; there is in fact a genius to Thurman's work that brings various sources and spiritualities alongside in conversation: "Preaching and teaching Thurman's NT spirituality requires the boldness to be involved in the religious experience as a series of experiments, instigations, and 'crossing great divides.'" In response to Smith's article, BU pastoral theologian Eunil David Cho sees an opening for embracing yet again "a more culturally responsive reading of texts." Cho then points to the work of psychologist William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Along the way, Cho invites Smith (and indeed our whole consultation) to embrace lived experience and follow Smith's *example* in bringing critical biblical exegesis alongside culturally responsive readings of Scripture.

The fourth article in this special issue represents Anna Carter Florence's return to the nineteenth-century Black woman preacher Jarena Lee, whom she first researched in her seminal work, *Preaching as Testimony*. Her article, "'A Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind': Jarena Lee's Call to Preach the Gospel—and Open Our Minds," represents a reappraisal of Lee's work and life through the lens of Black contemplative preaching. In the end, Carter Florence sees Lee as an

“invitational” model not only for her spirituality and preaching, but her ability to bridge racial divides. Along the way, she draws on Clark’s definition to understand the key ways it illuminates Lee’s preaching and life, especially the importance Clark attaches to a “mystical hermeneutic,” which Carter Florence sees as impacting Lee’s openness to scripture as a script for her life, sources of interfaith and interreligious wisdom, as well as her own emerging sense of identity in the mystical presence of God. New Testament scholar Shively Smith responds to Carter Florence’s paper by drawing out the unique way that Jarena Lee uses Scripture as a script while setting it alongside Lee’s own autobiographical writing in her memoirs and Lee’s “call to write.” Smith points out that figures like Lee (and the others our consultation have been studying) are not something we just read; *they read us*.

In “The Sermon as Essay: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher,” Frank Thomas extends the conversation around Black contemplative preaching to this well-known twentieth-century writer and public figure. As Thomas plumbs the depths of Baldwin’s essay, “Down at the Cross,” he reminds his readers not only that Baldwin was a young Pentecostal preacher but also that the very form of Baldwin’s work in this essay invites readers into a “conversation with God.” This conversation, however, is no easy one: as with the great contemplatives, it also deals deeply with the absence of God. The point for Black contemplative preaching, however, is for hearers to have their own deep conversations with God as part of their own inward journeys, which Baldwin in his own unique and challenging way exhibits. Suffolk University English scholar D. Quentin Miller responds to Thomas’s article by pointing out the myriad ways other parts of Baldwin’s work demonstrate a similar move. This entails, for example, Baldwin’s rejection of the notion of safety in any way, including religion. Miller quotes Baldwin’s biographer David Lemming in a way that resonates with Thomas’s contemplative take. Baldwin, Lemming says, “left the church in order to preach the gospel.” That gospel of love is not “safe;” nor is love what we think it is.

In the final essay, “A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a Twenty-first-century Womanist Contemplative Homiletic,” La Ronda Barnes returns to nineteenth-century Black woman preacher Zilpha Elaw as a model. Key to this, for Barnes, is the relationship of particularity and deep contemplation as a means for making connections and bridging divides. Drawing on the contemplative notion of “Oneing,” Barnes holds to a kind of unity in difference that itself is able to embrace particularity and difference with others. Along the way, Barnes places the life and work of Zilpha Elaw in critical conversation with Thurman as well as Womanist theologians Phillis Sheppard and Karen Baker-Fletcher. The paper concludes with Barnes’s own “letter to Zilpha” so that the imaginative dialogue and the connecting may continue. Harvard spirituality scholar Stephanie Paulsell responds to Barnes’s work by noting the convergence it has with works in contemplative spirituality that are likewise committed to the life and death of communities. Paulsell points out that Barnes’s Elaw-informed, Womanist contemplative homiletic for today means “to speak and be heard across seemingly uncrossable borders....” However Black contemplative preaching is to be defined, it must account for this deep connection between introspection and particularity.

Going Forward Together as a Field

We hope you find this new conversation in the field of homiletics an enlightening and inspiring one. We demonstrate, once again, in the pages to come that preaching is never just one thing, but a beautiful multiplicity. Our desire is that you also bear witness to the beauty here and allow this new collaborative research about Black contemplative preaching to continue to thicken our work together as field. Along the way, may you learn more than just *about* something. May you encounter how Black contemplative preaching deepens us spiritually and helps us to live more profoundly beyond our divides.

**Contemplative Agitator:
Tracing the Contours of Pauli Murray's Black Contemplative Homiletic¹**

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Abstract: *This article explores the preaching of Pauli Murray (1910–1985), an American poet, activist, attorney, professor, and Episcopal priest. Though aptly described as a renaissance person, Murray's fundamental vocation was that of bridge builder and preaching was instrumental to this work. Preaching became a means of reframing the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens. After describing the appeal of contemplative preaching and charting key aspects of Murray's preacherly formation, I discuss three important hallmarks of Murray's homiletic. These include: (1) maintaining a posture of wonder and irresolution when exploring human identity, (2) weaving intercessions for the listeners into sermons, and (3) invoking the wisdom of saints and Ancestors.*

A Note on Pronouns

This paper focuses on Pauli Murray, a freedom fighter, attorney, poet, Episcopal priest, and a person for whom self-definition was very costly. The barriers were many and varied and one concerns language itself. Today most scholars describe Murray as gender nonconforming, but Murray had less agency around gender expression than many do today and lived during a time when binary pronouns were commonly used by people of all genders. In conversation, I typically use she/they pronouns for Murray, but this paper includes many more she/her pronouns. I use them for a couple reasons: First, I use she/her pronouns to maintain consistency with sources and direct quotations in which Murray uses she series pronouns. Murray's gender identity was only shared with a tiny inner circle that excluded most close friends and relatives, and Murray usually moved through public spaces as a woman. Secondly, I use she/her pronouns to reflect Murray's very intentional usage of she/her pronouns in ministry contexts around the dawning of women's ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church, USA. As just one example, in a ministry license dated July 13, 1980, and signed by Bishop John T. Walker, Murray has stricken through the "he" and "his" pronouns and replaced them with "she" and "her."

A study of Murray's life story and archive reveals that terms that might grate Murray early in life are readily embraced at other points. In every case, I try to honor the fullness of Murray's identity and the need for the visibility of historical figures who were transgender or nonbinary. And I respect the fact that we are working with historical fragments and don't know which pronouns Murray would choose today. Writing about people from earlier historical contexts whose gender transitions were gradual or whose gender identities were not publicly known during their lifetime requires attention to the uniqueness of each case, and openness to ambiguity.²

¹ Portions of this article, particularly concerning Pauli Murray's homiletical emphasis on intercession and identity as a child of God, are also included in a forthcoming German publication, Donyelle McCray, "Consolations of a Pixie Priest" in *Queer im Pfarrhaus*, eds. Katrin Burja and Traugott Roser (LIT Verlag, 2024).

² Jen Manion, "Transgender Representations, Identities, and Communities" in *The Oxford Handbook of American Women's and Gender History*, ed. Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor and Lisa G. Materson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 313.

Pauli Murray was a path-breaking poet, activist, attorney, professor, and Episcopal priest whose legacy of human rights work continues to reverberate. Murray once said, “If anyone should ask a Negro woman what is her greatest achievement, her honest answer would be, ‘I survived.’”³ That survival was fueled by a healthy tension between prayerful contemplation and activism. For Murray, contemplation represented the lush inner world of imagination as well as the realm of cosmic wholeness beyond the sphere of time—a realm of mysterious divine action that exceeds human comprehension. Activism was rooted in the visible world of action and results—of brokenness demanding urgent, concrete human response.

Sometimes, holding this tension could be wearying. Murray makes this clear in a poem entitled “Conflict,” which depicts the intense wrestling between the poet and the warrior within.⁴ The poem suggests that peace between the contemplative and the activist is no easy feat. But in lived experience, more often this tension was enlivening and productive. The twentieth-century Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton argued that the prophet’s periods of quiet contemplation were not wholly focused on preparation for apostolic ministry or replenishment when public activities ceased, rather that prophets were most themselves during their quiet moments.⁵ The contemplative and the public witness were inseparable. This idea is borne out in Pauli Murray’s life and ministry.

Though aptly described as a renaissance person, Murray’s fundamental vocation was that of bridge builder and her preaching is instrumental to this work. Preaching reframed the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens. By situating herself firmly in the contemplative spiritual tradition, Murray challenges some long-held assumptions about its primary voices and aims. After noting the significant facets of her preacherly formation and aspects of contemplative preaching that would appeal to Murray, I will discuss three key hallmarks of her approach to preaching. These include foregrounding listeners’ identity as children of God, weaving intercessions into sermons, and invoking the wisdom of the Ancestors. Overall, I hope to present Pauli Murray as a figure who illumines critical dimensions of Black contemplative preaching and who troubles tidy assumptions about Black preaching more broadly. Murray’s example points to the range of models, aims, histories, and spiritualities that fit beneath the canopy of the term “Black preaching”—a range as broad as Black religious experience itself. Further, studying the preaching of figures like Pauli Murray is crucial to the flourishing of Black preaching. At its best, African American sacred rhetoric resists reduction and makes space within itself for minority and even contrarian perspectives.⁶ A growing understanding of divinely inspired speech requires attention to normative approaches as well as those of apparent outliers.

More than Resistance

Too often, the public expression of resistance is treated as the defining feature of Black culture and the primary frame for its study. The heavy emphasis on outwardness and publicness

³ Rosalind Rosenberg, *Jane Crow: The Life of Pauli Murray* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 5.

⁴ Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1971), 70.

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 260.

⁶ Toni Morrison touches on the dynamic I am trying to articulate when she says, “Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath them that is incomplete.” Toni Morrison, “An Interview with Toni Morrison,” interview by Nellie McKay, *Contemporary Literature* 24, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 429. I think of the canon of African American sacred rhetoric as similarly “incomplete,” continuously open, agitating, and evolving.

results in insufficient attention to Black interiority. As a consequence, Kevin Quashie argues that the multiplicity within Blackness is flattened—reduced to a public response to whiteness.⁷ While Murray treated activism as a moral imperative, she found it equally important to stay in touch with that part of herself that was “unfettered by race” because this link offered an internal buoy and vital source of perspective in a racialized society.⁸ This interior aspect of religious experience, which precedes and exceeds responses to racism and other dehumanizing influences, is essential to understanding Murray’s religious formation.

Murray’s early experiences in Black Episcopal congregations proved to be helpful in this regard. The Rev. Absalom Jones, compatriot of Bishop Richard Allen, and the Rev. Alexander Crummell were instrumental in linking some of the best aspects of Anglican theology—its quietude, optimism, high view of human experience, appreciation of history as a source of divine revelation, and intellectual curiosity—with aesthetics and cultural traditions from the African diaspora.

Just shy of eight months old, Murray was baptized by the Rev. George Freeman Bragg, a priest and journalist who advocated for racial equality in Baltimore while instilling in his parishioners a sense of belovedness and capaciousness that defied their daily experiences. Murray’s parents died during her youth, and she was raised in Durham, North Carolina by a maternal aunt, Pauline Dame, and maternal grandparents, Robert and Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald. In Durham, she attended St. Titus Episcopal Church, a small predominantly African American congregation that met in a “tiny frame chapel.”⁹ Over the course of multiple summers, Murray was nurtured by three other small African American Episcopal congregations in southern Maryland (though all part of the Episcopal Diocese of Washington): St. Simon’s, St. Mary’s, and St. Philip’s Aquasco.¹⁰ Affection drives Murray’s memories of growing up in these congregations. For example, she remembers the loving dispositions of people like Bishop Henry B. Delaney, and cherishes the time when, upon his deathbed, he blessed Murray and called her a “child of destiny.”¹¹ Delaney’s blessing was representative of a broader pattern among clergy of helping parishioners embrace their full personhood. The Christian contemplative tradition offered vital resources for this process.

Appealing Aspects of Contemplative Preaching

A review of Murray’s journals, letters, and theological scholarship suggests an affinity for certain preaching strategies that can be tied to contemplative spirituality. Chief among these strategies is the accent on divine adoration. Argument falters in this endeavor and a more non-agonistic tone follows. The gospel, as Amos Wilder argues in *Early Christian Rhetoric*, breaks the rules of rhetoric and manifests as a revelation or a “new utterance.”¹²

What the contemplative preacher proclaims is wonder—a wonder so all-absorbing that it recalibrates and unmoors the sermon’s nerve center.¹³ Preferred subgenres are wisdom and

⁷ Kevin E. Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 11.

⁸ Quashie, *Sovereignty*, 14, 21.

⁹ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹ Rosenberg, *Jane Crow*, 355.

¹² Amos Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 21.

¹³ Bernard of Clairvaux provides an example of this effusiveness in a sermon on Cant 1:3. Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 66.

didache, but whatever the chosen form, wonder at God, Creation, and the miracle of human life come to the forefront. The contemplative preacher is less inclined to *explain* Christ's Passion and more likely to respond with awe. Unraveled by the experience of God's love, the preacher can only stand before the listeners with great humility and marvel at what God might be up to next. Whatever the surface level theme, the core message is summed up by Saint Francis, "My God and all! What art Thou? And what am I?"¹⁴ The notion that the empirical world could be upended by stupefying divine action intrigued Murray.

Murray would also be drawn by the slow and deliberate consideration of the most elemental existential questions: Who is God? How is God known? What does it mean to be human and what are the ends of human life? Historically, Christian contemplatives have often bracketed urgent questions regarding contemporary life and examined them indirectly within larger existential questions. Henri Nouwen, whose work Murray read and quoted, understood contemplation as a practice of looking closely at life's nerve center. Drawing on Merton, Nouwen describes the contemplative as a seer whose outlook on the cosmos is unveiled and whose illusions about human life are stripped.¹⁵ With this consciousness, contemplative perception zooms in on the material world, finding in small, seemingly insignificant matter—the ridges of a peach pit, a swallow's feather—portals to the divine.

A third understanding of contemplative preaching is one that emphasizes the overlay between the seen and unseen worlds. This, too, would appeal to Murray. One of the more helpful narrators of this overlay is the English writer and spiritual director, Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941). Underhill authored *Abba*, a book Murray described as "one of the greatest books I have ever experienced."¹⁶ In other books and in formal retreat meditations that functioned much like sermons, Underhill attuned her audiences to the hidden influence of the eternal realm. She portrays Christians as "amphibious" creatures who crawl around in the realm of the visible and swim in the realm of the invisible.¹⁷ Yet the amphibiousness of which Underhill speaks does not allow for treating encounters with the invisible world as escapes from the pressures of daily life in a human order where justice is rare and fleeting; Underhill says Christians are called to "contemplative action."¹⁸ Sermons are the manna that feed such action by emboldening holy living. The vibrant spirituality that Underhill seeks (and is manifest in Murray's life) involves an intellectual humility about what can be seen and known through the empirical world but still requires acting on one's ethical convictions. So, there are roles for active and restive postures, or what might loosely be called outwardness and inwardness.¹⁹

¹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *The Ways of the Spirit*, ed. Grace Adolphsen Brame (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 179.

¹⁵ Henri Nouwen Papers, University of Toronto, St. Michael's College, Box 37, folder 159-1-19, bound volume 1 Ch. 17.

¹⁶ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 15; Evelyn Underhill, *Abba: Meditations on the Lord's Prayer* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1940).

¹⁷ Evelyn Underhill, *The Golden Sequence: A Fourfold Study of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Dutton, 1933), 45. Underhill builds on this sensitivity to the infinite in her many retreat meditations, especially "Inner Grace and Outward Sign." Underhill, *Ways*, 145–191.

¹⁸ John Francis, "Evelyn Underhill's Developing Spiritual Theology: A Discovery of Authentic Spiritual Life and the Place of Contemplation," Evelyn Underhill Association, <http://evelynunderhill.org/evelyn-underhills-developing-spiritual-theology-a-discovery-of-authentic-spiritual-life-and-the-place-of-contemplation-by-john-r-francis/>.

¹⁹ Though it has a long history in Christian spirituality, I am struggling with the inward-outward frame due to its woodenness and binary flavor. In addition to the active-restive postures described above, another set of helpful paradigms might be drawn from John McClure's discussion of the centripetal-centrifugal impulses in biblical interpretation and identity formation. John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 17–18, 26–29, 57.

Given Murray's fascination with autobiography and memoir, she would also be drawn to the biographical sermons that are so well deployed in contemplative spirituality. One of the early church fathers, John Chrysostom (c. 349–407) preached biographical sermons on the Apostle Paul that serve as illustrative examples of this tradition. Enamored with Paul, Chrysostom preached many homilies on him, sometimes focusing an entire message on a body part such as Paul's hands or feet.²⁰ In due course, listeners receive portraits of discipleship and are encouraged to develop the virtues that ground Paul's piety.

At their best, Chrysostom's sermons, and those preached by others in this vein, present the saint as a prism for examining God's action on the individual and in the world. The uniqueness of the person's story is affirmed as is adherence to a pattern of being found and wooed by God, and then risking, falling short, trying again, and despite obvious limitations, radiating some aspect of virtue. In other words, there are periods of delay and apparent failure before the saint's efforts bear fruit, disabusing Christians of their demands for immediate results. The saint's participation in God's revelation becomes a warrant for the community. These saintly snapshots take listeners beyond abstract, systematic theology to a theology that is lived.²¹ The biographical sermon suggests that, along with stories of Jesus, faith communities need stories of people who share their weaknesses, ambivalence, and failures.

Despite all that would appeal to Murray in the Christian contemplative tradition, some obvious critiques emerge. For one, the tradition has been largely approached as the study of a handful of exemplars instead of the ordinary Christians who had such a profound influence on her faith.²² The tradition's association with European saints, spaces, and references, have also overdetermined its paradigms, emphasizing themes like the threefold way (purgation, illumination, and union) and foregrounding virtues like meekness and servanthood which have more complex layers of meaning when read through the lenses of race, gender, disability, or other dimensions of cultural particularity.

Early Preacherly Formation

Decades before entering the pulpit, Murray's early formation as a preacher began with writing poetry. Inasmuch as creative writing sharpened her appreciation for the powers of language—particularly the power of metaphor and imagery—it served as an elemental introduction to sermon composition. But the substance of many of her poems suggest they were also instances of praying aloud and denouncing injustice. In the spring of 1959, for example, Murray read that Mack Charles Parker, a twenty-three-year-old African American man, was abducted from his jail cell prior to his trial and lynched near Poplarville, Mississippi. Drawing on petitions in the Book of Common Prayer, Murray wrote "Collect for Poplarville" to narrate the particulars of racialized terror—dogs, firearms, burning crosses—and the Christian duty to pray for one's enemies.²³

"Collect for Poplarville" has notable hybridity. It is at once a prayer and an exhortation. In keeping with Katie Geneva Cannon's guidance on preaching, the poem distills "biblical

²⁰ Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 113–115.

²¹ Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky, *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²² Philip Sheldrake comments on this issue when noting, "western spirituality has been dominated by certain spiritual, cultural and social elites" and "our historical method has tended to highlight these." Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, 2d ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 7.

²³ Murray, *Dark Testament*, 38.

conflicts of dominance and submission, assertion and deference, the righted and the outlawed, the propertied and dispossessed.”²⁴ In this poem and others such as “For Mack C. Parker,” “Ruth,” “Psalm of Deliverance,” “The Newer Cry,” and “Nazarene,” Murray the poet is also Murray the seer and prophet, or, to draw on a term she uses, the “poet-prophet.”²⁵

As much as Murray cherished writing poetry, she was more inclined to label herself as a “‘prose-oet,’ a transitional writer whose work is a bridge between lyric poetry and a highly sensitive prose.”²⁶ Under the umbrella of prose-oet, Murray also had the freedom to claim a voice with more multiplicity—perhaps better accommodating the contemplative and the agitator within. The prose-oet also had the potential of bridging different audiences and as a result forming new communities of listeners.

Murray understood poets and prophets as artists who worked in overlapping territory.²⁷ One of her first poetic mentors was Langston Hughes, whom she considered a “prophet.”²⁸ Shortly after hearing him at a reading, the two struck up a friendship through playful correspondence and on occasion, the two poets even wrote on parallel themes such as the Harlem Riot and the Roosevelt administration’s treatment of African Americans.²⁹ Both writers also have an affinity for centering poems on prayers that are offered to God in moments of desperation.

On the whole, Murray’s poetry reflects a more orthodox view of God, humans, and Creation, while Hughes’s approach is more complex. Though the specifics of his religious beliefs were closely guarded, faith served as an important theme in his poetry, and one way he addressed it was through his exploration of doubt and disillusionment.³⁰ For example, cynicism is inescapable in his poem, “God to Hungry Child,” a monologue in which a deity who made the world for wealthy people scolds a famished child for failing to own stock.³¹ In “Christ in Alabama” and “Goodbye Christ,” some of Hughes’s most memorable reflections on lynching, he contemplates the divine abandonment of African Americans.³²

In other instances, Hughes marvels at the miracle of African American faith amid desperate circumstances. Hughes’s poem, “Hope for Harlem,” considers the texture of faith in an urban context by highlighting the prayers of a person living in slum housing.³³ The petitioner seems to have more concern for neighbors facing a similar plight than the landlord. What is perhaps most beautiful in the poem is the disinherited petitioner’s childlike faith. Such faith comes to the forefront in Hughes’s poem “Feet o’ Jesus” as well when the reader overhears the prayer of a petitioner, who, despite facing immense sorrow, is still able to stand and seems to

²⁴ Katie Geneva Cannon, “Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church” in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 60.

²⁵ Murray, *Dark Testament*, 39–47, 54–55, 68; Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, n.p.

²⁷ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 207.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 166. Murray describes Hughes as a prophet in a sermon dated December 12, 1982, and entitled, “The Prophetic Impulse.” This sermon opens with Hughes’s poem, “Harlem.”

²⁹ I discuss Hughes’s influence on Murray in Donyelle C. McCray, “Pauli Murray In & Out of the Pulpit,” *Preaching the Fear of God in a Fear-Filled World: Proceedings from the 13th Conference of Societas Homiletica, Durham, 2018. Studia Homiletica vol 12 (Homiletische Perspektiven/ Homiletic Pers)* (LIT Verlag, 2021): 50–51.

³⁰ Wallace D. Best, *Langston’s Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 67–107.

³¹ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1995), 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 143, 166.

³³ *Ibid.*, 436.

overshadow a “little” Jesus.³⁴ In contrast to reflections on how small humans are in relation to God, Hughes depicts an everyday person who is a spiritual giant, one who seems to loom over an infant Jesus, unaware of her own power. By refusing a saccharine spirituality, Hughes urges Murray and other mentees to reckon with the beauty and complexity of Black life.

Hughes was not the only person who helped Murray link poetry and preaching. For several years she attended St. Mark’s in the Bowery Church in New York, a congregation that over the course of its history included illustrious poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, Khalil Gibran, and W.H. Auden. These figures and others in the congregation treated poetry as part of the church’s prophecy, essentially expanding the church’s pulpit in communal poetry readings. The practice of reading and listening to poetry enabled writers (and other artists for that matter) to share more directly in the proclamation of the gospel. Whether listening to the poetry of fellow parishioners or writing her own, Murray’s poetic practices enhanced her observational skills, linguistic precision, and appreciation for ambiguity. It may have also sharpened her imagination. All these attributes strengthened her preaching.

As gifted as Murray was with turning phrases and adding bits of humor, her poetry also flowed into the delivery of her sermons. Murray’s sermons took a staid form, progressing in argument with less of a parallel progression in the energy of the delivery. Yet it should be stressed that Murray was recognized as the first African American woman who was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church, USA. There were very few women priests during the time when she was preaching, making her entry into the pulpit a moment of drama. When congregants saw her occupy the sacred desk, they often saw a woman or an African American woman preaching for the first time. The “poetry,” then, was in the performance, in the practice of showing up and reinterpreting the gendered space of the pulpit. In this respect, Murray’s simple, Quaker-like delivery style is at once contemplative and consistent with the rhetorical approaches seen in the preaching of more expressive Black denominational traditions where the truth of the message is not merely spoken but poetically performed in rhythmic phrases, rhyme, and gesture.³⁵

Hallmarks of Pauli Murray’s Black Contemplative Homiletic

Murray had a vibrant preaching ministry that involved a considerable amount of guest preaching. The settings for sermons consisted primarily of Episcopal and mainline congregations on the east coast of the U.S. She preached in both predominantly Black congregations and predominantly white congregations. In both cases, Murray repeatedly focused on Christian identity, integrated periods of prayerful reflection, and highlighted Christian exemplars.

Identity exploration

A study of Murray’s sermon manuscripts and messages recorded on cassette tapes reveals repeated emphasis on the listener’s identity as a child of God. This identity precedes and subverts all other aspects of human identity and reveals them as partial. Murray explains:

To think of oneself as a child of God is a liberating experience; it is to free oneself from all feelings of inferiority, whether of race, or color, or sex, or age, or economic status, or position in life. When I say that I am a child of God—made in his image

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ Gardner Taylor takes similar liberties with his take on musicality in preaching, noting that it can manifest in different ways. When asked why he did not sing in his sermons, he pointed to his use of language, saying a preacher’s “words should sing!” Jared E. Alcántara, *Learning from a Legend: What Gardner C. Taylor Can Teach Us About Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 65.

(the theologians like to use the term *imago dei*)—I imply that ‘Black is beautiful,’ that White is beautiful, that Red is beautiful, or Yellow is beautiful. I do not need to make a special pleading for my sex—male or female, or in-between—to bolster self-esteem. When I truly believe that God is my Father and Mother, in short, my Creator, I am bound also to believe that all men, women, and children of whatever race, color, creed, or ethnic origin, are my sisters-and-brothers-in-Christ, whether they are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Black Muslims, members of the Judaic faith, Russian Orthodox, Buddhists, or atheists.³⁶

As children of God, Murray suggests, our call is to radiate the love that swaddles the world. This singular purpose is achieved in an endless variety of ways. A primary hindrance to it is the failure to recognize our own belovedness. Easily distracted by money, titles, achievements, or racial hierarchies, we fall prey to counterfeit identities and mistake partial dimensions of who we are as the whole. Murray tries to interrupt this pattern by reminding listeners that they are children of the Holy One who is known by many names, that the full meaning of their lives cannot be discerned in the temporal sphere, and that their identities are still unfolding. That is to say, the child of God cannot be reduced to any single facet of identity such as race, sexual orientation, or religion. Murray’s ecumenism is consistent with that of many mystics and contemplatives who see humanity’s kaleidoscopic variety as a divine gift. Rather than seeking mere tolerance or hospitality towards difference, the aim is universal siblinghood.

On a practical level, the emphasis on identity exploration means entering the central psychological and spiritual dilemmas faced by the listener. And how ought one approach such a task given that much of the tension is subconscious? Henry Mitchell and Frank Thomas suggest that preachers first identify and deconstruct the toxic tapes that run in the minds of listeners and offer life-giving substitutes that reframe the listeners’ understandings of identity.³⁷ Perhaps the most challenging task here is excavating the core issue or set of interlocking issues. To be most effective, preaching should address the underlying blueprint of the listeners’ worldview and interrupt the shame that “is all too often the dominant experience of the self.”³⁸ This homiletical approach requires reaching listeners at the subconscious level with affirmations of their true identities as beloved children of God and challenging any inner narratives that distort or inhibit self-recognition.³⁹ When this path to awareness of one’s identity is cleared, preaching functions as a bridge that unites listeners with God, the human family, and Creation.

In a video interview given shortly after her historic ordination, Murray reflects on the significance of offering the consecrated bread to worshippers at the Chapel of the Cross, the church where her grandmother (a preacher in her own right), Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald, was baptized. “For me,” Murray says, “what I was trying to communicate as I administered the bread was a lovingness for each individual who received the bread. And I went very slowly. Very often a priest may move right along the line. I didn’t. I didn’t care how long it took.”⁴⁰ Murray invests sermons with this sacramentality as well by making sermons occasions to envelop listeners in the

³⁶ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 15.

³⁷ Henry Mitchell, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 39–40; Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 9; Edward P. Wimberly, *Moving from Shame to Self-Worth: Preaching & Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 17–18.

³⁸ Wimberly, *Moving from Shame*, 124.

³⁹ Merle R. Jordan, *Taking on the Gods: The Task of the Pastoral Counselor* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 34.

⁴⁰ Pauli Murray, “On The Road” (1985), *The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice*, accessed June 2, 2024, <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/items/show/57>.

love of Christ. As Ruthanna Hooke explains in *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching*, “To preach in the power of the risen Christ is to see the other as Christ sees, which is to see with the eyes of love...[P]reaching is sacramental because it not only reveals but accomplishes love, effects love in the utterance of itself.”⁴¹ By emphasizing listeners’ identity as children of God, Murray seeks to “see the other as Christ sees” or “see with the eyes of love.”⁴²

To this end, Murray regularly makes explicitly affirming statements about racial and gender identities. With regard to gender, she suggests Jesus might return as a woman, stresses that women may have been present at the Lord’s Supper, and during a Father’s Day sermon observes that a Father-Mother or more inclusive approach to the holiday might be more appropriate.⁴³ In a similar vein, she includes affirmative references to queerness when listing the children of God. Having experienced what today might be considered a form of gender dysphoria and suffered multiple mental breakdowns as a result of pressure to conform to social norms, Murray knew these explicit, unqualified affirmations were vital. By making affirming statements about dimensions of personhood that were often maligned, she was honoring human particularity while reflecting on the sacred and still-unknown aspects of what it means to be human.

Ultimately, Murray’s preaching aims to expand the listeners’ spiritual bandwidth and deepen their sense of themselves as children of God. Two dimensions of the term “child of God” were pertinent: the notion of being a “child,” that is, utterly reliant and tenderly held in Love, and the idea of being “of God,” in other words, belonging to the Triune God and being a mysterious bearer of grace. Preaching involved exploring the vastness and wonder of human identity and allowing human multiplicity to spur questions about the aims of life.

An appreciation for the beauty of the world also seems to energize Murray’s perspective on human identity. This connection is most often implicit, as demonstrated in a 1982 sermon exploring the horror of nuclear disarmament:

What of the global effects of a full-scale nuclear holocaust? First, there is the ‘delayed’ or worldwide fallout, encircling the earth with radiation, which could kill animals, birds, fish, insects, plants, and trees as well as people. The contamination of the earth and water would run off to oceans, destroying oceanic life. ... The final threat to human survival would be the partial destruction of the layer of ozone that surrounds the entire earth in the stratosphere and is crucial to life because it acts as a protective shield against the deadly levels of ultraviolet radiation present in sunlight. This projects the possibility of the complete extinction of the human species and other life, leaving a silent and empty planet.

By our science and inaction, do we not participate in this ultimate evil, this vast collective sin of humankind, the final rebellion against God and God’s creation?⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ruthanna B. Hooke, *Sacramental Presence: An Embodied Theology of Preaching* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023), 180.

⁴² Hooke argues that through preaching “we gain access to the largeness of the self, the glory of which we are capable” and goes on to describe preaching as “an expansion into the fullness of love, which invites others into their fullness as well.” One area for further inquiry concerns the meaning of this expansion for Murray. What were the psychological and spiritual effects of preaching regularly? To what extent, for example, did preaching facilitate personal integration? How did it expose or exacerbate pressure to conform to gender norms? *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴³ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 15, 49, 120.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

Here and elsewhere, Murray wants her listeners to see themselves as dependent—in need of God, the kindness of human neighbors, and a vibrant planet. At the same time, she wants her listeners to see themselves as powerful moral agents who are called to be conduits of grace. In short, a robust view of the child of God grounds Murray's contemplative homiletic.

Intercession

While Murray treated sermons as occasions for instruction, she also saw them as opportunities to pray with and for her listeners. One homiletical technique that she uses repeatedly is the examen. Originally attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola and commonly used in Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, the examen is a mode of self-interrogation that attempts to discern the Holy Spirit's action on the soul. An examen consists of a series of questions that one mulls over rather than answering quickly. The aim is to tune into one's heart and discern feelings of consolation or desolation or promptings to take specific actions. Murray had a pattern of weaving short examens into sermons. For instance, in a message on the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:3–6), she offers the following self-reflective questions for listeners:

Am I willing to relinquish my self-interest, my self-centeredness, my dependence upon my own resources or upon others, and surrender my entire will, my entire life to God? Am I willing to trust in God absolutely and without any reservations? Am I prepared to acknowledge that all I am and all I have belong to my Creator, that I am not here for my own purposes, my own glory, but for the purposes and glory of God? Am I ready to confess that the only way to salvation and redemption is my utter surrender to God's will? And if I cannot do this, am I prepared to face God's judgment? What does salvation mean to me, anyhow?⁴⁵

By inviting prayerful reflection on these questions, Murray is interceding on behalf of the listeners. The query functions simultaneously as a petition on their behalf and an effort to enhance their dialogues with God. And though the examen has a long history, the litany of questions may also reflect Murray's legal background. One might construe the questions as an attempt to summon truth from the listener! A similar pattern arises in her diary entries when she is plumbing her own motives, so this practice of raising a battery of contemplative questions reflects Murray's personal prayer practices as well.

One potential inspiration for Murray's method here was Howard Thurman, who served as Dean of Howard University's Rankin Chapel while she was a law student. Murray considered him an invaluable mentor. Given Thurman's impact on Murray, it is likely that she experienced the brief, introspective meditations he incorporated in the worship services in Rankin Chapel. In these meditations, Thurman sought to cultivate a suitable disposition for the sermon—a posture of receptivity and self-awareness.⁴⁶ While later published in volumes like *Meditations of the Heart* and *The Inward Journey*, as distinct parts of the liturgy these meditations provided a helpful bridge between corporate worship and individual devotion time.⁴⁷ This contextual fluidity and deep regard for listeners' devotional lives flows through Murray's sermons, too.

Invoking saints and the Ancestors

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 172.

⁴⁷ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (1953; reis. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1976); Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey* (New York: Harper, 1961).

Pauli Murray was included in a recent update of the Episcopal Church's *Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints*. Readings from this volume, like its predecessor, *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*, are sometimes read in small weekday Eucharists in lieu of having a homily. It seems fitting that one who fed on the witness of saints like the Apostle Paul, Julian of Norwich, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman would later be included in the church's book of exemplars.

In the pulpit, Murray had a practice of foregrounding holy lives. These individuals included luminaries like Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as lesser-known figures whose spirituality was recognized by people in their communities. The charisms emphasized included some of the usual ones specified in 1 Cor 12:7-10, 29 along with Murray's take on virtues. In a sermon entitled "Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Women I Have Known," Murray describes her Aunt Sally's laughter as a charism, framing it as the ability to see the absurdities in life situations.⁴⁸ In another sermon, Murray describes imagination as a charism, and this involves more than being clever; it has a mystical quality. The person with imagination is a seer of sorts, able to discern unseen spiritual realities in the temporal sphere. Murray explains:

I identify imagination with *imago dei*, the image of God, and with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Imagination in the human sense permits us to have a vision: of the life to come after death, of life in our human existence for decades to come, of the possibility of transforming ambiguities, contradictions, anger, hostility, human limitations, into positive and creative acts touched by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁹

Murray sometimes uses individual stories of saints as exempla to illumine Scripture or themes from the liturgical season. Often it seems that saints' lives function as the central "texts" the community is charged with interpreting. The saints demonstrate how to en flesh Christian principles in varying social contexts and with different gifts and predispositions. Murray assumes hearing such stories will bolster faithful living.

Yet in the memory of her Aunt Sally in "Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Women I Have Known," I sense that Murray is also taking a further step and drawing on an African American preaching tradition of honoring the Ancestors. Rather than simply symbolizing reposed relatives and luminaries, the Ancestors are understood as having an active presence on their descendants. They encourage, illumine, and have an overall unitive impact. Murray's preaching catalyzes the bond between the living and the dead and demonstrates her reverence for ancestral wisdom.

Henry Mitchell observes how African American sermons regularly include references to what a deceased grandparent or elder might stress in a pericope and that such insights are not incidental; they tend to boost the sermon toward its celebration.⁵⁰ The commitment to foregrounding ancestral wisdom is pivotal. In truth, it is difficult to envision Black contemplative preaching that has no central role for ancestral wisdom.

And though I suspect Mitchell would agree, it is important to note that Murray would include among the Ancestors people of multiple racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds so long as they shared fundamental commitments to love and justice. Such a community would include Irene Barlow, Murray's beloved partner of sixteen years, a white woman to whom Murray dedicated her ministry as a living memorial and beside whom Murray was buried.

Conclusion

⁴⁸ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 93.

⁴⁹ Murray, *Selected Sermons*, 190.

⁵⁰ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 57–58.

Black contemplatives offer compelling perspectives that reveal the breadth of contexts, strategies, and priorities that enliven African American preaching. Pauli Murray provides a helpful case in this regard. Her contemplative homiletic recasts dominant frameworks, placing them in a larger landscape. In her hands, the sermon serves as a vehicle for exploring what it means to be a child of God, as a tool of intercession that prompts rigorous self-examination, and as an opportunity to remember the continuing witness of the saints and the Ancestors. These methods foster intimacy with God and continue to inspire contemplative agitators in successive generations. Contemporary preachers and homileticians have much to learn from Murray's example.

**Contemplation, Christian Spirituality, and Pauli Murray:
A Response to Donyelle McCray’s “Contemplative Agitator: Tracing the Contours of Pauli
Murray’s Black Contemplative Homiletic.”**

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In “Contemplative Agitator: Tracing the Contours of Pauli Murray’s Black Contemplative Homiletic,” Donyelle McCray has developed a wonderfully rich view of Pauli Murray’s contemplative, poetic, and “bridge-building” preaching vocation. Through her close analysis of Murray, the first African American woman ordained in the Episcopal church, McCray expands our view of what a contemplative homiletic might look like in practice. At the same time, this study of Murray contributes to the study of Christian spirituality by broadening understandings of contemplation to incorporate more diverse cultural particularities, providing a lived example of the “contemplative agitator,” and highlighting the power of life writing (autobiography and biography) as homiletical text.¹ In this response I will comment briefly on each of these three areas and raise some questions to deepen the conversation.

First, Pauli Murray’s life and writing expand our view of contemplation. Looking at the history of Christian spirituality from an African American perspective, Barbara Holmes argues that Christian understandings of contemplation have overemphasized individual, solitary experience due to insufficient attention to diverse cultural and religious traditions of contemplation. Holmes notes that while African and African American spirituality includes deeply personal religious experience: “The key to contemplation in the black church,” Holmes writes, “seems to be its emergence as a communal practice.”² Pauli Murray’s life and preaching provide an example of a communally oriented contemplative-public spirituality. Murray’s contemplative homiletic seeks a *shared* practice of awe, self-examination, and identity exploration that builds bridges while honoring the particularities of communities.

McCray describes Murray’s contemplative homiletic as the facilitation of a different way of seeing on the part of the hearers, an ability to perceive the deep reality at the heart of the world all around us: “Preaching reframed the tensions and exigencies of the empirical world, allowing them to be examined through a numinous lens.” Influenced by Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Evelyn Underhill, Murray understands contemplation not as a withdrawal into interiority but as a more attentive practice of seeing all of life, the visible and invisible, what Nouwen understands to be “a practice of looking closely at life’s nerve center.” Walter Burghardt’s definition of contemplation as a “a long loving look at the Real” comes close here too.³ In this approach to contemplation, there is not a sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular but rather attention to the “overlays of seen and unseen worlds,” as McCray writes.

¹ For an introduction to spirituality studies as an academic discipline, see Elizabeth Dreyer and Douglas Burton Christie, eds., *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). For further reading on life writing, see, for example, James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and Miriam Fuchs and Craig Howes, eds., *Teaching Life Writing Texts* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2008).

² Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 17.

³ Walter Burghardt, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real” in George W. Traub, *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), pp. 89-98. Originally published in *Church*, 1989.

Contemplation entails the practice of finding small, seemingly insignificant material things as “portals to the divine.” Doors are everywhere. The contemplative preacher helps us to see them.

For Murray, preaching is a proclamation of wonder. This explains a shift in homiletic tone from argument to awe. For Murray, the preacher is not an expert, but rather, alongside the congregation, is “unraveled by the experience of God’s love,” writes McCray. Contemplation here is a communal experience, accessible to all, in ordinary spaces, not restricted by place or ecclesial position. It is experience of connection to God, to creation, to ancestors. To further explore this communal-contemplative preaching, it would be interesting to think more about the congregation’s experience of a contemplative homiletic. How does the community receive this invitation to wonder? What kind of formation does a congregation need to participate fully in a contemplative homiletic? How does the rest of the worship service—and the congregation’s life during the week—support (or impede) a contemplative way of being?

Murray’s life and preaching also show the interrelationships between a contemplative way of being and public witness. Contemplation and public action can seem worlds apart—one ensconced in quiet perception, the other in the loud public arena. Yet, while contemplation and public agitation may seem like very different callings to some, Murray embodies their integration. Murray thus offers a kind of nuanced case study for Christian spirituality and a living example that is inspiring and instructive. McCray carefully notes that the faith lives of African Americans should not be reduced only to public action—and, more specifically, to “outward” resistance to whiteness. She points to the need for more attention to the inner lives of African Americans and notes how important “inner life” is for Murray’s contemplative homiletic: “Murray’s sermons nurtured the inner lives of fellow contemplative agitators who were convinced of God’s abiding presence.”⁴ Such attention to interiority and homiletics is intriguing and merits further study. Also to be noted here is that interiority and community go together; inner life can be cultivated in the communal context of worship.

I would draw particular attention to McCray’s brief note about the “wearying” tensions in Murray’s life. The poet and warrior battle in her mind; the contemplative and the reformer pull in different directions. So often, the burden of sustaining that challenging, tensive relationship between contemplation and public action goes unnamed or unnoticed, quietly written into a diary or a personal note. For example, I have noted similar tensions cracking open in the letters of Dorothy Day, where Day describes her exhaustion as she struggles to build the Catholic Worker movement, live in community, and raise her daughter as a single parent.⁵ I would encourage more study of “weariness” in the lives of contemplative public leaders, including preachers. In Murray’s life, as for Day, surely gender complicates and intensifies the struggle to integrate public and contemplative leadership. How does the intersection of gender and race contribute to Murray’s fatigue? How nurture a contemplative way of being in the very public persona and role of the preacher? How might we teach or form students in a contemplative homiletic—and what sustains this homiletic?

⁴ On African American women and interiority, see also Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Tilling Sacred Grounds: Interiority, Black Women, and Religious Experience* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).

⁵ See Robert Ellsberg, ed., *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day* (New York: Image Books, 2010) and Robert Ellsberg, ed., *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* (New York: Image Books, 2011), as well as Day’s autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). For more on the challenges of integrating spirituality and public leadership in Day and other women, see Claire E. Wolfteich, *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women’s Life Writing: Explorations in Spirituality Studies and Practical Theology* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2017).

Third, McCray notes Murray's use of autobiography, biography, and memoir as texts of contemplative preaching. Murray expands beyond Scripture and the stories of well-known saints to include narratives of ordinary people who have shaped her faith, including the ancestors. McCray notes that the dominance of Eurocentric saints understood as exemplars in Christian contemplative tradition has resulted in certain spiritual itineraries, pathways, and progressions being understood as normative for Christian spirituality. For example, historical traditions of Christian spirituality include many examples of the familiar trajectory—purgation, illumination, and union—and the elevation of certain virtues (for example, humility).⁶ I share Murray's appreciation of life writing as an important entry into lived theology and spirituality. Lives can be read and preached as significant spiritual texts—embodied witnesses that can illuminate and energize the lived faith of the readers/hearers.

At the same time, I would be interested to hear more about Murray's (and McCray's) hermeneutical approach to life writing as a preacher and as an Episcopal priest. What authority does biography hold, and how did Murray bring life writing into dialogue with Scripture, tradition, and reason? As the lives that we regard as central texts expand beyond recognized saints of the church, we gain such rich and relatable companions. Yet, so too the theological questions get more complicated. How do we identify what is faithful in these lives? What happens in the encounter between preached life writing texts and the reader or hearer? Do these lives/texts function as mirrors, exemplars, and/or spiritual companions? Practical theological study of Murray's homiletic leads us into such questions.

In my own research on spirituality and women's life writing, I have grappled with such issues. One important Roman Catholic theological resource here is the idea of the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful): "Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the Church possess the '*sense of the faith*' ... a kind of 'spiritual instinct.'"⁷ This sense of the faithful is a capacity for discernment that operates within the communion of the Church. In my view, life writing can be a window into the *sensus fidelium*, revealing the daily texture of faith in actual lives of the people of God. Still, there is debate about how to identify authentic expressions of faith, as Pope Francis noted: "Of course, it is clear that the *sensus fidelium* must not be confused with the sociological reality of majority opinion. It is something else. It is therefore important...to develop criteria for discerning authentic expressions of the *sensus fidelium*. For its part, the Magisterium has the duty to be attentive to what the Spirit says to the Churches through the authentic manifestations of the *sensus fidelium*."⁸

This discussion of the sense of the faithful may be useful as we consider life writing as homiletical text, though clearly homiletical theologians from different traditions will need to reflect from within their own frameworks. McCray's study of Murray provides food for thought.

⁶ For further reading, see, for example, Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest 16 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986). See also Arthur Holder, "The Problem with 'Spiritual Classics.'" *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2010): 22-37.

⁷ Pope Francis, Address to the International Theological Commission, December 2013: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html, accessed May 24, 2024. See too International Theological Commission, "Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church" (2014), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html, accessed May 24, 2024.

⁸ Ibid.

How might we understand, specifically, the narratives of black women as ancestral wisdom?⁹ And, how might a contemplative homiletic cultivate the spiritual instinct of the faithful?

In sum, McCray's exploration of Pauli Murray makes a welcome contribution to homiletical theology and to spirituality studies. In Murray, we find a lived example of the contemplative preacher, agitator, reformer, and "poet-warrior." Her life and writing poignantly illustrate a distinctive contemplative homiletic while also raising generative questions for our further reflection.

⁹ On black women's autobiography, see, for example, Joanne Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

Spirit, Spoken Word, and the Search for Common Ground: Amanda Gorman as Contemplative Preacher

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Abstract: *Amid profound political fragmentation, the poet and activist Amanda Gorman demonstrates the power of the spoken word to build bridges toward greater justice and wholeness for all people. Drawing on select theologies of the Spirit and especially Howard Thurman's notion of common ground, this article considers Gorman's inaugural poem "The Hill We Climb" as an act of pneumatological or Spirit-inspired contemplative proclamation that fosters community in a time of division. Specific attention is given to how preachers and other communicators might learn from Amanda Gorman's example to contribute toward social and spiritual healing in our beautiful yet broken world today.*

Introduction

It is January 20, 2021. The occasion is the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. The nation is divided, economic hardship abounds, and the country is in the throes of a deadly pandemic. Amanda Gorman, a 22-year-old African American woman and the first National Youth Poet Laureate, has been invited to deliver a poem. It is entitled "The Hill We Climb."² Amid intense political polarization, ongoing racialized violence, and a recent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C., the nation's youngest inaugural poet calls the deeply divided country to a new way of seeing and being. As Gorman herself stated, the goal of the poem was to "envision a way in which our country can still come together and can still heal" amid varied crises and chasms in the nation.³

While she does not explicitly identify as a preacher, it is hard to deny that the young Black Catholic's poem was "a sort of melodic sermon" inspired by the Spirit.⁴ Indeed, Gorman seemed to embody the kind of quotidian mysticism that Catholic theologian Andrew Prevot suggests is characteristic of everyday Black women seeking to live a life committed to resistance, embodied freedom, and joy.⁵ It is almost as if the "grace of divine union" that sustains Gorman's struggle for justice could be glimpsed in the bold, non-anxious way in which she

¹ In addition to his responsibilities at Fuller Seminary, Clark is also co-founder of The Black Contemplative Society. This article builds upon portions of his recent book, *Black Contemplative Preaching: A Hidden History of Prayer, Proclamation, and Prophetic Witness* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2024).

² "The Hill We Climb" Copyright © 2021 by Amanda Gorman. Used by permission of the author. To view the poem, see Amanda Gorman, "WATCH: Amanda Gorman reads inauguration poem 'The Hill We Climb,'" PBS NewsHour, January 20, 2021, YouTube video, 5:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZ055iLiN4>.

³ Amanda Gorman quoted in Alexander Alter, "Amanda Gorman Captures the Moment, in Verse," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/books/amanda-gorman-inauguration-hill-we-climb.html>.

⁴ Danté Stewart, "Amanda Gorman, My Grandma, and the Black Tears We Cried," *Religion News Service*, January 21, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/21/amanda-gorman-my-grandma-and-the-black-tears-we-cried-yesterday/>. In this paper, when I refer to "the Spirit" I am referring to the one identified as the third person of the Trinity in Christian tradition. However, at times, I speak of Spirit or spirit much broader than this.

⁵ Andrew Prevot, *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life: Theology, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 222-266. Of course, there is a long history of African American female mystics. See Joy R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

delivered her poem.⁶ And, of course, the deeply spiritual poem itself was a kind of sermonizing outside the traditional pulpit. In the words of Audre Lorde, she engaged in “poetry as illumination” as she brought forth unusual wisdom and perspective for the masses.⁷ Or, as one commentator put it, at the inauguration, “Amanda [Gorman] was a theologian in the truest sense of the word—she was making divine possibilities intelligible and offering an alternative world of love, freedom, hope and joy.”⁸ With grace and courage, she embodied the power and potential of the spoken word to “communicate a spirit that is larger than ourselves.”⁹

Various scholars and spiritual writers have drawn attention to Gorman’s proclamation in “The Hill We Climb.” For example, womanist scholar Ayo Morton has described her poem as an example of “womanist vernacular discourse.”¹⁰ A German political scientist, Mareike Gebhardt, contends that Gorman is a model of feminist truth-telling that challenges “andro-centric politics and post-truth discourse.”¹¹ From a different perspective, Catholic writer Richard Rohr lauds Gorman as one engaged in “poetic prophecy” in the lineage of the great Hebrew prophets.¹² Building on the work of these writers and others, in this paper, I would like to consider Amanda Gorman as a contemplative preacher who continues in her own way what Howard Thurman once called “the search for common ground.”¹³ Specifically, I argue that Gorman is an example of Spirit-inspired, contemplative proclamation outside the traditional pulpit that bridges various racial, religious, and cultural divides.

To begin, I establish some foundational understandings of terms used in the paper. Specifically, I articulate a pneumatological or Spirit-inspired understanding of proclamation outside the traditional pulpit, introduce Howard Thurman’s understanding of common ground, and offer a definition of contemplative preaching. With this foundation, the second section of the paper provides a brief overview of Amanda Gorman’s formation and examines her poem “The Hill We Climb” as an example of contemplative proclamation outside the traditional pulpit. The final section of the paper articulates wisdom that Gorman offers for preachers and others engaged in proclamation in times of fragmentation.

Proclamation and the Pursuit of Common Ground

Spirit Speech Outside the Pulpit

There is a long history of Spirit-inspired proclamation through African American female poets such as Phillis Wheatley (1753-1854), Francis E. W. Harper (1825-1911), and Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958), to name only a few. Along with Amanda Gorman, their poetry (whether written or spoken) can be understood as part of a tradition of preaching outside the traditional pulpit. As Teresa Fry Brown notes, “there are thousands of African American women who ‘Say a

⁶ Prevot, *The Mysticism of Ordinary Life*, 4.

⁷ Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley: Crossing, 2007), 36.

⁸ Stewart, “Amanda Gorman.”

⁹ Amanda Gorman quoted in Michelle Obama, “‘Unity with Purpose’: Amanda Gorman and Michelle Obama Discuss Art, Identity, and Optimism,” *Time*, February 4, 2021, <https://time.com/5933596/amanda-gorman-michelle-obama-interview/>.

¹⁰ Ayo Mariama Morton, “Lifting as We Climb: Amanda Gorman and Womanist Vernacular Discourse at the 2021 Presidential Inauguration,” *Journal for the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2022): 83-95.

¹¹ Mareike Gebhardt, “(Post-)Truth, Populism and the Simulation of Parrhesia: A Feminist Critique of Truth-telling after Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2023): 179.

¹² Richard Rohr, “Prophets as Poets,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, March 21, 2021, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/prophets-as-poets-2021-03-24/>.

¹³ Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1971).

Word' for God but are not ordained or operate under a different rubric."¹⁴ Unfortunately, this tradition is often overlooked due to what Chelsea Brooke Yarborough calls the "single story of preaching."¹⁵ Alluding to the popular TED Talk of Chimamanda Adichie entitled "The Danger of a Single Story," Yarborough writes:

the 'single story' of preaching has often centered the pulpit, a spatial demarcation of power and hierarchy. In fact, the pulpit is so entwined with the story of preaching that the use of a pulpit has come to define what preaching is: preaching is that which occurs in a pulpit. This narrow outlook on what preaching can be and where it can take place immediately excludes both those who have been pushed out of formal places of power and those whose sense of call to proclaim does not require a pulpit.¹⁶

In other words, a monolithic understanding of proclamation eclipses preachers of the past and present, especially Black women.

For me, a truncated understanding of preaching is a result of a truncated pneumatology.¹⁷ If we take seriously "God's wider presence"¹⁸ in culture and creation, then we cannot restrict God's revelation or what Luke Powery calls "Spirit speech" to traditional ecclesial contexts.¹⁹ The Spirit reveals dimensions of God's goodness, truth, and beauty in a range of contexts. As Jürgen Moltmann writes, "The possibility of perceiving God in all things, and all things in God, is grounded theologically on an understanding of the Spirit of God as the power of creation and the wellspring of life."²⁰ A belief in the Spirit of God as the Spirit of creation and life affirms the possibility of God's revelation beyond the traditional pulpit, including through the proclamation of poets like Gorman.

Of course, I am not suggesting that all of Gorman's poetic proclamation is reflective of divine revelation.²¹ However, I am suggesting that some of it may be, especially when it reflects one of the persistent characteristics of the Spirit in the Christian Scriptures: unity. For example, in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit presses the people of God into unexpected intimacy with the

¹⁴ Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 17.

¹⁵ Chelsea Brooke Yarborough, "An Icon of Exclusion," in *Unmasking White Preaching: Racial Hegemony, Resistance, and Possibilities in Homiletics* eds. Lis Valle-Ruiz and Andrew Wymer (Lanham: Lexington, 2022), 221. My thinking on preaching outside the pulpit has also been deeply shaped by the work of Donyelle McCray. See, for example, Donyelle McCray's "Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers," *Religions* 9:2 (2018):1-7; *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher* (Minneapolis: Fortress Academic, 2019); and "On Shrieking the Truth: Mary and Proclamatory Wailing" *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* vol. 25, no. 2 (2021): 102-111.

¹⁶ Yarborough, "An Icon of Exclusion," 221.

¹⁷ The following paragraph builds on Edgar "Trey" Clark III, "Protest as Preaching: The Pneumatic Proclamation of Black Lives Matter," *International Journal of Homiletics*, Supplementum II: Words in a Time of Crisis (2021): 43-51.

¹⁸ Robert K. Johnston, *God's Wider Presence: Reconsidering General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

¹⁹ Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009). Powery's insightful work offers "a theological-hermeneutical lens for "reading" preaching events pneumatologically," xviii.

²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 35.

²¹ To be clear, I believe all proclamation must be measured against the Scriptures and the experience and wisdom of the global church. Moreover, I affirm the unique character of God's revelation through Scripture, the church, and the person of Christ. Nevertheless, my commitment to a robust theology of general revelation leads me to attend to Spirit speech that transgresses the boundaries of traditional proclamation.

other: young and old, women and men, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. This has led theologian Willie Jennings to argue that in the book of Acts, we encounter “an erotic God who seeks to place in each of us desire for those outside of us, outside our worlds of culture, clan, nation, tribe, faith, politics, class, and species.”²² We see this same desire in Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb.” Her proclamation invites us to boundary-crossing intimacy that is emblematic of the desire of the Spirit. To echo Powery, we might say her promotion of unity through “lamenting disunity or celebrating unity is a sign of the Spirit” in her proclamation.²³

The Spirit, Howard Thurman, and the Search for Common Ground

Another way to talk about unity or the desire of the Spirit is to reference what Howard Washington Thurman (1899-1981) called the search for common ground. Thurman was a pioneering African American mystic, theologian, pastor, and poet who lived during tumultuous times of war, racism, and intransigent segregation.²⁴ Though his life defies any simplification, if there was one theme that was woven throughout his ministry, it was the search for common ground.²⁵ While there are many values and convictions that inform Gorman’s proclamation as a poet, she seems to share some of Thurman’s commitment to common ground.²⁶ The most extensive written treatment of Thurman’s understanding appears in *The Search for Common Ground*.²⁷ In the book, Thurman writes: “From my childhood I have been on the scent of the tie that binds life at a level so deep that the final privacy of the individual would be reinforced rather than threatened. I have always wanted to be *me* without making it difficult for you to be *you*.”²⁸ In other words, for Thurman, the search for common ground is a search to affirm the common connection we share with others without eliminating the uniqueness of individual personality. Later, he writes: “Here is the paradox. A [person] is always threatened in [their] very ground by a sense of isolation, by feeling [themselves] cut off from [their] fellows. Yet [they] can never separate [themselves] from [their] fellows, for mutual interdependence is characteristic of all of life.”²⁹ In the book, Thurman goes on to explore the nature of this interdependence by attending to racial memory in accounts of creation, living structures, Utopias, common consciousness, and identity. For Thurman, human life and more-than-human life (i.e., plants, animals, the universe) are connected.³⁰ Or, as he put it, “all life is one.”³¹ In short, though many descriptions might be offered, for Thurman, common ground seems to be more-or-less equated to community.

²² Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 12.

²³ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 75.

²⁴ Space does not permit an overview of Thurman’s life. However, for a recent, well-researched, concise account of Thurman’s life, see Paul Harvey, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2020). The most extensive biography of Thurman is Peter Eisenstadt’s *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021). Of course, the best place to learn about Thurman’s life is his autobiography, Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979).

²⁵ Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 4.

²⁶ To be fair, I am not aware of Gorman using Thurman’s phrase. However, as is visible in the examination below of “The Hill We Climb,” she clearly is committed to a vision of human community similar to him.

²⁷ Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, xiv.

²⁸ Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, xiii.

²⁹ Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, 2-3.

³⁰ For further reflection on Thurman’s understanding of spirituality and nature, see Timothy Robinson “He Talked to Trees!: ‘Thinking Differently’ About Nature with Howard Thurman,” *Spiritus* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 1-19.

³¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon, 1981), 117-118.

Walter Earl Fluker, one of the most prolific Thurman scholars, writes, “Thurman’s use of ‘common ground’ proceeds from his theological and philosophical conceptualization of ‘community’ and his personal wrestling with the moral demands of religious experience. Beyond its utilitarian functionality, Thurman saw common ground as a transcendent ideal that calls us to seek wholeness, integration, and harmony within our private lives and in public discourse and practice.”³² In other words, Thurman’s search for common ground was at once both a pragmatic search for resolution in the face of social and political exigencies and a deeply personal spiritual quest. Like Thurman, Gorman is invested in the search for common ground as essentially a social and spiritual pursuit of community beyond all the forces that might seek to cause division.

However, Gorman embodies the search for common ground with sensitivity to the particular challenges of the 21st century and her own voice. Common ground is not static. Rather, it reveals itself in a multiplicity of ways in our contemporary context. Gorman’s practice demonstrates she does not “accept at face value [the] claims of ‘common ground’ as an essentialist project.”³³ For example, her promotion of unity is not an endorsement of a “nonracial, colorblind society” that only exacerbates the material well-being of the most vulnerable.³⁴ “To me, unity without a sense of justice, equality and fairness,” she argues, “is just toxic mob mentality. Unity that actually moves us toward the future means that we accept our differences—we embrace them and lean into that diversity. It’s not linking arms without questioning what we’re linking arms for. It’s unity with purpose.”³⁵ Gorman’s advocacy of unity with purpose is visible in her poem “The Hill We Climb,” but it also appears in some of the poems in her collection *Call Us What We Carry* and in her children’s book *Change Sings*.³⁶ At times, for some, the optimism in her proclamation might seem to be disconnected from reality. Thurman faced this criticism at times as well.³⁷ However, similar to him, Gorman is persuaded that “optimism shouldn’t be seen as opposed to pessimism, but in conversation with it.”³⁸ Her timely proclamation holds the two as dialogue partners. In this light, Amanda Gorman ought to be viewed as part of “a new generation of dreamers and activists who dare to continue the search for common ground amid the challenges and threats that confront us in the third decade of this century.”³⁹ As an unapologetic young Black Catholic poet, she engages in proclamation to transgress boundaries and cultivate unity with purpose.

Defining Contemplative Preaching

Both Amanda Gorman and Howard Thurman engage the spoken word as part of their search for common ground.⁴⁰ However, before examining Gorman as one who engages in

³² Walter Earl Fluker, “Introduction” in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman* ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), 8.

³³ Fluker, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gorman quoted in Obama, “‘Unity with Purpose.’”

³⁶ See Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry: Poems* (New York: Viking, 2021) and Amanda Gorman, *Change Sings: A Children’s Anthem*, illus. Loren Long (New York: Viking, 2021).

³⁷ See, for example, Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell*, 358-359.

³⁸ Gorman quoted in Obama, “‘Unity with Purpose.’”

³⁹ Fluker, “Introduction,” 16.

⁴⁰ As Shively Smith notes, Thurman’s “vision of human relations that crosses borders and destroys contrived social boundaries” is not limited to his written work. As an orator, preacher, and poet, he modeled contemplative proclamation that cultivated community. See Shively T. J. Smith, “‘I Can See It. Now, How To Say It?’: Hearing the Aesthetic Dimension of Howard Thurman, the Interpreter” in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground*:

contemplative proclamation, it will be helpful to say more about Black contemplative preaching. In my book *Black Contemplative Preaching*, I suggested that Black contemplative preaching is an often-overlooked tradition of proclamation that (1) emerges from a habitus or disposition of prayer, (2) employs a mystical hermeneutical lens, and (3) embodies a meditative homiletical style in order to lead listeners into a divine encounter that contributes to the flourishing of African Americans and all creation.⁴¹ Let me highlight its three distinctives.

While almost all Black proclamation emerges from prayer, Black contemplative preaching flows from a contemplative way of life that is cultivated through stillness, introspection, and various forms of meditation alongside more expressive African embodied spiritual practices. To put it differently, it flows from a prayerful orientation toward God and all creation. The mystical hermeneutical lens of Black contemplative proclamation prioritizes inviting people to encounter the divine. However, it is further distinguished by three components: a focus on certain biblical texts and/or themes related to divine encounter (especially in the Psalms and Gospels), incorporation of varied sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance to nurture interiority (such as ancestral wisdom, philosophy, poetry, hymns), and an inclusive, nondualistic vision for cultivating a life-giving and liberating relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation. The third distinctive of Black contemplative proclamation, as I understand it, is a meditative homiletical style that almost never involves ecstatic whooping. While some expressions of Black contemplative preaching may evince celebration, it is typically transposed into a more meditative or reflective key.

Though I continue to affirm that these are three helpful distinctives for exploring contemplative preaching, I recognize that some expressions of the Black contemplative homiletical tradition press beyond these boundaries. Indeed, there is an inherent fluidity in Black contemplative spirituality and proclamation that resist a singular definition.⁴² As Shively Smith helpfully pointed out to me, “While there are certain themes, features, and distinctions that make Black contemplative proclamation identifiable, they can come in a variety of configurations.”⁴³ In other words, contemplative proclamation manifests in a multiplicity of ways. We need a description that is open, not closed. As a starting point, I propose that Black contemplative proclamation inside and outside the pulpit is marked generally by a prayerful orientation, an inclusive hermeneutic, and purposeful embodiment that invites people to a different way of seeing and being in the world. These distinctives are not exhaustive, but, in my study, they seem to be some of the most common characteristics. With this description of Black contemplative proclamation in view, I now turn to consider Amanda Gorman as a contemplative preacher.

Amanda Gorman as Contemplative Preacher

The Formation of Amanda Gorman

Long before Amanda Gorman became widely known for her inaugural poem “The Hill We Climb,” she was being deeply formed as a poet-preacher. There seems to be a profound spirituality that undergirds her life and work. In this section, before examining one of her poems

Reimagining Howard Thurman ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), 30. For an examination of Thurman as a contemplative preacher, see Edgar “Trey” Clark III, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers,” *Homiletic* 47, no. 2 (2022): 3-14.

⁴¹ This definition and the distinctions that follow can be found in Clark, *Black Contemplative Preaching*, 33-36.

⁴² Donyelle McCray, communication with author, Homiletical Theology Consultation at Boston University, October 17, 2024.

⁴³ Shively T. J. Smith, communication with author, Homiletical Theology Consultation at Boston University, October 17, 2024.

as an example of Spirit-inspired contemplative proclamation outside the pulpit, I consider aspects of her formation.

Like Thurman, Gorman has been formed by a holistic, communal Africana spirituality. It is a spirituality captured in the proverb *Umntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*, which is sometimes translated as “a person is a person in relationship to other persons.”⁴⁴ As a result of being shaped by this cultural philosophy, she counts a host of individuals and communities as integral to her identity and way of being in the world, including her mother Joan Wicks, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou, whom she calls her “spiritual grandmother.”⁴⁵ She resists those who think of her success as instant and individualistic. On the contrary, she sees her newfound public success as something that “took a lifetime” and “a village” to cultivate.⁴⁶ Her indebtedness to her village and ancestors is visible in the mantra she regularly recites before speaking: “I am the daughter of Black writers, who are descended from Freedom Fighters, who broke the chains who changed the world. They call me.”⁴⁷ For Gorman, the mantra is a way to “remind myself of ancestors that are all around me whenever I’m performing.”⁴⁸

A particular community that Gorman has been shaped by is St. Brigid Catholic Church, an Afrocentric Black Catholic church in Los Angeles that in recent years has become “a predominantly Black and Latino congregation.”⁴⁹ Gorman “grew up singing in the choir, taking her sacraments, and reciting her poetry” at the historic church.⁵⁰ At the church, she would’ve been exposed to what Maurice Nutt has called the “Black preaching style” that appears in the African American Catholic church.⁵¹ It is a style of proclamation that, like African American spirituality in general, is “contemplative, holistic, biblical, joyful, and communal.”⁵²

A third critical component of Gorman’s formation has been exploring poetry and writing since her childhood. She grew up in a home without a television, where her mother facilitated space for creative exploration and learning.⁵³ As a result, Gorman regularly wrote stories and poetry as a young person. Later in life, as a college student, she “grounded herself” before the start of a new day by reading poetry.⁵⁴ Each of these dimensions of Gorman’s formation, as well as others, contributed to shaping her into the person and proclaimer that she is today.

⁴⁴ Hak Joon Lee, *We Will Get to the Promised Land: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Communal-Political Spirituality* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 28-29. See also Peter Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 51; Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1999); and Diana L. Haynes, “A Great Cloud of Witnesses: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Roots in the African American Religious and Spiritual Traditions” in *Revives My Soul Again: The Spirituality of Martin Luther King Jr.* eds. Lewis V. Baldwin and Victor Anderson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 45.

⁴⁵ Doreen St. Félix, “The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman,” *Vogue*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.vogue.com/article/amanda-gorman-cover-may-2021>.

⁴⁶ Gorman quoted in Obama, “‘Unity with Purpose.’”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Alejandra Molina, “At Amanda Gorman’s Black Catholic LA Parish, ‘It’s like Everybody Here is a Freedom Fighter,’” *Religious News Service*, January 28, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/01/28/at-amanda-gormans-black-catholic-l-a-parish-its-like-everybody-here-is-a-freedom-fighter/>.

⁵⁰ Molina, “Amanda Gorman’s Black Catholic LA Parish.”

⁵¹ Maurice J. Nutt, CSsR, *Down Deep in my Soul: An African American Catholic Theology of Preaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), 24-55.

⁵² Nutt, *Down Deep in my Soul*, 13-23.

⁵³ Félix, “The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman.”

⁵⁴ Elise Brisco, “Amanda Gorman tells Oprah about her connection to Maya Angelou: ‘It was an Amazing Discovery,’” *USA Today*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2021/03/26/amanda-gorman-oprah-interview-cites->

A Contemplative Sermon: “The Hill We Climb”

Amanda Gorman’s contemplative proclamation can be found in many of her poems, but I will focus specifically on “The Hill We Climb,” a poem she wrote after being invited to serve as the inaugural poet at the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in January 2021. Though she only had a little under a month to write a poem related to the theme “America United,” Gorman crafted a memorable and moving piece that resonated with people from a wide range of backgrounds not only in the US but around the world. Of course, “The Hill We Climb” does not capture the totality of Gorman’s proclamatory capacities or convictions. Like all public oration, the poem is shaped by its audience, place, and time. In this case, Gorman was speaking at one of the largest occasions imaginable: the inauguration of the highest political leaders in the US. Reflecting on this fact, poet Danez Smith says, “I hope we don’t limit her to that poem. I hope we don’t think that she’s always got to talk to everybody.”⁵⁵ I agree. Though I am focusing on Gorman’s poem as an example of Spirit-inspired proclamation outside the traditional pulpit, I am not suggesting it encompasses the fullness of her voice, style, and call as a poet, activist, and human being.

In what follows, I will not seek to offer an extensive examination of her poem. Instead, I highlight a few examples of how her Spirit-inspired poem reflects characteristics of Black contemplative proclamation through its various movements.

However, to begin, I would like to draw attention to Amanda Gorman’s purposeful embodiment of the poem. Given the history of how Black female bodies in the US have been under constant threat, surveillance, and brutal violence, echoing Kevin Quashie’s work, I would suggest that Gorman unapologetically presents “the aliveness” of her Black female body as a part of her embodied proclamation of common ground.⁵⁶ As Donyelle McCray has helpfully noted, this aliveness is in stark contrast to the solemn dignitaries and armed guards that surrounded her moment of proclamation.⁵⁷ For example, the day of the inauguration Gorman wore a bright yellow jacket accompanied by a red head band that her mother Joan Wicks suggested she wear like “a tiara” or “a crown.”⁵⁸ Thus, she preached to the nation dressed like royalty. In a world fixated on Black death, she beckons the country to behold the undeniability of her aliveness as she called for unity amid division. Moreover, Gorman’s self-insertion in the poem as “a skinny Black girl” of enslaved ancestry who was raised by a single mother is a sort of refusal to erase the fact that her history is intertwined with the history of her people.⁵⁹ Against the backdrop of the dehumanization and destruction of enslavement, her existence as one who “can dream of becoming president” glows like a light, calling the nation toward a brighter future.⁶⁰ Finally, while Gorman’s delivery of the poem was quite demonstrative and expressive in some ways as one attune to Black sermon traditions,⁶¹ in other ways, her delivery challenged popular

angelou-morrison-inspiration/6998957002/. Gorman noted that she read Maya Angelou’s inaugural poem “On the Pulse of Morning” every morning during her senior year in college.

⁵⁵ Danez Smith quoted in Félix, “The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman.”

⁵⁶ Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2.

⁵⁷ Donyelle McCray, “Response to Trey Clark,” paper, Homiletical Theology Consultation at Boston University, October 17, 2024.

⁵⁸ Félix, “The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman.”

⁵⁹ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 14.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For instance, Gorman speaks about being familiar with the “sound tradition” of Black preachers such as Ralph Abernethy and Martin Luther King Jr. See Félix, “The Rise and Rise of Amanda Gorman.”

stereotypes of Black performance as *solely* ecstatic, loud, and driven by emotionalism at the expense of intellectual engagement. Hers was a meditative, reflective, and even “quiet” way of proclaiming that engaged her body.⁶² In this sense, her purposeful embodiment was an invitation to participate in common ground by helping us to see “the wealth of Black humanity” she radiated beyond the well-known images of Black resistance.⁶³ With this understanding of Gorman’s particular embodiment of her proclamation, I would now like to turn to the poem itself as an example of contemplative proclamation that fosters common ground.

The poem begins with a question: “When day comes we ask ourselves / where can we find light in this never-ending shade?”⁶⁴ Though Gorman doesn’t directly challenge the racialized aesthetics of light and dark with her words, she does through her profound embodiment we noted above. Echoing the notion of the dawning of a new day in poems by previous inaugural poets such as Maya Angelou and Elizabeth Alexander, Gorman starts the poem on a pensive note. Where can we find healing light in the midst of the darkness of division, hate, and injustice that threatens to destroy our nation?⁶⁵ The entire poem can be read as an exercise in what Luther Smith calls “questing with questions”⁶⁶ as Gorman addresses the question she poses. As one engaged in contemplative proclamation, she invites listeners on a journey of deep reflection and introspection that reflects a prayerful orientation.

A prayerful orientation is also seen in the title of the poem, “The Hill We Climb,” which appears in the second movement of her proclamation. Along with alluding to the notion of a “city on a hill” based on the Sermon on the Mount, the title of the sermonic poem echoes an important theme in mystical literature: ascent.⁶⁷ Though the notion of ascent has “Hellenistic origination” that stretches back to Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus, the image has been explored by mystics for centuries in various ways to consider the nature of the soul’s Spirit-directed journey toward union or oneness with God.⁶⁸ However, for Gorman, reflecting a holistic Africana spirituality, the mystical journey of ascent is a collective undertaking toward becoming a better nation. In this sense, the poem is a prayer for the nation’s ongoing journey of becoming. The journey does not assume perfection is the telos. As a country, we are “unfinished” and “far from polished,” according to Gorman.⁶⁹ Moreover, seeming to evince what Cindy Lee calls a “cyclical orientation” to formation,⁷⁰ she acknowledges that there is a chance that we may once again “know defeat” as a nation.⁷¹ For Gorman, this reality should beckon us toward humble,

⁶² Following Kevin Quashie, I speak here of “quiet” not as “motionless nor without sound” but rather to refer to a deep well of Black interiority that cannot be contained within the popular representations of Black expressiveness. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 6. See also Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf), x.

⁶³ Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, back cover.

⁶⁴ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 11.

⁶⁵ For a critical engagement with the negative connotations often assigned to darkness in mystical literature, see Andrew Prevot, “Divine Opacity, Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2016): 166-188.

⁶⁶ Luther E. Smith Jr., “Embracing the Quest” in *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet* ed. Gregory C. Ellison II (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 173.

⁶⁷ The title also is reminiscent of English Puritan John Winthrop’s vision of a city on a hill.

⁶⁸ Julie Canlis, “Stages of Spiritual Ascent,” in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* ed. Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 274.

⁶⁹ Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country* (New York: Viking, 2021), 13, 15.

⁷⁰ Cindy S. Lee, *Our Unforming: De-Westernizing Spiritual Formation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 20.

⁷¹ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 18.

communal collaboration to create a “country committed to all cultures, colors, characters, and/conditions of man.”⁷²

Gorman’s vision of a future of unity is informed by Christian Scripture. Alluding to playwright Lin-Manuel Miranda’s wildly popular musical “Hamilton,”⁷³ in the second movement of her poem, she references a biblical passage which is mentioned in the musical by George Washington’s character: “Scripture tells us to envision / that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree / and no one shall make them afraid.”⁷⁴ The Scripture is from the Hebrew prophet Micah’s vision of a new day in which Jerusalem will experience peace and abundance.⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning the words that precede her citation of Micah: “God shall judge between many peoples, and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”⁷⁶ Building on this ancient wisdom, Gorman’s proclamation exposes the weakness of violence and calls for common ground through nonviolence. “If we’re to live up to our own time,” she proclaims, “then victory won’t lie in the blade. / But in all the bridges we’ve made.”⁷⁷ In so doing, she situates herself as part of a rich history of African American nonviolence embodied by Black contemplatives such as Thurman, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King Jr.⁷⁸ In the aftermath of the storming of the capitol, brutal police violence against Black and Brown people, and intense political polarization, Gorman courageously engaged an inclusive hermeneutic to “preach *toward* reconciliation” as part of the search for common ground.⁷⁹

In the third movement of the poem, Gorman’s poetic sermonizing reflects the Scriptural practice of lament or what Luke Powery calls “homiletical lament.”⁸⁰ Powery writes: “Homiletical lament basically states that life is not right, indicating a dissatisfaction with the way things are in the present; yet it possesses a tone of hope in anticipation of future change through divine intervention.”⁸¹ When the insurrection took place on January 6th at the US Capitol, Gorman stayed up late into the night crafting lines that lamented the destructive efforts that sought to “shatter our nation rather than share it.”⁸² However, in naming this fact, Gorman

⁷² Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 16.

⁷³ One of her lines echoes a song sung by George Washington in the musical entitled “History Has Its Eyes on You.” See Sarah Bahr, “Amanda Gorman’s Nods to ‘Hamilton’ Won a ‘Brava’ from Lin-Manuel Miranda,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/20/us/amanda-gorman-hamilton-inauguration-poem.html>.

⁷⁴ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 19.

⁷⁵ Mic 4:4. C.f. Isa 2:4. Scripture reference from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁷⁶ Mic 4:3.

⁷⁷ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 19.

⁷⁸ For a history of African American nonviolence, see Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt, *Visions of a Better World: The Origins of African American Nonviolence* (Boston: Beacon, 2014) and Anthony C. Siracusa, *Nonviolence before King: The Politics of Being and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). For a case of why some Black abolitionists found violence essential in the freedom struggle, see Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionist and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁷⁹ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 148.

⁸⁰ Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 104. See also Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2017).

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 20.

refused to engage in binary thinking that dehumanized the perpetrators.⁸³ She famously concluded “while democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated.”⁸⁴ Given that lament is an expression of prayer, her words speak to the prayerfulness of her Spirit-inspired work as she merges lament and hope not as opposites but integrally connected for a nation that wants to journey toward healing.

Another way in which Gorman fosters healing in the third movement of the poem is through embracing what spiritual writer Barbara Holmes has called “crisis contemplation.”⁸⁵ Somewhat akin to the passive contemplation that St. John of the Cross speaks of related to the dark night of the soul,⁸⁶ Holmes understands crisis contemplation as “a space that is neither the result of spiritual seeking nor the voluntary entry into meditative spaces.”⁸⁷ On the contrary, it is communal contemplation that emerges during or after deep pain, trauma, and disruption. It is contemplation that isn’t sought as much as fallen into through various portals that invite stillness and reflection. Amid the crisis of polarization, insurrection, and racialization, Gorman’s contemplative proclamation became one of these portals toward healing. While insisting on naming the division and violence of the country, she prophetically declared that the nation “will not march back to what was / But move to what shall be.”⁸⁸ In so doing, she offered an invitation to allow the crisis to be an occasion of healing the “bruised but whole” country that is the US.⁸⁹

In the final movement of the poem, Gorman continues to call for a new future. However, she expands her vision of common ground to include the human and the more-than-human creation. To be sure, this is not as developed in “The Hill We Climb” as much as it is in some of her other poems, such as “Earthrise.”⁹⁰ However, it can be glimpsed as part of a tradition of African American environmental concern.⁹¹ Near the end of the poem, Gorman calls for the nation to “raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.”⁹² She repeats the phrase, “we will rise”⁹³ four times, and we are invited to “ride [her] repetitions into the inner sanctum.”⁹⁴ Like a steady drumbeat, the phrase is used to bring us into a moment of reflection and to enlarge our imagination to believe that another future is possible for our wounded world. To speak of the wounded world is to indirectly name the climate catastrophe that is plaguing the globe and particularly causing harm and instability for the most marginalized. Gorman seems to be concerned that we address this reality alongside our division so we can “leave behind a country [and world] / better than the one we were left with.”⁹⁵ In this sense, hinting at what Douglas

⁸³ Luke Powery, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2022).

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Barbara A. Holmes, *Crisis Contemplation: Healing the Wounded Village* (Albuquerque: Center for Action and Contemplation, 2021), 44.

⁸⁶ See John of the Cross, *Dark Night* in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, Third Edition* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2017).

⁸⁷ Holmes, *Crisis Contemplation*, 44.

⁸⁸ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 24.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ The poem can be found here: Climate Reality, “24 Hours of Reality: ‘Earthrise’ by Amanda Gorman,” YouTube, 4:29, December 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwOvBv8RLmo>.

⁹¹ See Kimberly K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence, KY: University of Press of Kansas, 2007).

⁹² Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 26.

⁹³ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 27.

⁹⁴ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 2.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Christie calls a “contemplative ecological vision,” Gorman helps to reshape how we engage with the more-than-human creation even as she speaks of mending human division.⁹⁶ Her contemplative proclamation shows how our pursuit of common ground as a human family cannot be severed from our relation to the more-than-human family. As such, like Thurman, she shows that “all life is one.”⁹⁷

The poem ends by returning to the theme of light and darkness that began the poem. Amid the darkness of division and hate, Gorman declares that “there is always light.”⁹⁸ However, we are left with a question. Will we have the courage to “see” the light and “be” the light?⁹⁹ Gorman’s contemplative proclamation challenges listeners to recognize that the answer to the question of whether or not we will find common ground in the dark night of our country will be manifest in the way in which we live our lives.

What Preachers Can Learn from Amanda Gorman

As we continue the search for common ground amid the ongoing challenges of the contemporary moment, there is a need to learn from the wisdom of others such as Amanda Gorman. In this final section, I turn to consider the insight and perspective that Gorman’s contemplative proclamation might offer to preachers and other proclaimers as they seek to foster common ground today. At a basic level, Gorman provides a stirring reminder that contemplative preaching not only *can* happen outside the pulpit, but it often *needs* to happen outside the pulpit. Through her poetic proclamation, she spoke to people across racial, religious, political, and economic backgrounds that likely would never walk into a traditional ecclesial environment. In so doing, she served as a vehicle of the Spirit to cast a compelling vision of unity to people from diverse convictions and contexts that reflects the heart of God. In the words of Donyelle McCray, Gorman’s example demonstrates we need to help people enlarge their “framework for what counts as preaching the gospel” and who might be proclaimers.¹⁰⁰ If we are to join what God is doing in the world through the Spirit, there is a need to encourage and equip proclaimers of all backgrounds—ordained and lay—to engage in contemplative proclamation in a multiplicity of forms and contexts. In so doing, preachers who might not see themselves as preachers will be empowered in local environments to be advocates of common ground in ways that fit their gifts, calls, and backgrounds.

A second important lesson that Gorman offers for preachers seeking to foster common ground is to attend to spiritual formation in holistic ways. Gorman engaged in various spiritual practices that enriched and informed her work as a poet-proclaimer. Let me mention two that she embodied that might be fruitful for preachers to explore. One practice that shaped Gorman’s proclamation was the habit of reading poetry. For example, as mentioned earlier, while a senior in college she “grounded herself” each morning by reading a poem.¹⁰¹ She recognized that reading poetry would be formative for her life and proclamation. Likewise, preachers have much to glean from engaging poets. In a provocative and illuminating lecture entitled “What Poets Can Teach Preachers,” Anna Carter Florence has suggested that poets have much to offer preachers

⁹⁶ Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 51.

⁹⁷ Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*, 117-118.

⁹⁸ Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, 29.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ McCray, *The Censored Pulpit*, 101.

¹⁰¹ Brisco, “Amanda Gorman tells Oprah.”

about “what we do, how we do it, where we do it, what we bring along, and why we do it.”¹⁰² For instance, how might the inclusion of poetry as an integral part of homiletical formation shape the spirituality, sensibilities, and speech of preachers as they pursue common ground? A second practice that Gorman embodied that could be instructive for the formation of preachers is developing a mantra that orients us before preaching. For Gorman, the mantra is “I am the daughter of Black writers, who are descended from Freedom Fighters, who broke the chains who changed the world. They call me.”¹⁰³ The exercise of developing and crafting such a mantra is an opportunity to consider our identity and deepest convictions as a preacher. This kind of clarity is crucial to be able to engage in the courageous work of pursuing common ground in a world of animosity and instability.

A third insight preachers might learn from Gorman is the importance of cultivating a “humanizing homiletic”¹⁰⁴ that honors the dignity of all people and pursues a concrete manifestation of the unity of the Spirit. Gorman’s poetry is insistent on seeing and honoring the humanity of all people—even those who may have committed dehumanizing and unjust acts. In an age in which it is easy to cancel, condemn, and cloister ourselves from others, Gorman challenges us to see our common humanity. This means paying attention to how we reference (or do not reference) others outside of our own tribe theologically, culturally, or politically. How might we as preachers develop habits of “auditing” our sermons for binary, either/or thinking?¹⁰⁵ How might this be a communal exercise with others that fosters more community and mutuality in the search for common ground?

Conclusion

Amanda Gorman is an example of the bridge-building capabilities of Spirit-inspired contemplative proclamation outside the traditional pulpit. In her own way, she has continued Howard Thurman’s pursuit of common ground as she bridges various racial, religious, and cultural divides. Her commitment to an integrated life through grounding rituals and community speaks to how a disintegrated person cannot build bridges. Contemplative formation helps shape reconciling proclamation. Additionally, Gorman’s example reminds us of the role of the arts in social transformation. The Spirit seems to work in a unique way through artistic expression to bring people together. Given the propensity for contemplative proclamation to both be engaged as an art and to engage the arts, it is an essential theological resource for the bridging of divides in our time. Moreover, related to this, we see in Gorman that contemplative proclamation has the potential to bridge divisions not only between races and religions but also between the church and the world. Her poetic, contemplative sermonizing captured the hearts and minds of people in the public square literally around the globe. Communicators of all sorts will do well to learn from the expansive possibilities of contemplative preaching she evinces.

As we continue to face various challenges in our complex, global society, we need the kind of vision, commitment, and spirituality embodied in contemplative preachers at their best. We need a vision of radical reconciliation and justice for all of God’s creation. We need a commitment to humanizing even those with whom we deeply disagree. And we need a

¹⁰² Anna Carter Florence, “What Poets Can Teach Preachers 9/1/21 Preaching Workshop with Anna Carter Florence,” Synod of the Covenant, YouTube, 1:29:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dYm8iWvwfA>.

¹⁰³ Gorman quoted in Obama, “Unity with Purpose.”

¹⁰⁴ Powery, *Becoming Human*, 99.

¹⁰⁵ For some examples of how preachers might seek to move beyond particular types of binaries, see Ronald J. Allen, “Preaching beyond Binary Categories: An Approach from Process Theology” *Religions* 15, no. 2: 221 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020221>.

spirituality of receptivity to the Spirit who continues to invite us to move beyond the boundaries of who we call kin.

Post-Event Reflections

I experienced the consultation on “Spirituality, Preaching, and Bridging Racial Divides” at Boston University as one of the most intellectually, relationally, and spiritually enriching academic gatherings that I have been part of. I continue to find myself deeply grateful for the remarkable planning and hospitality of David Jacobsen and La Ronda Barnes that made the event possible. It was an honor to be invited into such a warm and meaningful community of scholars to explore a topic of great interest to me personally.

The quality of academic engagement in our time together should not have been a surprise, but it truly exceeded my expectations. I was struck by the rich questions and comments from doctoral students and pastors—such as Damon Fraylon, Joshua Lawrence Lazard, and Keith Norman—alongside the professors who presented and responded to papers. I found myself challenged to consider new exemplars of contemplative preaching through the work of Frank Thomas on James Baldwin and La Ronda Barnes on Zilpha Elaw. While I had previously thought of Jarena Lee as a contemplative preacher, Anna Carter Florence’s brilliant engagement with her mystical hermeneutic was illuminating in many ways. And Donyelle McCray’s thought-provoking, challenging, and generous response to my paper was extraordinary. It will linger with me for quite some time. Though I have grown in my interest in contemplative preaching over the years, I haven’t always had folks around me who are interested in discussing the topic. The depth of conversation I experienced at the consultation was a gift I never could’ve imagined receiving.

Alongside the intellectual stimulation of the gathering, I was struck by the meaningful relational connections that emerged. Personally, it was special to be at an academic gathering with three scholars—Frank, David, and Donyelle—who I first met as a new doctoral student at a conference in 2018 around the time I first started studying contemplative preaching. They were wonderful supporters and conversation partners throughout my studies, with Frank eventually serving as a doctoral mentor, so it was quite surreal to join the gathering with them now as a colleague. I also was happy to meet new folks whose work I had only previously read, such as Anna, Shively Smith, and Stephanie Paulsell. Their warmth, encouragement, and wisdom were a tremendous gift to me not only in my exploration of contemplative preaching but also my ongoing development as an early career professor.

While you might expect a consultation with scholars to be academically and relationally enriching, it is less likely also to be spiritually uplifting. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the gathering touched not only my head but also my heart. This was due in part to the nature of the subject matter, but there were also meaningful prayers and meditations that La Ronda beautifully led before most of our paper sessions. Additionally, we spent time in Marsh Chapel where we were given a tour by the current Dean of Chapel, Robert Allan Hill. Being in the space where Howard Thurman served as Dean of Chapel and engaged in contemplative preaching was a moving experience, to say the least. We fittingly ended our final session of the consultation in the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground. The beautiful building was created in honor of Thurman’s vision of fostering community for all people. After we ended our time together, I spent some time lingering in the center. As I saw students and staff from diverse backgrounds laughing, talking, and working together, I thought to myself, “Surely, Thurman’s search for common ground is still alive.” Guided by the Spirit of God, I hope to continue that search.

Response to Trey Clark

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After reading Professor Trey Clark's 2022 essay on Black contemplative preaching, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers," I was eager to read more of his reflections and "Spirit, Spoken Word, and the Search for Common Ground: Amanda Gorman as Contemplative Preacher" does not disappoint. The paper offers a full buffet of wisdom on the homiletical dynamics in "The Hill We Climb" and I see bridges to other exhortative poems like Richard Wright's "I Have Seen Black Hands," Margaret Walker's "For My People," and Pauli Murray's "Dark Testament."

If I can take off my academic cap and speak with a bit more candor, Trey, I want to say that I began reading as your homiletical colleague but increasingly found myself reading as a hungry soul. Your paper spoke to that part of me that longs for a different relationship to Christianity—one that will do more loosening than binding, pierce my idealized self, and more effectively bear the weariness of "this present darkness" (Eph 6:12). This is a long way of saying I am increasingly mindful of the distorting effects of my faith and thinking of Amanda Gorman as a preacher refreshed me. Her poetic dreaming put me in a crowd on a hillside and reminded me that we are climbing towards a future none of us can fully see.

Like every strong essay, your paper raised questions for me—but the kind I want to savor rather than slake with ready answers. The poetic lines that first came to me—and it seems fitting to draw on poetry here—were from Alice Walker's poem "Reassurance." She speaks of savoring questions without rushing to resolution, being willing to stay in limbo, and consequently experiencing expansion. Flourishing becomes possible when "Time" does not "squeeze" the discovery process.¹

What is a Poem?

As Alice Walker speaks of living with questions, your essay similarly dislodges and jostles some basic assumptions. First, what is a poem? Surely, like a sermon, a poem is a conduit of divine revelation. And perhaps a poem is a tool specially fit for fostering the unity the triune God longs for. You describe "The Hill We Climb" as an "example of Spirit-inspired proclamation outside the traditional pulpit" and a word purposefully embodied, inquisitive, "prayerful" in its "orientation," and "informed by Christian scripture." More, the poem has "healing" capacities. I couldn't help noticing how these features resonate with Audre Lorde's expansive description of poetry as "a revelatory distillation of experience" rather than "sterile word play."² "Poetry," she goes on to say, "is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives."³ Lorde alludes to the visionary propensities of poetry when she observes that it "is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives."⁴

There is a dailiness that grounds poetry even as a more ethereal quality gives it life. Reading your essay, Trey, I sense that like Nathaniel Mackey, you want to point us away from

¹ Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Ballantine, 1997), 97.

² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

“poems as discrete pieces of writing—the sealed-off odes that we are taught in school,” towards something more mysterious and active—poems as channels of divine energy.⁵

Where Do Poems Come From?

Building on the first question inspired by your work is a related question: Where do poems come from? I ask, again, not so much because I expect an answer but more as an attempt to marvel at *how* poems like “The Hill We Climb” come to be and how they seem to point to the ineffable.

Gorman takes us beyond the patina of beautiful words, beyond abstractions and self-satisfied speech, and lights a flame of possibility. And you note that Gorman’s poem is not the mere fruit of individual effort or mastery but something *received*. This question of origin also arises with sermons. We preachers *hope* our Sunday sermon comes from God—at least some of it, if not the whole! Do inspired poems like Gorman’s tell us anything about that mysterious well of truth from which so much Black sacred discourse descends?

I think Fred Craddock plays with this question when he describes sermons and short stories as “first cousins.”⁶ If this is true, then I’d say sermons and poems are siblings—perhaps sisters like Black feminism and womanism as one scholar puts it.⁷ Both are mothered by truth and mystery, and both are sometimes destined to move through a world that is not prepared for their gifts. Your paper sits these sisters next to one another so we can see the family resemblance. I wish they sat side by side more often within and beyond Christian liturgies.

How are Preachers like Gorman Nurtured?

Third, within what frames does Black contemplative preaching flourish? You make a compelling case for seeing Gorman as a Black contemplative preacher and “The Hill We Climb” as a Black contemplative sermon. What would it mean to nurture preachers like Gorman and cultivate fertile ground for their sermons? What are the vital elements of the formation process?

When Gorman read her poem on the steps of the capitol, some of us experienced church. I’m not talking about a heavy super-imposition of dogma in a purportedly secular space, but an energy—what William Stringfellow describes as eventfulness, a flash, an ephemeral happening in which we had new registers of perception.⁸ Though fleeting, the experience had a lasting effect on our consciousness, leaving us suppler and strangely open to newness. There was a glimpse of Jesus preaching on the hillside, or, for those of us with ears to hear, an immersion in the “Clearing.”⁹ In Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, her character, Baby Suggs, holy invites the newly freed to laugh, dance, and weep during her sermon given in an open space surrounded by witnessing trees called the “Clearing.” The space is known only to her community, those who felled the trees, and a few deer.¹⁰

⁵ Hua Hsu, “Nathaniel Mackey’s Long Song,” *The New Yorker*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/12/nathaniel-mackeys-long-song>.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 79.

⁷ Layli Phillips, “Womanism: On Its Own” in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxiv. Phillips also describes womanism and Black feminism as cousins. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁸ William Stringfellow, *William Stringfellow: Essential Writings*, Selected with Introduction by Bill Wylie-Kellermann (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 124–125.

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, With a new foreword by the author (New York: Vintage, 2004), 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Gorman creates a similar Clearing with her words. She speaks into being, to quote Morrison, a “wide-open place.”¹¹ One might say Gorman creates a rhetorical space for her own words and for the listeners’ reception of those words. As I thought about this dynamic, I wondered whether, in a womanist frame, preaching is an act of clearing or an act of speaking into a clearing? In any case, I would link this “wide-open” rhetorical space to Thurman’s vision of “common ground.”¹² After reading your paper, I became more curious about the different contemporary manifestations of Thurman’s common ground today. Can it be created in a static form or is it necessarily evanescent—appearing only to those with eyes to see and ears to hear? And how might we, like Gorman (and Zilpha Elaw?), develop more polyvalent speech? One potential example drawn from nineteenth-century African American preaching is John Jasper, who wove oblique or clandestine messages into sermons that he preached to audiences that included whites and African Americans and both enslaved people and slaveholders.¹³

Questions on Scripture and Violence

What does Amanda Gorman teach us about the role of scripture in the public square? I experienced preaching as deeply embedded in the poem, but not driving it in a heavy-handed way. And I felt that, in this case, it flourished in the back seat.

What is the relationship between the contemplative poet-preacher-dreamer and the reality of violence? One of the compelling moments in your paper arose in your reflection on Gorman’s liveliness—her bright yellow jacket and red headband-tiara or “crown.” Indeed, she stood in cinematic contrast to the capitol’s grey stone and the crowd of dignitaries in business or military attire. Watching the video, I noticed Gorman’s dance-like gestures and rhythmic delivery. She brought vibrant colors, dance, and music into the staid atmosphere of the Inauguration.

At the same time, deathliness surrounded the reading of the poem—not just on January 6th but in the wave of rhetoric that followed. And as radiant and joyous as she was, when I read your paper, I could not help juxtaposing her—a buoyant young poet who is small of stature—with the mob. The comparison reminded me of how lonely preaching can be. Her personal mantra seems crucial in counteracting loneliness and vulnerability, reminding Gorman of the ancestral cloud of witnesses who speak to and through her.

I was also reminded of how our words hold both Pauline weakness and divine power (2 Cor 12:9). Gorman’s embodied vitality in the face of death provides a vivid image of the ministry of preaching. Her liveliness and charisma touched something in her audience and generated a body of listeners who can tolerate ambiguity and seek tenderness. This dual longing is a gift in our polarized rhetorical landscape.

Threats of Celebrity and Acquisition

And this leads me to my last question about celebrity. Though each person in our Consultation focuses on a forward-looking figure, you are the only one in our group who writes about someone who is still alive. Gorman is alive literally and metaphorically in that she is not letting the wretchedness of celebrity culture squelch her life.

What do we make of Black contemplative thought as yet one more potential acquisition in the market? Clearly, even Black contemplative preachers cannot entirely escape the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1971), xiv, 2–3.

¹³ Richard Lischer, “John Jasper” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 278–279.

commodifying effects of celebrity culture, but Trey, I was grateful for your reflection on Gorman's solidity amid these dynamics. By noting that she was not an instant success, she challenges America's worship of the fast and the grand.

Her assertions about her success taking a "lifetime" and a "village" indicate her spiritual depth. I hope these responses will encourage preachers who seek to emulate her not to do so by merely attempting to perfect their language but instead by growing as *listeners*—that is, listening to God, the Ancestors, and Creation as she does.

Closing Thoughts

Looking back on his teenage years, Howard Thurman tells a story about a time when he opened his mother's bedroom door without knocking and found her praying.¹⁴ Yet, he was the one who was stunned because she was radiant. The serenity and glow he saw in her was an arresting indication of the power of prayer. But as I see it, the "light" seemed to be both in his mother's face *and his recognition of it*. And the same might be said of Trey and Amanda Gorman. They are both light bearers who shine forth with homiletical wisdom and I look forward to reading new works from you both.

Participating in the Homiletical Theology Project was one of the most rewarding experiences in my academic career. From the start, the climate of warmth and openness facilitated true collaboration. There was room to struggle, doubt, and be honest about the many ways that our current historical context challenges long-held paradigms. The depth of conversation we had is rare in academic spaces. At some point, and I am not sure when, our group gelled in such a way that our communal work seemed to supersede our individual contributions. As a result, I left Boston with more than fresh ideas; I left with new friends.

¹⁴ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 15.

Preaching [and Teaching] Thurman's New Testament Spirituality

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Abstract: *The paper considers the hermeneutical and homiletical model of New Testament spirituality available through Howard Thurman's writings. The paper argues that at least three features distinguish Thurman's NT spirituality from dominant understandings of Christian spirituality that serve preachers, biblical and theological teachers, and the NT exegete. Attuned to the histories and contexts of African Americans and diverse understandings of spiritual experience, Thurman's approach to NT spirituality attends to matters of genre and biography, explores the activities of God's Spirit as attested in the Bible and the lives of faithful people, and utilizes diverse modes of African American rhetorical aesthetics from oral, literary, and visual materials.*

Sitting among homileticians as a New Testament (NT) biblical hermeneutician, I was struck by how infrequently such roundtable discussions occur. What a novel idea—scholars of preaching and interpretation, both of whom are lifelong students of the Bible and theology, talking to each other as equals! The consultation confirmed a hunch I had going into the event: homileticians and hermeneuticians are, at the very least, first cousins, if not siblings. We belong at the family table together. There is much we can learn in exchanges about methods and approaches, sources of interpretation for preaching, and the diverse audiences of concern that call us to interpret and proclaim. Seated among my roundtable collaborators, I felt our call was decisive, not general. We convened unapologetically to describe Black contemplative preaching as an undeveloped area of study that deserves conversation and definition within homiletics and biblical studies. I discovered something in that conversation as the sole biblical scholar. We share a common language, commitment, and aim.

One of the most memorable details from our collaboration was the diverse sources we packed in our satchels and showcased from our computer screens. Our discussions highlighted that the sources of Black contemplative preaching include the Bible and extend beyond it. Figures like Howard Thurman, James Baldwin, Pauli Murray, Amanda Gorman, and Jarena Lee are necessary commentators, supplying the interpreter's notes necessary for probing Black spirituality as a site from which we preach and interpret. Together with the Bible, the written texts of such figures forge pathways toward inner and outer meanings that inlay strands of Black spiritualities interweaving across the US American landscape. Those "inter-weavings" cross generations, regions, cultures, artistic expressions, and audiences. The Bible of Black contemplative preaching and its contributing interpreters come from here and there, yesterday and today, and they gaze in and out of themselves and their communities. Always guided by God's Spirit and the spirit of the age from which they interpret, practitioners of Black contemplative preaching faithfully mine meanings that look to futures afar off. I learned these insights while sitting at the consultation tables among my preaching friends. From our intellectual sharing, our diverse reference points shaped our understandings about not just what and how to preach but how to responsibly handle the Bible in dialogue with those wielding sacred words of contemplation.

The consultation was a needed table-talk community for me. It reset my understanding of what sprouts at the meeting place between preacher and interpreter within Black contemplative traditions when New Testament spirituality is in view. We bore witness to each other at that site. We watched and listened for the threads of Black contemplative traditions our seven-member group tracked. Among the visiting friends and respondents who joined us at the table, we shared testimonies not broadly heard in the fields of homiletics and biblical hermeneutics. Black contemplative preaching materialized as communally aimed. It moved from our personal inner selves and intellect to the webs of outer selves that constitute our communities. Our table talks mapped how approaches in Black contemplative preaching travel in the opposite direction, too. It moves from our outer selves and networks of community relations and histories to inner fashionings that are incomplete and continually uncoiling. Seated at the T-junction between Black contemplative traditions, preaching, and New Testament studies with new colleagues and a trustworthy “companion of old” named Howard Washington Thurman, I asked, what is Black contemplative preaching to New Testament studies and which way should we go?

Spirituality Studies: New Testament and Howard Thurman

I often tell students, especially those enrolled in my advanced exegesis or Howard Thurman interpretation courses, that before I was a biblical scholar, I was a preacher. I am one of those people who came from a household of preachers and turned preacher herself at 16. I knew the New Testament as a book of faith and a repository for exhortation, prayer, song, warning, and influence. My Baptist and Pentecostal preaching father, grandfather, uncles, and aunts carried the Bible to hospitals. They read it at the dining table and studied it while sitting in their offices to prepare for Thursday night's Bible study and prayer service. Raised in a household dominated by black pastors and preachers from the South, I knew how to preach the Bible before I learned about the critical tools of exegesis. I was unaware of how those tools can enrich or diminish the sacred Africana aesthetics of proclamation, exposition, and the inner workings of black faith.

What does the biblical scholar have to say about the preaching life? Focused on language, reception history, and the social history of ancient civilizations preserved in the canons of the Torah, the New Testament, and even other canons like the Quran or Pseudepigraphal writings, biblical scholars are known for being more concerned about “setting the text” and its past contexts than preaching. Traditionally, we aim first to identify the most plausible original wording, historical parameters, and theological soundings of sacred writings. We are not required to concern ourselves with how contemporary audiences understand biblical writings and whether the historical contexts fully align with our theological commitments by which we resource the Bible today. Many of us, however, can recall stories of biblical preaching and study in faith communities because such experiences were our initial introductions to vocations of interpretation.

Furthermore, biblical scholars are traditionally not trained to think of the NT in matters of “spirituality.” On topics like Christology, soteriology, eschatology, etc.—the NT exegete trains to distill from biblical writings and interpretive histories the threads of meaning and relevance that shape such theological concepts. We identify the *topoi* (or discussion places) in biblical writings and locate them in the histories of biblical interpretation, past and present. Much of our methodological inheritance derives from the interpretative agendas of German and European schools of thought from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which trained generations of

scholarly interpreters across fields.¹ However, when it comes to homiletics and its modes of communication and practices for contemporary cultural proclamation, and even more so when the discussion shifts to spirituality studies, the New Testament exegete is typically less prepared.

It would be almost a decade after I accepted my preaching vocation, which quickly transformed into a multi-vocational identity of scholar-teacher-preacher-writer—that I encountered Thurman as a preaching exemplar. By age 17, barely one year after I started preaching, someone gifted me with Thurman’s book, *Meditations of the Heart*. In my initial encounter with him, I thought of Thurman as a stirring and revelatory writer of Christian meditations and prayers. I did not learn he was an expositor in the tradition of Africana preaching until almost a decade later when my preaching vocation was in jeopardy.² I was poised to abandon the black preaching life for the life of the mind and the profession of a biblical scholar. Thurman became an exemplar of how I can hold the two together.³

Thurman’s approach to NT interpretation blended exegetical data, spiritual probing, and social reflections with practices of contemplative preaching. He supplied a model in which preacher and exegete, or biblical interpretation and matters of the Spirit coexist as epistemological frames that serve both faith communities and intellectual academies. Thurman’s model is on full display in his collection of meditations called *Deep is the Hunger*, his personal interpretation of America’s history of segregation in *The Luminous Darkness*, and his sermon collection in *Temptations of Jesus*, to name a few. In the epilogue to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman depicts the vocational life as a working paper: “The life working paper of the individual is made up of a creative synthesis of what the man is in all his parts and how he reacts to the living process.”⁴ Thurman’s working paper metaphor provides a means to reconsider the impactful and rhetorical blend of preacher and exegete in biblical spirituality.

Keeping the working paper in mind, Thurman’s NT spirituality appears to solve a fundamental problem that arises in traditional structures of theological schools and religious departments. Whereas biblical homiletics and hermeneuticians often function in separate fields of study within theological education, Thurman assumes their essential compatibility. Exploring Thurman’s NT spirituality brings studies in NT preaching, exegesis, and spirituality together. All three coexist in Thurman’s model of NT spirituality, which issues from preaching subjects tuned for pedagogical aims. Although Thurman did not systematically describe his NT spirituality, he nonetheless left guideposts in his sermons, essays, meditations, and recordings. The question becomes, what is Thurman’s NT spirituality, and how does it serve the preacher, the teacher, and the exegete simultaneously? Three features distinguish Thurman’s NT spirituality, which makes it preacher-teacher-ready. Thurman (1) leverages matters of genre and biography and (2) focuses on not just language and depictions of Spirit activity in the NT but its models of interiority that attend to social circumstances. He also (3) enacts, as a preacher, a particular mode of African American rhetorical aesthetic, which resources the materials of African American arts, such as the Spiritual songs or the tenor of his own voice, to foster awareness about a God that is both knowable and being revealed. With these three ingredients,

¹ Shively T. J. Smith, “Historical Criticism: Methods,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, eds Ian Boxall and Bradley Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 37–54.

² Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 491–492.

³ Shively T. J. Smith, “Thurman-eutics: Howard Thurman’s Clothesline for the Interpretation of the Life of the Mind and Journey of the Spirit,” in *Anchored in the Current: Discovering Howard Thurman as Educator, Activist, Guide, and Prophet*, ed. Gregory C. Ellison II (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 71–83.

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 100.

Thurman is always looking for various interpretive outcomes and a medley of proclamations that transgress the boundaries that keep even human beings separate and distant from each other.

A Matter of Genre: What is the New Testament in Thurman's Spirituality?

New Testament spirituality remains a relatively untouched area of study in critical biblical studies. Though it has pride of place in spirituality studies, it tends to be absent from the conversation within formal studies in the New Testament. One need only explore the current roster of program units and paper titles within the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting bulletin to notice how NT spirituality is unattended in intellectual discussions. In the annual meeting slated for 2023, only four sessions included the language of spirituality in conversation with matters of women's mysticism, Gnosticism, or rituals in the biblical world—none of those posted papers specifically named New Testament Spirituality as the subject. Interestingly, when the biblical field raises the conversation of NT spirituality, it is typically among Catholic biblical scholars, not Protestant or interfaith-identifying scholars. It is also surprising how rarely the phrase appears within current configurations and articulations of Africana biblical studies.

Though few, some helpful definitions of NT spirituality clarify Thurman's working understanding. A conservative biblical scholar, Gordon Fee casts New Testament spirituality as primarily exegetically oriented. Essential to understanding the meaning of spirituality, according to Fee, is mapping the language of Spirit deployed in biblical literature. He says, "In the New Testament, therefore, spirituality is defined in terms of the Spirit of God (or Christ). One is spiritual to the degree that one lives in and walks by the Spirit; in Scripture the word has no other meaning, and no other measurement" (Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 5). Fee's definition of NT spirituality derives from the activities of God's Spirit narrated in the New Testament. Therefore, he locates spirituality as an object of study and analysis. NT spirituality, described by Fee, is an orienting mode of study that should shape and guide toward a particular interpretive outcome: "...the aim of [biblical] exegesis: to produce in our lives and the lives of others true spirituality, in which God's people live in fellowship with the eternal and living God, and thus in keeping with God's purposes in the world. But to do that effectively, true 'Spirituality' must precede exegesis and flow from it" (Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*, 6). According to Fee, the spirituality expressed in the NT, when exegetically distilled, gives way to what he calls "true Spirituality." Rather than using phrases like multiple spiritualities, diverse spiritualities, or simply spiritualities in the plural form, Fee sees the outcome as singular and definitive.

In contrast, Sandra Schneiders, a Catholic biblical scholar, expands biblical spirituality beyond the processes of exegesis. Biblical spirituality, according to Schneiders, derives from and informs the quality of the preacher-exegete's interior selves and the quality of their interactions with each other:

Biblical spirituality is not an individual's invention of some pattern of Christian life decorated with biblical texts or an appeal to the Bible for some kind of extrinsic authorization. It is the spirituality, the experience of lived Christian faith, offered to us and modeled for us in Scripture. Nevertheless, this spirituality is not simply observed or admired or even exegeted and explained. It is interiorized by the contemporary reader... Scripture is not only a record of the spirituality of our forebears but a source and pattern of our own spirituality.⁵

Schneiders depicts biblical spirituality as part of the residue of ancestral lineages attached to a personal living pattern. It can reflect the state of interiority of ancestors and forebearers as much

⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality," *Interpretation* 56, no. 2 (April 2002): 141.

as it does the individual or current faith community. Moreover, biblical spirituality satisfies more than the curiosities of intellect. It forms ways of being and knowing that surpasses methodical interpretative processes.

So, how might we describe spirituality in general? Eschewing matters of doctrine and exegetical process, Schneiders defines spirituality as a kind of “life integration” that creates human patterns of flourishing rather than human patterns of destruction, such as alcoholism and consumerism.⁶ Schneiders articulates “spirituality as lived experience,” which “can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives....”⁷

The spirituality Schneiders sets out to define from within the fields of biblical studies and doctrinal theology, Luther E. Smith supplies through describing the elements of Thurman’s biography and the tenets of his theological thought as a “mystic prophet.” In his book, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic Prophet*, Smith says, “Spirituality is a way of life committed to understanding the nature and urging of the spirit. Life organizes all its desires, energy, and resources so that they might be dominated by the spirit. Spirituality brings a harmony to living that is consistent with the peace and will of God.”⁸ Smith offers a definition of spirituality that gives context to understanding Thurman’s brand of mysticism and its contribution to formal theological studies.

Like Schneiders, the meaning of spirituality mediated through Thurman’s extant perspectives serves a pattern of life that leads to oneness and relationship. It is a seeking modality or, in Thurman’s preferred language, “a quest” that is ongoing and ever-changing. The language Thurman uses to discuss spirituality in this way is often “religious experience.” In his sermon collection *Temptations of Jesus*, Thurman says:

In the total religious experience, we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit. In the waiting, brooding, lingering, tarrying timeless moments, the essence of the religious experience becomes most fruitful. I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. When it happens, I experience His Presence. When this experience becomes an object of thought and reflection, it is then that my mind creates dogmas, creeds, and doctrines. These are the creations of the mind and are, therefore, always after the fact of the religious experience. But they are always out of date. The religious experience is always current, always fresh.⁹

Spirituality for Thurman is dynamic, ever-unfolding, and fundamentally a quest for what is Ultimate. Thurman uses other terms like Presence, God, Creator, and Transcendent to label the ever-escaping subject of spirituality. If God is always current and those who preach and exegete outdated, what is the NT as a mediating mechanism that serves the worship life of Christians and others across space and time? There are two points to consider.

First, Thurman understands the NT as a diverse set of writings by various authors. He sees it as a spiritual anthology constituted by different types of writings, varying perspectives, and distinct experiences reflecting the arc of mortality: life and death. Sometimes, those human experiences are mediated by Spirit, God, the life of Jesus, nature, and the incidents Thurman

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM, 2005), 1.

⁷ Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality,” viii.

⁸ Luther E. Smith, Jr., *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond: Friends of United Press, 1991), 19.

⁹ Howard Thurman, *Temptations of Jesus* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978), 14-15.

deems “the daily rounds.” Most often, Thurman acknowledges persistently how human living is populated by and constantly colliding with other human beings and societies. He usually lists types of writings from the Bible he deems scriptural and even “holy.” Among his most frequently referenced places are the Gospels, Psalms, Proverbs, the prophets, and Paul’s letters.

While he rarely mentions the New Testament explicitly as “the New Testament” per se, when it does arise, Thurman has a specific understanding of its significance for the rhetorical moment—which is often the preaching moment. For example, in Thurman’s 1951 sermon on “Forgiveness,” available in *Sermons on the Parables*, he names the New Testament as a source of more than merely biblical references. It is a repository for moral insight and reflection. Yet, according to Thurman, the New Testament also expresses the prejudices and leanings of its authors and the communities to which it was initially intended, leaving other communities and perspectives unacknowledged or discredited. He says:

This morning we are dealing with two of the very striking parables of Jesus. And they have to do with forgiveness of sin. Very simple stories, they are. One of them has a dramatic setting. A Pharisee—and I hope that you will bear in mind that most of the New Testament references to the Pharisees are references that reflect a judgmental attitude toward the Pharisee that [does not acknowledge]... the genius of the Pharisaic movement in Israel. It is a reflection of another kind of attitude, [a] kind of prejudice, and this of course is nothing new, nothing radical; it’s an old familiar thing to those persons who have made any study of either the Pharisees or the Sadducees or of Israel or of the life of Jesus for that matter.¹⁰

Thurman thinks such biases, as articulated in the NT, should not only be identified as such but the historical record of their realities corrected for proper moral consideration. One of the tasks of the preacher of NT spirituality is to communicate the operative prejudices canonized in the Bible from different times and people. The other task is to heighten the awareness of the congregation and gathered community to how they may be interpreting the Bible in a way that does not account for the perspectives of the past that are no longer applicable today. In other words, the preacher of NT spirituality closes the distance between human behavior then and now while also widening the gap between cultural circumstances and differences.

Thus, for Thurman, the biblical text is an ideological collection of literature meriting sifting and weighing. Thurman’s considerations of the ideological entanglements within the NT as matters to address in the preaching moment expands the context of biblical study set out over 30 years ago by Itumeleng J. Mosala, a South African biblical scholar. In his 1989 volume, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Mosala describes the importance of context, particularly the Africana diaspora context in its global fullness, as the necessary starting point for exegesis:

In particular, I hope that black theologians will take black history and culture seriously enough that they will use it more to interrogate the texts of the Bible. I propose that in this appropriation of black history and culture for the purposes of appropriating biblical texts, the category of struggle will serve as a critical grid. It is necessary to take sides in the struggles inscribed in black history and culture as a

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, “Forgiveness” (Sept 30, 1951),” in *Sermons on the Parables* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 37-38.

prior step to taking sides in the struggles that produced the Bible and are significant in it.¹¹

Mosala understands the Bible to take sides. He argues the Bible is a product of the ideologies of its compilers and that an uncritical acceptance of the Bible as the word of God leads to a notion that it has no ideology itself when it does. The Bible's collection as an authorized, canonized set of writings makes it inherently ideological. Furthermore, Mosala asserts biblical interpretation is potentially harmful to colonized peoples, especially people of African descent, who accept the Bible without interrogating its dominant uses. African people's reasons for adopting and adapting the Bible as a source of meaning and even divine revelation require description and definition. Thurman sees the work of NT spirituality, mediated through preaching, as a moment of interrogation and acknowledgment of reasons to adopt some viewpoints of the NT while rejecting others.

Second, Thurman understands the NT as "a record of the spirituality of our forebearers," as Schneiders describes it. For example, Thurman resources his grandmother's understanding of the significance of the NT in his vocation as a preacher. The opportunities and challenges to biblical spirituality for Thurman were set out as a young child listening to the sage words of his grandmother. He rehearses repeatedly throughout his life as a preacher, teacher, and writer the story of his grandmother's sifting of NT writings as relevant or irrelevant to her faith life. He says:

During much of my boyhood I was cared for by my grandmother, who was born a slave and lived until the Civil War on a plantation near Madison, Florida. My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother—she could neither read nor write. Two or three times a week I read the Bible aloud to her. I was deeply impressed by the fact that she was most particular about the choice of Scripture. For instance, I might read many of the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. My curiosity knew no bounds, but we did not question her about anything.¹²

Capturing his grandmother's rejection of Pauline writings, Thurman depicts the writings of the NT as a contested space. It yields a diversity of NT spiritualities and behaviors, but not all behaviors are moral. For Thurman, many readings, interpretations, and practices stemming from NT spirituality are incompatible with the experiences and faiths of those identified as "disinherited." As Thurman states at the beginning of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "MANY and varied are the interpretations dealing with the teachings and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But few of these interpretations deal with what the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall." Preaching NT spirituality that does not start with the interiority and social realities colliding in the living of the oppressed risks offering a sounding not only out of step with Jesus but lacks the essential aim of spiritual matters—namely, to see those who are unseen.¹³

Interpretive Wrestling and Response

¹¹ Itumeleng Jerry Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics & Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 11–12.

¹² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 20.

¹³ Adapted from 2 Corinthians 4:18, "because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (NRSVUe).

Spirituality for Thurman is similar to what Schneiders proposes. What makes Thurman's working notions important, however, is how they were formed out of Black life in America in the early and mid-twentieth century in the US Spirituality, mainly as it is interpreted and expressed through the communicative work of preaching, according to Thurman's model, orients human beings to a non-intuitive way. Forged from the struggles and hopes of African American people—from those enslaved to those navigating the terrains of Jim Crow or cultural prejudice—Thurman's biblical interpretive play does not reach for sureness. NT spirituality uncovers and distills the tentativeness of spiritual understanding. It is at its best when it cultivates community spaces of interpretation that are comfortable, even expectant of "the waiting moment." NT spirituality, interpreted for the task of preaching, casts life as one of exploration and wonder. It leads the exegete, preacher, and hearers away from certainty and is suspicious of proclamations of certainty. Moreover, biblical spirituality is tied to the faith proclamations of others, especially kinspeople and ancestors, even as it looks forward to future generations.¹⁴ Thus, biblical spirituality is an interpretive endeavor, but it is not simply individual practice and outcomes, as it seems to unfold in Fee's thinking. Biblical spirituality, mediated through Thurman's ideas and experiences, is a public interpretive work.

One such site to see Thurman's notion of NT spirituality as public wrestling is in his study and interpretation of segregation and racism in America in his 1965 monograph, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. Growing up and preaching in the segregated, Christian American context of the early 1900s, Thurman distinguished between interpreting "within the framework of American Christianity" and outside it.¹⁵ Thurman noticed and rejected the social outcomes in normative American Christian interpretive practice with its formal and informal segregation, separation, and inequality structures. He said, "The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit and has rendered me terribly sensitive to the churning abyss separating white from black. Living outside of the region, I am aware of the national span of racial prejudice and the virus of segregation that undermines the vitality of American life." Aware of the divisions that keep people separate, Thurman determined the matters of spirituality, religious experience, and responsible biblical interpretation of Jewish-Christian ethics requires a different commitment: "Nevertheless, a strange necessity has been laid upon me to devote my life to the central concern that transcends the walls that divide and would achieve in literal fact what is experienced as literal truth: human life, is one and all men are members one of another. And this insight is spiritual and the hard core of religious experience."¹⁶

¹⁴ Thurman, *With Head & Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: A Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 268. Thurman speaks about the work of future generations in the final paragraph of his autobiography, saying, "Therefore, failure may remain failure in the context of all our strivings, hatred may continue to be hatred in the social and political arena of the common life, tragedy may continue to yield its anguish and its pain, spreading havoc in the tight circle of our private lives, the dead weight of guilt may not shift its position to make life even for a brief moment more comfortable and endurable, for any of us—all this may be true. Nevertheless, in all these things there is a secret door which leads into the central place, where the Creator of life and the God of the human heart are one and the same. I take my stand for the future and for the generations who follow over the bridges we already have crossed. It is here that the meaning of the hunger of the heart is unified. The Head and the Heart at last inseparable; they are lost in wonder in the One."

¹⁵ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 104.

¹⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), x.

The popular and globally recognized brand of American Christianity distanced human relations and proximity based on artificial and arbitrary markers of race-ethnicity, nationality, and religion. American Christianity was layered with human race violence and differentiation that represented human, not divine, constructions and hierarchies, according to Thurman. His unique interpretive impulse within American Christian interpretive history and experience. It functioned from a different imperative and vision of what the Christian religion, if it is indeed seeking to live up to “the religion of Jesus,” should accomplish. In the preface of his 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman articulates his Christian interpretive center by posing two questions, “Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice based on race, religion, and national origin? Is this impotence due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a fundamental weakness in the religion itself?”¹⁷

Thurman's interpretive practice resourced the NT for what he calls “the religion of Jesus.” He shifts from the interpretive task of reconstructing the early Jesus movement's origins and understanding how God's spirit worked through him during his “living fact.” For Thurman, interpreting NT spirituality properly requires working outside the mainstream Christian social formations of separation, claims of exclusive hermeneutical superiority, and traditional doctrines such as the Incarnation. Rehearsing the significance of Jesus' birth, Thurman does not reach for incarnational claims but historical ones. “Stripped bare of art forms and liturgy, the literal substance of the story remains, Jesus Chris was born in a stable, he was born of humble parentage in surroundings that are the common lot of those who earn their living by the sweat of their brows. Nothing can rob the common man of this heritage—when he beholds Jesus, he sees in him the possibilities of life even for the humblest and dramatic a resolution of the meaning of God.”¹⁸

For Thurman, preaching NT spirituality is about doing something other than ignoring and even transcending the social markers that define Jesus and respective persons. By locating Jesus as one of the disinherited, for Thurman, the significance of Jesus for preachers in their current moment is rooted in his social realities. Jesus proclaimed—preached even—from a particular social, economic, and political location as one among a people. He taught, healed, fellowshiped, and was guided by God's Spirit within his faith community, not outside and counter to it. As Jesus stated in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount discourse, he is fulfilling what was possible, not destroying or upending it. The revelation of Jesus is one that cast the vision—even call—for a community defined by love and populated by tremendous diversity and difference. Jesus is the “instance of mind of God” in the world.¹⁹

Thurman's interpretive endeavors bridge distances of meaning without seeking to influence people to switch their religious and ancestral allegiances. Characterized by studies about Jesus' interiority formed by the social realities of his day, Thurman's Christian interpretive endeavor departed from the purposes of normative, white Christian readings of the New Testament at the time, with its twofold effort to proselytize and colonialize. Thurman attempted to see more bodies and hear more voices from the global world with diminishing bias and radical inclusion, using the religion of Jesus as a guide. He saw Spirit activity in every action Jesus took to care for those who were outcasts, marginal, oppressed, imprisoned, silenced, and overlooked.

¹⁷ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7-8.

¹⁸ Howard Thurman, *Mood of Christmas & Other Celebration* (Boston: Friends United Press, 1985), 11.

¹⁹ Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 82-83.

He relies heavily on Gospel texts like Luke 4:18 to set an interpretive agenda of NT study for the preacher who sought the commitment to care for all. According to Thurman's perspective, widespread American Christian interpretive practice had the capacity to produce a corrupted sense of exceptionalism and selective inclusion. Such approaches transformed NT spirituality into something more like Fee's version—an attempt to secure “true spirituality” as if only one singular experience eclipsed all others.

A Matter of African American Rhetorical Aesthetics and the Arts

For Thurman, the aesthetic quality of biblical spirituality is also not cast as a single truth articulated in the NT. Nor is biblical spirituality dependent on the certainty expressed in organized Christian religions' doctrinal and creedal languages or even fixed worship experiences. Much of Thurman's preaching life as Dean of Chapel at both Howard University and Boston University's Marsh Chapel was defined by his attempts to fiddle with the fixedness of worship experiences that narrowly defined what spirit encounters could be by engaging in what he called “teaching experiments” or “worship experiments.”²⁰ These experiments shifted the work of the sermon and bible reading, assigning it as elements of the potential spiritual encounters possible instead of the singularly most important moments of a worship program. Below, I quote Thurman's description of the experience at length to capture his notion of spirituality deriving from what I call “experimental pedagogies.”

At Howard, I began to experiment with forms of worship other than usual religious services. The sermon was not always the centerpiece. Within the regular order of service, I provided stretches of time for meditation, a quiet time for prayers generated by silence. I also wanted to develop a service that would permit greater freedom for the play of creative imagination, a vesper service; these were called Twilight Hours. Each Twilight Hour was different in form and texture. I knew there was a felt need in the congregation, with its diversity of religious backgrounds, for a sense of the majesty of Holy Writ. The very first service was devoted to "The Ancient Heritage of Man's Quest for God," using both Old and New Testament passages that addressed this theme, some dramatically, some even rebelliously, and others, as in the great Psalms, with a sublime sense of redemption. These selections were typed and mimeographed as a single connected story. As shadows gathered in Rankin Chapel, after an organ prelude, I began to read aloud, the tones of the organ weaving in and out in muted accompaniment. There were periods of silence here and there to allow the inspiration of the words to hold full sway. When the service was over, I left the pulpit, but the audience remained in their seats, in total silence, for several minutes. When they rose to leave, the ushers gave each of them a copy of the reading.²¹

In an essay on Thurman titled, “Hearing the Aesthetic Dimension of Howard Thurman, the Interpreter,” I described the aesthetic dimension of Thurman's NT spirituality as articulated in not only what he says about the NT and where he goes but how Thurman preaches in general. Skilled in the rhetorical arts of communication, Thurman wrote and verbalized his proclamations, prayers, and inquiries. As I stated, “He spoke with the vocal range of a sonorous and musical tenor. Much like how the trumpet-master, Miles Davis, took his listeners on an odyssey through sound, Thurman's oratorical mastery played jazz with images that invite

²⁰ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 44, 92–93.

²¹ Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 92.

listeners to embark on a journey." He often started his expository moments with an even tone that carried a hint of levity. Playful, dry humor was a common starting point for Thurman to build a rapport with his audience. It was so natural and so well conducted that it was easy to miss how Thurman put his audience at ease while also readying them for the interpretive journey. "Thurman's voice lulled a listener into a still attentiveness, easing her into a space of introspection and wonder. To hear him engage matters of head and heart is to experience a spiritual genius drafting a working paper in social intervention and human relations."²²

Thurman's NT spirituality was a creative synthesis between subjects, objects, context, and exploration. Listening to him, sermons embodied an aesthetic quality of the playful inner life that is sensory rich and attentive to both the human being and their society of the past, as well as the human being in their present society (mainly if that human being was one of the many with "their backs against the wall"). Thurman's preaching of NT spirituality evoked the full range of human bodily experiences defined by hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and touching. Thurman's speech connotes an "aesthetic consciousness" that Hans-Georg Gadamer identifies as a work of art that "has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it."²³ Yet, Thurman is not changed alone. As he wrestles with expressing his inner life publicly, his listeners and viewers are "swept up" to belong more fully to the world they share. Thurman's pregnant pauses and surprising verbal asides, coupled with their effects on listeners, find affinity with Gadamer's descriptions of the interplay between a work of art and "the world of real existence." Together, they produce generative settings for meaning-making (interpretation) for both artist and audience, with the writings of the NT as the artistic media of choice.²⁴

Conclusion

In his collection of sermons, *The Growing Edge*, Thurman defines preaching as public wrestling "with a great idea." The preacher's goal is not "to preach a great sermon" but to fashion the conditions and supply the material that can instigate introspection and extrospection.²⁵ Thurman's experience as a preacher and interpreter informs his reflection when he says, "For me the sermon is an act of worship in which the preacher exposes his spirit and mind as they seek to reveal the working of the spirit of the living God upon them. It is a searching moment! The atmosphere is one charged with the dynamics of worship and the surrender and commitment which worship inspires."²⁶ According to Thurman, who is a preacher, interpreter, and teacher, practices of interpretation intended for public soundings among congregations, eager students, and curious lay audiences should bear one's spirit and mind as testimonial evidence of the unending working of God's Spirit.

Perhaps there is no greater sense of Thurman's eclectic blend of NT preaching, exegesis, teaching, and spirituality—particularly its impetus—than his frequently rehearsed dialogue with Gandhi from 1936. Thurman would often retell the story in writing or orally to different

²² Thurman characterizes his personal story as one of head and heart in the title of his autobiography: Thurman, *With Head & Heart*.

²³ Howard Thurman, "'I Can See It. Now, How to Say it?': Hearing the Aesthetic Dimension of Howard Thurman, the Interpreter," in *The Unfinished Search for Common Ground: Reimagining Howard Thurman's Life and Work*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023), 34; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 107.

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

²⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), x.

²⁶ Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, ix-x.

audiences to model the interreligious dialogues necessary for the Christian faith to cultivate true kinship that genuinely reflects the life of Jesus of Nazareth. One stirring moment occurred in 1972 as a series of reflections offered to the Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts, which convened at Eliot Congregational Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Thurman gave a 40-minute lecture titled “Black Pentecost and the Black Experience,” rehearsing his meeting with Gandhi at the end. In this version, Thurman references his encounter with Gandhi as an example for understanding the relationship between Black spirituality—particularly Black Christian spirituality—and its shared links to the spiritualities of others who identify as those with their backs against the wall.

Thurman recalls that after three hours of conversation, as they are turning to leave, Gandhi asks Thurman and his party to sing the Spiritual, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” Thurman describes the moment in these terms:

So here we were, standing in this bungalow tent in a field, singing a song that sprang right out of the Heart of our Idiom. And as we sang Gandhiji, his secretary, and the other man with him, bowed their heads in prayer. And when we finished, Gandhi closed it with a prayer in his own language. And then we sat for about five minutes in a silence that was drunk with the presence of God. And then we got up and departed. God speaks with many tongues, but with one voice--one voice.²⁷

It is unclear what shocked Thurman the most at that moment. First, he was surprised that Gandhi knew the spirituals enough to identify one of them by the title and its opening verse. Second, Thurman was startled to discover that from Gandhi’s Hindu perspective, there is religious truth and revelation contained in the song’s interpretation of crucifixion. Thurman listened as Gandhi assigned value and relevance to the spiritual song for African American people and Gandhi’s Hindu people’s faith and social struggle as a testament to resources of Black Spirituality that even he may have underestimated or, at least, taken for granted. Gandhi illustrated that spiritual resources for worship and insight are available within African American religious life and history and serve humanity in broad diversity.

Last, Gandhi caught Thurman off-guard by asking them to sing the Spiritual extemporaneously. Yet, Gandhi’s request and insight into the song’s significance for Christian African Americans and Hindu Indians emboldened Thurman’s party to satisfy the request. Moreover, it deepened Thurman’s growing hunger to understand better the importance of Jesus for the Christian preacher and believer, but also beyond them. What are the resources of community, fellowship, dialogue, and presence available through interpretations of Jesus’ life as it interacts with the lives of Africana peoples across the world and others? For the rest of his career, Thurman repeatedly returned to this conversation with Gandhi and the treasured insight that “God speaks with many tongues but with one voice.”

Thurman’s model of NT spirituality involves preaching subjects of various spiritualities in conversation. These conversations are expressions of a diversity of pedagogical objectives in spiritual exchanges that change the landscapes of social reality. Thurman understands the work of NT spirituality as mediated through dialogue and proclamation shared in worship spaces and spaces of generousities of listening, consideration, and welcome. Preaching and teaching Thurman’s NT spirituality requires the boldness to be involved in the religious experience as a

²⁷ Howard Thurman, “Black Pentecost #2: Reflections on the Black Experience,” May 30, 1972, Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts at Eliot Congregational Church, Roxbury, Massachusetts, Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, box 118; box 10, folder 26, digitized cassette.

series of experiments, instigations, and “crossing great divides.”²⁸ NT spirituality is mediated through Thurman’s writing, preaching, and experiences, necessitating the coexistence of biblical exegesis, preaching, and spirituality rather than separation.

²⁸ Part IV in Thurman's autobiography rehearses his travel across India and his meeting with Gandhi. He titles that part of his story “Crossing the Great Divide—India.” Thurman, *With Head & Heart*, 103-137.

A Call for More Culturally Responsive Reading of Texts: Jamesian Reading of Howard Thurman's New Testament Spirituality

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Introduction

It is my great honor to respond to Shively Smith's important article that explores Howard Thurman's New Testament spirituality as a preacher and exegete and its implications for preaching and teaching. Although I am not a homiletician, I approach this conversation as a fellow practical theologian. I engage narrative theories to closely examine how individuals and communities construct stories to interpret and give meaning to their lived experiences within their cultural contexts. In this brief response, as a pastoral theologian who engages psychology as a primary conversation partner, I examine Thurman's New Testament spirituality through the lens of William James in his highly influential work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as Jamesian psychology of religion offers insights on personal religious experience and mysticism to understand how Thurman's spirituality is shaped by his lived experience. Then, I conclude by arguing that the essence of Thurman's New Testament spirituality lies in his application of what New Testament scholar Brian Blount terms "culturally responsive or sensitive reading" of Jesus's teachings, practices, and religious framework.¹

Understanding Thurman's Spirituality Through James

In summary of Smith's exploration of Thurman's New Testament spirituality, for Thurman, spirituality is principally a "dynamic and ever-unfolding quest" for "what is ultimate presence, God, divine, transcendent, or meaningful."² Thurman's understanding of spirituality is closely aligned with William James' definition of religious experience written in James' monumental text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where James defines religious experience as "*the feelings, acts and experiences of individuals in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to what-ever they may consider divine.*"³ Likewise, Thurman understands that spirituality begins with "the conscious and direct exposure of the individual to God."⁴ As they explore human spirituality through the lens of religious experience, Thurman and James both intentionally exclude the influence of doctrinal theology and religious institutions, choosing to pay more attention to direct and immediate "religious experiences" and focus on how ordinary individuals, particularly those with "their backs against the walls" encounter God or the divine alone in powerful and mysterious ways.⁵ For Thurman, these individuals would be "the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed,"⁶ and for James, these would be people with "sick souls."⁷

¹ Brian Blount, "The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2019): 6-21.

² From Shively Smith's paper.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), 31 (italics original).

⁴ Luther Smith, *The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991), 76.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1996), 1.

⁶ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*.

⁷ In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James writes about "the Sick Soul" in Lectures VI and VII and describes how people who experience suffering and evil in their lives are more likely to have more powerful religious experiences and gain greater insight into the human condition.

While Thurman and James would agree that churches, theologies, creeds, traditions, and institutions are significant vehicles for passing on insights gained by religious experience, they claim that people's spirituality can be *first* found in what they think, what they feel, and how they make sense of their first-hand, subjective religious experiences that defy exact explanation. It means one's religious experience is often incapable of being described and must be directly experienced to be understood, which explains why Thurman and James were both very interested in mysticism. James defines mysticism as follows, "In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness."⁸ He further clarifies that there's something about "mystical experiences" in many religious traditions that require individuals to pause, think, and reflect. Similarly, Thurman states in his sermon collection, *Temptations of Jesus*, "In the total religious experience, we learn how to wait; we learn how to ready the mind and the spirit...I work at preparing my mind, my spirit for the moment when God comes to Himself in me. When it happens, I experience His presence."⁹ Why are there such parallels between these two thinkers, namely their strong interest in personal religious experience? In his autobiography, *With Head and Heart*, Thurman writes that he studied James' work in college,¹⁰ and specifically references James directly in *The Creative Encounter*.¹¹ Another unknown connection between the two is W.E.B. Du Bois. Religious historian Amanda Brown, who wrote about Thurman's Fellowship Church, expounds that as a student and an intellectual collaborator of James at Harvard, Du Bois developed his thoughts on pragmatism and theories on race and identity, namely "double consciousness," which explains how Thurman undoubtedly inherited pragmatist and pluralistic thinking from James by way of Du Bois.¹²

Thurman's New Testament Spirituality: Situated Reading of Biblical Texts

However, Smith claims that Thurman's spirituality, especially his New Testament spirituality, goes beyond what James does because they came from different time periods and racial and socioeconomic contexts. Born in 1842, James was the first son of Henry James Sr., a Swedenborgian theologian from an intellectually elite family.¹³ Raised in a wealthy environment, James received a trans-Atlantic education both in Europe and America, becoming fluent in German and French. He initially aspired to study art and become a painter but ultimately attended Harvard Medical School to become a physician.¹⁴ When James died in 1910, Thurman was a ten-year-old Black child growing up in deep poverty in the segregated South. Since childhood, Thurman grappled with the stark reality of having his "back against the wall." In his challenging quest for experiencing oneness with the divine, Thurman came to realize and understand the Bible as "an authorized, canonized set of writings makes it inherently ideological and potentially harmful for colonized peoples, especially people of African descent," as Smith

⁸ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 419.

⁹ Luther E. Smith, Jr. ed., *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis: 2006), 45-46.

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt & Brace, 1979), 44.

¹¹ Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), 20.

¹² Amanda Brown, *The Fellowship Church: Howard Thurman and the Twentieth-Century Religious Left* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18-64.

¹³ American-British author Henry James (1843-1916) was William's younger brother.

¹⁴ In his young adulthood, James struggled for years with various physical illnesses and mental health challenges, including depression, which led him to contemplate suicide for months. These challenges are considered important reasons for his deep interest in religion as a source of healing and meaning in the face of adversity.

said.¹⁵ In his interpretation of the New Testament, or the “people in the NT world,”¹⁶ Thurman appears to engage in what New Testament scholar Brian Blount’s vision of “situated” and “culturally responsive” reading. This approach focuses on interpreting “Jesus, his teachings, and practices within their contextual framework” in the New Testament. For Thurman, this culturally responsive reading enabled him to reinterpret Jesus as “the disinherited Jew and a marginalized non-citizen under Roman imperial power,” which allowed him to reimagine how Jesus as “the disinherited Jew” would resonate with him and his communities during the time of racial segregation in America. Blount calls this “reading from an Other’s space” and argues that “reading from an other’s space transforms not only how one reads but how one lives.”¹⁷ In other words, interpreting Jesus as “the disinherited” empowered Thurman to raise the issues of power, discrimination, and injustice on the basis of race, religion, gender, or national origin, challenging his readers and listeners to stand in solidarity with fellow “disinherited” siblings in America *and* across the globe in their quest to find and experience “oneness” with the divine.

This approach to situated reading clearly distinguishes Thurman’s spirituality from James’ understanding of religious experience and spirituality. In *The Varieties*, James offers psychological examination of human nature by describing and interpreting numerous religious individuals’ personal accounts. However, James does not engage in culturally responsive exegesis when interpreting these personal religious accounts, neglecting to reflect critically on people’s cultural contexts or consider stories from their points of view. As a European American, James, due to his situatedness, was shielded from grappling with questions of systemic challenges, such as racial injustice, power dynamics, and cultural disparities. In contrast, Thurman, growing up and residing in a homeland that treats him as “a problem, an outcast, and a stranger,” was compelled to wrestle with his lived experience of inhabiting the “American wilderness” constantly.¹⁸ As a result, Thurman’s contextually situated reading leads him to interpret Jesus as “the disinherited,” inspiring him to embrace and practice “the religion of Jesus,” distinct from mainstream American Christianity. Therefore, Smith’s analysis of Thurman’s preaching and teaching reveals that this “culturally responsive and sensitive” reading of the Bible, advocated by Blount, pertinently encapsulates the essence of Thurman’s New Testament spirituality.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by posing a lingering question for Smith and all of us: How do we perceive Thurman as an exegete, especially when most recognize him primarily as a theologian or preacher? Why don’t people normally consider him as an exegete of biblical texts? My response to this question draws on the insight of Schüssler Fiorenza, who contends that “culturally responsive or sensitive” interpretations of sacred texts are undervalued in the North American theological academy that still prioritizes “value and context-free scientific interpretation.”¹⁹ Within this framework, Thurman may not be recognized as “an exegete” because his deeply contextual reading of Jesus and the Bible does not align with the perceived

¹⁵ From Smith’s paper.

¹⁶ From Smith’s paper.

¹⁷ Blount, “The Souls of Biblical Folks and the Potential for Meaning,” 9.

¹⁸ Fannie Lou Hamer, a formidable leader during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, often refers to the experience of African Americans as “wilderness.” See Karen D. Crozier, *Fannie Lou Hamer’s Revolutionary Practical Theology: Racial and Environmental Justice Concerns* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 8.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988): 3–17.

requirements of being scientifically or philosophically sophisticated. Similarly, in my field of pastoral theology and spiritual care, interpreting the texts of the living human document continues to stand as the central task.²⁰ Yet, we still struggle to fully embrace and practice culturally sensitive readings of human texts or narratives for the purpose of care. Moreover, unfortunately, ongoing resistance within the broader theological academy still persists toward contextual and cultural hermeneutics.

As theological scholars, educators, and practitioners, it is imperative that we persistently challenge the enduring resistance to the situated and contextual reading of biblical, human, and cultural texts in theological schools and faith communities. By drawing insights from New Testament hermeneutics and Thurman's writing, Smith guides us to understand how Thurman's contextual interpretation of the New Testament was pivotal in nurturing his mystic spirituality and informing his practice of contemplative preaching. Alongside Blount and Schüssler Fiorenza, by reconsidering Thurman as an exegete, Smith illustrates the profound impact such interpretations can have, not only on individuals but also on catalyzing transformative changes within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. I am convinced that Smith's interdisciplinary analysis and wisdom are crucial for advancing scholarly and ministerial conversations on both Black contemplative preaching and Thurman's mysticism and spirituality.

²⁰ Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-Visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984).

**‘A Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind’:
Jarena Lee, Black Contemplative Preaching, and Bridging Racial Divides**

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Abstract: *Jarena Lee (1783-185?), the first woman licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is a well-established homiletical role model for women and persons of faith in multiple traditions. Her life and witness continue to be the subjects of study in many research venues through a variety of lenses, although less frequently through the lens of Black contemplative preaching. This paper offers a reappraisal of Jarena Lee as a Black contemplative preacher, with particular attention to what Professor Edgar “Trey” Clark III has called the “mystical hermeneutic” characteristic of Black contemplative preaching.¹ Such a reappraisal invites us to consider anew how Jarena Lee’s life and example may offer invitational models for bridging racial divides.*

Introduction: Jarena Lee, Preacher

In 1811, a young woman named Jarena Lee went to see her pastor. She told him that she had had a strange experience: a voice had said to her, *Go preach the gospel*.

On a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon me, and I stood as if someone was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart.—But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which said to me, “Go preach the Gospel!” I immediately replied aloud, “No one will believe me.” Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say, “Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends.”²

Jarena Lee was mystified. She wondered if the voice had actually been Satan in disguise and quickly sought an answer in prayer:

Immediately I went into a secret place, and called upon the Lord to know if he had called me to preach, and whether I was deceived or not; when there appeared to my view the form and figure of a pulpit, with a Bible lying thereon, the back of which was presented to me as plainly as if it had been a literal fact.³

The voice and the vision were convicting, but later that night, Jarena Lee herself confirmed the call: she woke her entire household by preaching in her sleep. Two days later, she was at her pastor’s front door. She told him “...that the Lord had revealed it me, that [I] must preach the gospel.”⁴ Her pastor listened carefully and replied that he knew of one woman who had obtained permission to exhort and hold prayer meetings but that women preachers were something else: “...our discipline knew nothing at all about it—that it did not call for women preachers.”⁵

¹ Edgar “Trey” Clark III, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers,” *Homiletic* Vol 47, no. 2 (2022): 6-8.

² Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1849; reprinted edition published by Legare Street), 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Jarena Lee professed to be relieved, but she wasn't and went home with a heavy heart. Later, she wrote, "I found that a love of souls had in a measure departed from me; that holy energy which burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered."⁶

Jarena Lee had not grown up in the church. In fact, she never went to church until she was 21 years old. Jarena Lee was born in Cape May, New Jersey, in 1783, and although her parents were free African Americans in a state that had outlawed human enslavement, they were very poor, with few choices. When Jarena Lee was 7 years old, her parents made arrangements for her to live with a white family as their servant: functional enslavement. The child had to move to another town, far away from her parents, and for the next fourteen years, she didn't see them, not once. Jarena Lee later said of those years that the worst thing about it was how utterly alone she was: no mother, no father, not even God because her parents had never taught her about God. So, at the age of 21, when she finally was released from the terms of her indentured servitude, Jarena Lee moved to Philadelphia to start a new life and find, as she said, "...the people to which [her] heart [could] unite..."⁷

She found the church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and its pastor, Bishop Richard Allen. She also found the strange voice and vision—or they found her. But after consulting with Bishop Allen, Jarena Lee decided she must have misunderstood. The message couldn't have been, *Go preach the gospel*. It must have been, *Go marry someone who preaches the gospel*, which Jarena Lee did. She married the Reverend Joseph Lee, moved with him to a town outside Philadelphia, had two babies, and tried to be a pastor's wife. Yet the disturbing dreams continued; the voice, it appeared, would not be satisfied. When her husband died after six years of marriage, Jarena Lee took her two young children back to Philadelphia and rejoined her old church. She taught Sunday School and Bible study. She led some prayer groups. She tried to ignore the subject of preaching, which was, she wrote, "...as a fire shut up in my bones."⁸ And then one Sunday morning in church, just as the preacher of the day began his sermon from the book of Jonah and seemed to lose the Spirit, Jarena Lee leaped to her feet with a joyful outburst:

I told them I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam's race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord. . . . During the exhortation, God made manifest his power in a manner sufficient to show the world that I was called to labor according to my ability and the grace given unto me.⁹

Jarena Lee sat down, and Bishop Allen spoke up. He confirmed her story as well as her call to preach:

I now sat down, scarcely knowing what I had done, being frightened. I imagined, that for this indecorum, as I feared it might be called, I should be expelled from the church. But instead of this, the Bishop rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking for permission to preach, and that he had put me off; but that he now as much believed that I was called to that work as any of the preachers present. These remarks greatly strengthened me, so that my

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁹ Ibid., 17.

fears of having given an offence [sic]...subsided, giving place to a sweet serenity, a holy joy of a peculiar kind, untasted in my bosom until then.¹⁰

Jarena Lee was the first woman licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. For more than thirty years, beginning in 1818, she traveled widely, preaching in any town that would have her. From Pennsylvania to Canada to Ohio to Maryland, she made the rounds again and again, sometimes preaching as many as 692 sermons a year.¹¹ She risked her life by crossing into states that permitted enslavement and forbid free Blacks from even entering; she risked her freedom by speaking to audiences composed of Black and white, enslaver and enslaved; she risked her reputation by preaching to women and men—all of it illegal and at the time, unheard of. She wrote two landmark books,¹² enthralled the faithful and unsettled church authorities to such an extent that by the time Jarena Lee was 60, she could no longer preach publicly because the Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church had forbidden it (1852).

We don't know for sure when Jarena Lee died or where. But we know what she built, she and scores of other women in every period of history: women who preach (and women have always preached) create the bridges that are necessary and cross them, too. Many of those bridges still stand. The ones that Jarena Lee built, over divides we still face, are still open for crossing if we follow her lead.

Jarena Lee, Black Contemplative Preacher

How does a woman open her mind to what she can and cannot be? This is a question one might well ask of historical women preachers like Jarena Lee. What led these women to step out and away from the strictures of their time and place and into a call to preach the gospel? What motivated and inspired them at that moment of decision? What authorized and sustained them to keep preaching when opposition rose—as it inevitably did?¹³

Jarena Lee has long been a role model and heroine for preachers in her African Methodist Episcopal tradition and others. Her extraordinary ability to open *her* mind to what she could and could not be in her day is as riveting a story to read now as it must have been when she first wrote it nearly two centuries ago; she inspired readers then and inspires us still. She also inspires us to keep reading and rereading that story, to see what else might begin to open—in her, in us, in our perception of what the stories reveal.

As a person who first encountered Jarena Lee thirty years ago and discovered, from her life and example (as well as those of other historical women preachers), a homiletic of testimony to ground my own life and work, I have found it—to quote Jarena Lee herself—“a holy joy of a peculiar kind” to return to her writings and read them with a new lens. The invitation to this table centering on Black contemplative preaching offers some exciting possibilities for re-engaging Jarena Lee. Her remarkable sense of authority, her power to speak, and her unshakable conviction that she was called to preach the gospel may take on another kind of character and momentum when read as distinctives of Black contemplative preaching. And there are further motivations for this kind of reengagement. Sitting as we are today in the Howard Thurman

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Ibid., 77. The year was 1835.

¹² Jarena Lee's first book, *The Life and Religious Experience of Mrs. Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady* (1836), is the first autobiography published by an African American woman. Her second book, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1849), is an expanded version of her first.

¹³ Jarena Lee was one of three historical women preachers I researched and featured in my dissertation, “Preaching as Testimony: Towards a Women's Preaching Tradition and New Homiletical Models” (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000), and subsequent book, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

Center for Common Ground at Boston University, we cannot help but feel his presence—and with it, his urging to seek the deep connections between ourselves and human beings across many constructs and divisions, many layers of time and argument. Reengagement in the name of bridgebuilding can be holy work, or so it feels today.

I am deeply grateful to each of my esteemed colleagues for the gifts of their scholarship and friendship and the teachers they have been to me; I know I am in the presence of greatness long established and rising. But I would like to name Edgar “Trey” Clark III as my particular teacher today, with his description of three distinctives of Black contemplative preaching: a habitus of prayer, a mystical hermeneutic, and a meditative homiletical style.¹⁴ In the remainder of this paper, I will draw on Professor Clark’s excellent article, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers,” and his terminology (knowing, as I do, that it builds on the work of another esteemed scholar in the room),¹⁵ as I sketch out this broad-strokes testimony, focusing in particular on the second distinctive Clark notes: a mystical hermeneutic. Time limitations keep me from addressing the first and third distinctives, but I will say (and leave others to investigate) that Jarena Lee’s habitus of prayer, as she records it in her books, might also place her squarely within the Black contemplative preaching tradition. Her homiletical style may have elements of the meditative in it, too, although we have only her descriptions of what happened when she preached; most of the time, she reports that the energy and volume levels were high and happy, which might lead us to ponder the many ranges in which Black women (and Black contemplative women in particular) exercise their homiletical freedom and ingenuity.¹⁶

However, the second distinctive of Black contemplative preaching that Clark describes, the *mystical hermeneutic*, is very much in evidence in Jarena Lee’s preaching life. This hermeneutic, as Clark notes, is characterized by three things: “a focus on certain biblical texts and/or themes related to divine encounter (especially in the Psalms and Gospels), incorporation of varied sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance to nurture interiority (such as ancestral wisdom, philosophy, poetry, hymns), and an inclusive vision for cultivating a life-giving and liberating relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation.”¹⁷ This mystical hermeneutic might be a three-fold invitation to divine encounter—by way of scripture, sources other than scripture, and a vision of liberatory wholeness in community. And in living in and living out of these encounters, with the deepening of relationships that ensue, the preacher experiences a kind of spiritual empowerment or clarity of knowing that relies less and less on external sources of authority. As Bishop Yvette Flunder has said, “If your knowing is deep, and your knowing is powerful, then your knowing can speak back to religion, to texts, to practice, to wickedness done in the name of God.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Edgar “Trey” Clark III, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers,” *Homiletic* Vol 47, no. 2 (2022): 6-8.

¹⁵ Frank Thomas, whose co-edited volume with Martha Simmons, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), first gave special attention to what they called “contemplative preaching” as a significant strand of the African American preaching tradition.

¹⁶ The term “ingenuity” is signature to Lisa L. Thompson, and developed in full in her landmark book, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018), in which she draws on Black women’s spirituality as homiletical source and resource.

¹⁷ Clark III, *op.cit.*, 7.

¹⁸ Bishop Yvette Flunder, The Prathia Hall Lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary, Feb. 6, 2019, accessed July 18, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3iP4XIkTJM>.

Jarena Lee might be an example of this. For women and other marginalized preachers of her time and ours, the issue of authority is ever-present and endlessly demanded. The question of what we can and can't do and say and be comes up as often as we care to notice it, and it can eat away life itself. But Jarena Lee knew her own knowing. She knew it more resolutely and, we could say, mystically, as her preaching life went along: how to stay anchored, grounded, and nourished by the One who had planted this knowing within her. It took the form of voices that addressed her, dreams that were given to her, scripture that engaged her, poetry that inspired her, and the act of preaching itself—her “holy joy of a peculiar kind.” Jarena Lee’s preaching created sacramental spaces that she *knew* enabled divine encounters between herself, her listeners, and God. She intended her book to be a record of that: “I firmly believe that I have sown seed, in the name of the Lord, which shall appear with its increase at the accounts, when Christ shall come to make up his jewels.”¹⁹ When a woman is so called that she preaches in her sleep, waking herself and the entire family with the sound of her own voice, it creates a certain conviction.²⁰ And it may create a bridge of imaginative possibility for another woman as well.

A Mystical Hermeneutic (1): The Script in the Scripture

One aspect of a mystical hermeneutic for Black contemplative preachers is paying attention to scriptures of divine encounter. Those texts are a source of knowing and, with it, preaching authority—and for Jarena Lee, this was also true. Her knowing had everything to do with scripture. The knowing, however, went far beyond Bible drills and spitting out correct citations of chapter and verse.

Jarena Lee knew scripture, or at least the scripture that had been interpreted to her. She knew all the biblical texts that told her women were subservient to men; she had to be quiet in church, keep her head covered and her mouth shut, and let her husband handle the preaching and any dealings with snakes. *She* had to learn to talk back to those texts with interpretations of her own, which is a fluency required of minoritized and oppressed persons—because, as Yvette Flunder has said, “No matter what the justice moment, there was always a scripture that somebody could read to tell you that God wanted you to stay where you were...and the only way we got there is we had to leap-frog over what it said, [like] Howard Thurman’s grandmother.”²¹ For Jarena Lee, leap-frogging over certain epistles, talking back to scripture, was *knowing herself in it*.

In 1818, when she sprang to her feet and interrupted the preacher’s sermon on Jonah, Jarena Lee told the congregation that she had lived this story. She had felt the Spirit’s call to preach. She had heard the voice for years, telling her, “Go preach the gospel.” She had resisted, or others had, and denied that voice and, as a result, had found herself at the end of the world in Tarshish, at the bottom of a sea of despair. She had closed her mind, or tried to close it, about what she could and couldn’t be. But when she heard the scripture read aloud and knew herself in it, something snapped into place. *She was Jonah*. He was no stranger to her. He had been there all along in the pages of her Bible—and here she’d been, thinking she was all alone in her strange little life; not any longer. Jarena Lee’s story had biblical precedent, and when she leaped to her feet, it had embodiment.

Over and over again, it is not just the call of God that empowers a woman of a closed homiletical mind to break rank and become a preacher. It’s the moment when she connects what

¹⁹ Lee, op. cit., 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

²¹ Flunder, op. cit.

is happening in her life to a story she knows in her sacred texts and places herself in that story. It's the moment she perceives she has a script in the scripture.

A script is the written text of a play. Having one means we know what to do on stage. We know our lines. We know how the scene unfolds. We know the characters we'll meet along the way, the props we'll need, and the stage directions required by the playwright and director. We are free, then, to rehearse the script any number of ways until we find one that feels authentic because, as every actor will tell us, we don't all play the scene in the same way, even when we work from the same script. This is what makes theatre so compelling, and rehearsal too. A person will go to see their twenty-sixth production of *Les Miz* or *Rent* or *Fences* because it's a new day with new actors in the cast—and a person just has to know how those new actors will interpret a role differently than Mary Alice and Viola Davis did, in their iconic 1987 and 2016 performances, respectively. Theatre is always different and always changing. One day, it may be our turn, our time to step into a role, take up the script, and play it.

This was the case for Jarena Lee. She realized on that fateful day in church, as the preacher appeared to fumble through his Jonah text that she might do better with it; this script was *hers*. Her church realized it, too, as soon as she started speaking because it's hard to deny an authentic performance of a script the audience knows all too well.

Once she got started, Jarena Lee saw scripts in the scripture on a regular basis, and the practice empowered her. Biblical stories of divine encounters were especially evocative for her; they became *her* stories, bridges between herself and her Creator, without any distance or separation. She began to trace, in her own life experiences, the hand and presence of God. God was with her, just as God was with the biblical characters whose stories she was preaching; she knew it and could see it in the parallels between their lives and hers. She saw it in Hannah before Eli and in Isaiah before the throne of God.²² She saw it in Paul preaching his first sermons in Jerusalem and his last sermons in Rome.²³ She saw it in trembling Belshazzar and hapless Noah and eager Apollos, and even in Psalm 141:3 ("set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips"), which was the text her Bible fell open to, as she nervously prepared to preach for the very first time. ("My sermon, such as it was," she later commented, "applied wholly to myself."²⁴)

Jarena Lee found scripts in the scripture that empowered her in other ways, too. She was especially alert to texts that spoke to her of women preachers and those who opposed them; these, it seemed to her, were clear bridges of authentication and freedom, both ancient and new. As the epigraph for her books, she chose words from the prophet Joel: "And it shall come to pass...that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons, and your *daughters* shall prophesy."²⁵ Her famous argument in favor of women preaching is John 20: Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, preaching resurrection.²⁶ When faced with an ornery gentleman, she even takes up Balaam and his donkey and does so with wry humor: "I met with many troubles on my journey, especially from the elder, who like many others, was averse to a woman's preaching. And here let me tell that elder, if he has not gone to heaven... 'If an ass reprov'd Balaam, and a barn-door fowl reprov'd Peter, why should not a woman reprove sin?... May be a speaking

²² Lee, op.cit., 22 and 6.

²³ Ibid., 18-19, 13, and 97.

²⁴ Ibid., 6, 32, 27, and 18.

²⁵ Ibid., 1. The italics are hers.

²⁶ Ibid., 11-12.

woman is like an ass—but I can tell you one thing, the ass seen the angel when Balaam didn't.”²⁷

There is a fearlessness that comes with standing upright in a script, and when the script is scripture, the fearlessness can be radiance. The preacher herself is not the source of the radiance, but she is a conveyer of it; she is a bridge toward the light. Jarena Lee knew this. A preacher who finds her script in the scripture finds her own embodied freedom. She meets the resurrected Christ. She opens to proclaim it freely.

A Mystical Hermeneutic (2): “Hymn[s and Poetry] to Suit My Feelings”

A second aspect of a mystical hermeneutic for Black contemplative preachers is receiving and honoring different sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance, which Clark reminds us may include ancestral wisdom, philosophy, poetry, and hymns. Time constraints once again preclude a lengthier examination of Jarena Lee's work, but a few examples may show some of the ways in which she exemplifies and employs this aspect of a Black contemplative mystical hermeneutic—and again, the effort as well as the result is a bridgebuilding practice, both aspirationally and inspirationally.

A case in point is the number of times Jarena Lee includes passages of poetry and hymns in her books. In the 1849 edition of her spiritual memoir, there are 32 such citations, which feels substantial for a 97-page book—more word space than she gives to passages of scripture. These poetic excerpts appear at emotional high points in her account: moments of jubilation or doxology or exhortation or lament. She may cite scripture, but she quotes poetry, which appears to be her vernacular of the heart. One feels that scripture is the living, inclusive drama in which she continually locates herself and us—a holy theatre of redemption—while poetry is the balm that soothes and strengthens her soul in the here and now. Both sources of wisdom are deeply important to her and serve common as well as overlapping purposes. But she is skilled at improvising with both, perhaps to model to her readers how the words we hold close can be nourishing, healing, and spiritually authorizing in themselves.

In April 1827, for example, she wrote this: “My health having been bad, I have not travelled so largely, and in this, as in some other moments of reflection, I felt somewhat oppressed, and I resorted to the Hymn Book for something to suit my feelings, the poetry as follows: ‘Soon as I heard my Father say, / Ye children seek my grace, / My heart replies, without delay, / I'll seek my father's face. // Let not thy face be hid from me, / Nor frown my soul away, / God of my life I fly to thee / In a distressing day. // Should friends and kindred, near and dear, / Leave me to want and die, / My God will make my life his care, / And all my wants supply. // My fainting flesh had died with grief, / Had not my soul believed / To see thy grace prove a relief, / Nor was my hope deceived. // Wait on the Lord, ye trembling Saints, / And keep your courage up, / He'll raise your spirit when it faints, / And far exceed your hope.’”²⁸ She follows this (and it is the longest poetic citation in the book) with, “However I went to Baltimore in the same month with the Bishop and Elders, and enjoyed myself under great preaching, and preached several sermons. Praise God, and the slain of the Lord appeared to be many.”²⁹

Several layers of concern are expressed here, but several layers of spiritual resources are at work as well. Of the concerns, health is a primary one; Jarena Lee's punishing travel schedule and poverty-level finances meant that she was frequently exposed to illness and vulnerable to it.

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ Ibid., 46-47.

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

More than once, she found herself confined to bed because of life-threatening ailments that interrupted her work, which meant that depression became a factor. Yet the work itself took her to life-threatening places that were right outside her door—Maryland, in this case, which was a slaveholding state at the time and a very dangerous place for Jarena Lee to go. In 1832, just a few years later, the state would forbid free Blacks from even crossing its borders as retaliatory legislation for the 1831 revolt of enslaved persons led by Nat Turner in Virginia; Jarena Lee would continue to travel to Baltimore, in full awareness of what could happen to her. She could not have written the words, “However I went to Baltimore...and enjoyed myself under great preaching” lightly—and didn’t. The words were as defiant as they were jubilant: part declaration, part journal entry, part eschatological hope, part prayers of petition and thanksgiving. In writing about the very outcome she always hoped to achieve through her preaching, she registered her intention with the Almighty and then revealed its fulfillment. The interplay of citing scripture and quoting poetry was a call for wisdom to do its work, even as she did hers.

Another example of her skillful use of resources is the respect she shows toward different religious affinities and her willingness to draw upon them as sources for her own piety and preaching. Although she was always loyal to the A.M.E. Church and Bishop Allen, even entrusting her young son to him while she was out on the road for years at a time, Jarena Lee had seen enough of the world to know that denominations weren’t everything. As a brand-new preacher with Bishop Allen’s certification in hand, she felt free to borrow from the Quakers, among others. From her journal: “I next went six miles and held a meeting in a coloured friend’s house, and [at] eleven o’clock in the morning, and preached to a well-behaved congregation of both coloured and white. After service I again walked back, which was in all twelve miles in the same day. This was on Sabbath, or as I sometimes call it, seventh day; for after my conversion I preferred the plain language of the Friends.”³⁰ Another example from those early years: “Mr. Smith, a doctor, also invited me to call upon them—he was a Presbyterian, but we prayed and conversed together about Jesus and his love, and parted without meddling with each others [sic] creeds. Oh, I long to see the day when Christians will meet on one common platform—Jesus of Nazareth—and cease their bickerings and contentions about non-essentials—when ‘our Church’ shall be less debated, but ‘our Jesus’ shall be all in all.”³¹ Such ecumenical receptivity was, for her, far preferable and more practical than denominational divisions and platforms, which only frustrated her.

A similar openness appears in interfaith encounters. Jarena Lee had plenty of exposure to non-believers and people who didn’t hold to any religious tradition; for her, they were souls to be reached and loved and saved, and the major reason she existed. However, she also writes about several meaningful interfaith (or intercultural Christian) experiences she had with Native American and indigenous peoples on her trips to Canada, upstate New York, Ohio, and Illinois. In Fort George in 1819, she rode through sleet and snow on sleigh and horseback for an appointment with the Indians (as she called them): “...two of the chiefs called at where I stopped to see me. I asked them to pray for us; they complied, but done it in their own tongue. I felt the power of God in my own heart.”³² She writes movingly about her visit: the worship service, the children, the singing of hymns in their own language (“They sung it beautiful,” she remembered), the numbers gathered and what they wore (“Some of them met me from seven or eight miles round—they filled the house. It was in the month of March—it rained and snowed—

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 50.

yet they walked in their moccasins, and some bare-headed—they made a large congregation”), concluding with these words: “We might call them heathens, but they are endowed with a Christian spirit. I felt happy in my visit.”³³ On another occasion, around the year 1831, she was invited to visit a group of Native Americans near Urbana, Illinois, where “We heard them [the Native Americans] preach in their own language....Thank the Lord for Urbana.”³⁴

Her writing reveals nineteenth-century sensibilities and the colonizing Christian attitudes of the time concerning Native Americans, but it also transcends those. As a free Black woman preacher, respectably widowed and licensed—words which were never held together in one sentence or body, in her day—Jarena Lee had lived the discontinuities of multiple identities in liminal spaces. It opened her to see, name, and proclaim God in other marginalized places and peoples. It opened her to see, name, and proclaim God *for* them. And openness to the words and world around us strengthens a preacher’s knowing, and so her anchored-ness, grounded-ness, and rootedness. On such ground, we can build and be a bridge.

When the sources of holy nourishment are everywhere, the limitations are nowhere. Every encounter, whether with God or human beings or creation or creative expression, is a summons to pay attention because this might be God. This might be a burning bush. Jarena Lee lived this way, as if the next moment might be one for taking off her shoes.³⁵ Her ears were highly tuned to what “sings in our blood” and “cries from the housetops,” as Pauli Murray puts it.³⁶ And it compels and opens us, me, to do the same—to understand that a preacher is always listening: “For it must be told, endlessly told, and you must hear it. // Listen, white brothers, hear the dirge of history, // And hold out your hand—hold out your hand.”³⁷

A Mystical Hermeneutic (3): “A Sacramental Sermon to My Soul”

A third aspect of a mystical hermeneutic for Black contemplative preachers, as Clark articulates it, is “an inclusive vision for cultivating a life-giving and liberating relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation.”³⁸ This aspect of a mystical hermeneutic is very much in evidence in Jarena Lee’s life and work. For her, the preaching act was a sacramental experience, “a peculiar joy” that created its own sacramental space of possibility. When Jarena Lee preached, she and her listeners experienced the presence of Christ with us and for us. But they also caught a vision of longed-for eschatological space that contrasted sharply with their own embodiment in the world around them—which, in turn, opened them to other paths of knowing and being with God and one another.

Jarena Lee’s own preacherly embodiment was a lesson in courageous faith—the kind of faith that takes one from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, over and over. She fought injustice on every conceivable front with every breath, especially when she dared to step into a pulpit. She struggled daily with brutal oppression on the basis of race, fierce opposition on the basis of sex and gender identity, outright exclusion on the basis of economic, educational, and class-driven inequities, and sanctimonious rejection on the basis of her chosen work and profession. Violence, too, or the threat of it inflicted on Black bodies, was a constant backdrop in pre-Civil War America, as it is for African Americans and other persons of color today. Even in states like

³³ Ibid., 51.

³⁴ Ibid., 59.

³⁵ I began to count the number of what might be called “mystical experiences” or “burning-bush moments” in her *Religious Experience and Journal* and gave up after I’d hit 20 in the first 20 pages alone.

³⁶ Pauli Murray, *II*, in *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018), 19.

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁸ Clark III, *op. cit.*, 7.

Pennsylvania that had outlawed human enslavement, Jarena Lee endured menacing intimidation and near-arrest on multiple occasions by local magistrates who were enraged at the prospect of a free Black woman preaching in their vicinity. And then there were the humiliating rejections she had to stomach from preachers, both Black and white, who wouldn't allow her to enter their churches, let alone their pulpits.

She documents these instances in her books.³⁹ As readers, we are shown exactly what it was like for her, with her particular embodiment, to preach in such a time and context—when human enslavement is legal in some states and not in others, when the abolition movement is underway, and when Black communities continue to live in extreme impoverishment. We read of her visits to Black congregations and white ones, anti-slavery society meetings and schools for Black children, and churches that were likely stations of the Underground Railroad.⁴⁰ And she describes the tensions (to put it mildly) of preaching to Black and white persons at the same time, something she regularly did, when some of the listeners are enslaved and others are slaveowners; some are grand ladies and others are poor widows; some are polite and others are disparaging; some are reserved and others are drunk.

But we also see the joy she left in her wake, joy that transported both preacher and listeners into a radical vision of inclusion—and one they could feel in their own bodies, in the preaching moment. For Jarena Lee, that mid-sermon experience of preaching to a roomful of mid-divine-encounter listeners was pure bliss; it was sacramental. She describes the aftermath of one sermon like this: “...before I got through, I felt so much of life and liberty in the word, I could but wonder, and in the doctrine of Christ it was a sacramental sermon indeed to my soul.”⁴¹ On another occasion, she expresses it like this: “...joy sprang up in my bosom that I was not overcome by the adversary, and I was overwhelmed with the love of God and souls...I felt a greater love for the people than ever. It appeared to me that they erred through ignorance of my desire to do them good; and my prayer was that nothing but love might appear in my ways, and actuate my heart. Religion is love—God is love.”⁴²

Joy is a powerful way of knowing. So is the lack of it. Jarena Lee's capacity for joy may have had something to do with her long-suffering from depression and her childhood trauma of separation from her parents beginning at age 7. She had experienced such emptiness in her life, such hollowed-out despair, and at such a young age. Is it a stretch to link this *via negativa*, this long season of shadows, with the contrasting season of joy she experienced as a preacher? Shadows had shaped her. Like Christ, she was acquainted with grief. She wanted joy for others, the joy *she* had found and now knew. Just as Howard Thurman was marked by his father's funeral at age 7—the experience of listening to a hellbent preacher declare his father's eternal damnation for not belonging to a church and growing up to become a man supremely open to all expressions of faith—young Jarena Lee was marked, too, by a long period of aloneness.⁴³ Perhaps the absence of God sensitized her to the presence of God and gifted her with the capacity to create God-filled spaces for others.

Preaching was a sacramental experience for Jarena Lee, an interplay of the right-now and the not-yet: this scene we are in, and that scene we all yearn for; this script we are living, and that

³⁹ An example of a near-arrest scene, and another of opposition to her as a woman preacher (in Princeton), can be found in Jarena Lee's *Religious Experience and Journal*, op. cit., 36 and 46.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 47, 80-81, 72, and 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Ibid., 24-25.

⁴³ Ibid., 1-2. Also, Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1979), 4-6.

script we pray to live; this worldly drama of brokenness thrust upon us, and that holy drama of sacramental communion we could choose instead. Preaching was both experience and vision—and joy was in the bridging.

Conclusion

Jarena Lee is a compelling example of many aspects of Black contemplative preaching, and of a mystical hermeneutic in particular. I hope many more will keep exploring this dimension in her work. On a personal note, I am very thankful to have found this new lens with which to read her and claim her, along with Zilpha Elaw, in my pantheon of Black contemplative homiletical sheroes.⁴⁴ And in the process, as so often happens, I have found myself being read by her.

Let me speak from the heart. Since I first learned of her, Jarena Lee has been the preacher who opened for me my own homiletic, my own preaching tradition that I have understood to be one of testimony. Jarena Lee has been the witness I most aspire to emulate, with the fire and depth of knowing that I sometimes wrestle with tending. She opens me up—to the next bridge, the next challenge, the next biblical text, and wherever it will lead. She refuses closure. And for a white woman preacher and teacher at 61 years of age, who would (as Jarena Lee herself said) “rather wear out than to rust out,”⁴⁵ these are daily encouragements. They might find the best expression in prayer, that I might

- find my own scripts in biblical texts of encounter, so that my knowing may become my embodied bridge-making and bridge-traveling across racial divides;
- search out and honor sources of wisdom I have not yet explored, to hear the dirge of history and also songs of hope—since both are holy ground—and;
- seek the peculiar joy that comes to preachers when we have spoken honestly and sung well—with text, with context, with present truth, and ached-for justice.

And it shall come to pass that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh. And your sons and your daughters, and all your children, shall prophesy.

⁴⁴ For the invitation to meet Zilpha Elaw, and for a myriad of other reasons, I add La Ronda Barnes to this company.

⁴⁵ Lee, op. cit., 97.

Preaching and Writing Bible Scripts
A Response to Anna Carter Florence's "'A Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind:' Jarena Lee's Call to Preach the Gospel—and Open Our Minds"

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Abstract: *This paper responds to and extends the portrayal of Jarena Lee (1783-185?) as an interpreter of biblical scripts, advanced by Anna Carter Florence's essay. She reexamines the significance of Lee's autobiography as the first woman licensed to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, casting her as a Black contemplative preacher. Noting Lee's hermeneutical tendency to resource the Bible for its narrative scripts, Florence Carter states that Lee was a preacher who "found her script in the scripture." With gratitude to Carter Florence's proposal, this response reviews her perspective and explores extending Lee's contemplative preaching approach from biblical script preacher to include Lee as a writer.*

Introduction

I am grateful for my colleague Anna Carter Florence's consideration of Jarena Lee as a resource and figure in the Black contemplative preaching tradition. More than mere reconsideration, Carter Florence's approach enacts an intellectual form of the Akan philosophical tradition of Sankofa.¹ Born from the Adinkra cultural system, Sankofa, *Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi*, in translation means, "It is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget."² It is a way of knowing one's communities and self that relates the past to the present and future. Sankofa is a memory, ritual, and naming practice that retrieves ancestors and their stories and invites them into the present moment. According to one scholar, Sankofa is also a solution "to reconstituting a fragmented cultural past."³ Focusing on the nineteenth-century African American woman preacher and writer Jarena Lee (1783-185?), Carter Florence retrieves and reaches into the archive of Black women's religious history and writing. Eschewing mere historical reconstruction, she contemporizes Lee for women preachers and teachers who value the powers of agency, voice, and witness.

Carter Florence's paper "fetches" Jarena Lee's "Holy Joy of a Peculiar Kind" to respond to a contemporary question: "How does a woman open her mind to what she can and can't be?" In the question, there is a generative "talk back" of response and affirmation that is akin to what Thurman prescribes in his meditation, "We are Visited:"

¹ I am grateful to one of my first conversation partners in the field of homiletics, Melva Sampson, who introduced the notion of Sankofa to me years ago. Since then, it has become a component of my hermeneutical approach. See Melva Sampson, "Fetching Spiritual Power: Black Women's Preaching Bodies as African-Centered Womanist Oratory" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2016); Shively T. J. Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women's Moral Writings* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2023), 10–15, 87–88, 145.

² Quoted in Christel N. Temple, "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History," *Journal of African American Studies*, 41, no. 1 (2010): 127; W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra* (Washington, DC: Pyramid Complex, 1998), 188–89.

³ Quoted in Pamela Felder Small, Marco J. Barker, and Marybeth Gasman, eds., *Sankofa: African American Perspectives on Race and Culture in US Doctoral Education* (New York: SUNY Press, 2020), 10; Temple, "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States," 128.

It is our great and blessed fortune that our lives are never left to themselves alone. We are visited in ways that we can understand and in ways that are beyond our understanding, by highlights, great moments of inspiration. ... We are also surrounded by the witness of those others whose strivings have made possible so much upon which we draw from the common reservoir of our heritage, those who have carried the light against the darkness, those who have persevered when to persevere seemed idiotic and suicidal, those who have forgotten themselves in the full and creative response to something that calls them beyond the furthest reaches of their dreams and their hopes.⁴

Thurman understands the process of memory and retrieval as fertile soil for spiritual and ancestral visitation. Such encounters, or “religious experience” in Thurman’s terminology, unfold as movements back, from here to there; and movements forward, from there to here. According to Thurman, the visitation and invitational nature of the contemplative encounter involves entanglements of the individual life with the lives of others. He says, “The religious experience as I [Howard Thurman] have known it seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives.”⁵

Strikingly, the very structure of Carter Florence’s paper performs Thurman’s contemplative proposition that bi-directional visitations are possible and necessary for the Christian religious experience. Her mixed study approach combines a re-contextualized examination of Jarena Lee’s significance and life with her testimony. The rhetorical frame and movement of the paper embody a contemplative mode of exploration and witness, which leads me to consider two questions. First, what interpretation practices can we form in response to autobiographical exchange following Lee’s model? Second, how do we “talk back” to ourselves and our communities through the autobiographical stories shared between us and the witness of forbearers from the black contemplative tradition?

Jarena Lee: A Creative Producer of Bible Scripts

Pregnant with deeper interpretive reflection, Carter Florence classifies Lee’s call story as a Bible script. Lee claims Jonah’s story for herself in retelling her call story. Sitting in a church listening to her male counterpart preach from Jonah 2:9 when, according to church polity, she cannot; Lee felt moved to talk back to the preacher and congregation. From her perspective, the preacher “seemed to have lost the spirit.” In response, Lee reports that she sprang to her feet “as by an altogether supernatural impulse” and “aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text” her brother-preacher had taken. This was the moment, according to Lee, when she

⁴ Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1975), 54. This language is also used as a womanist hermeneutical approach, though my understanding of its pertinence to Black contemplative preaching and interpreting traditions is slightly different. Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 3, 5, 30-31. A womanist hermeneutical approach casts “talkback” as an interpretive mode of resistance that is suspicious of power hierarchies and disparities that render meaning to people, places, cultures, and stories. Consequently, womanist talkback hermeneutics typically approach texts and contexts in a mode of interrogation, correction, and resistance. Within the Black contemplative tradition, as captured in Lee’s autobiography and Thurman’s meditation, it is a means for communing, connecting, and exchanging. Talkback can move participants closer, create a deeper understanding of each other, and build a connection where it may have been previously absent or unacknowledged.

⁵ Howard Thurman, “Excerpt from *The Luminous Darkness* (1965),” in *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life*, eds. Walter Earl Fluker and Catherine Tumber (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 257.

responded to her “call to preach,” identifying herself as the contemporary Jonah figure in their midst.

I told them that I was like Jonah; for it had been then nearly eight years since the Lord had called me to preach his gospel to the fallen sons and daughters of Adam’s race, but that I had lingered like him, and delayed to go at the bidding of the Lord...⁶

Lee’s interaction with Scripture was a connecting moment. It attests that contemplative preaching is a site where the preacher and congregation can become something that had not yet been realized up to that point. Carter Florence describes Lee’s call story in such terms when she says, “... when she heard the Scripture read aloud and knew herself in it, something snapped into place. *She was Jonah*... It’s the moment when she connects what is happening in her life to a story she knows in her sacred texts and places herself in that story. It’s the moment she perceives she has a script in the scripture.” Her interpretation of Lee’s preaching call experience portrays her as a “script finder.” Lee reads Scripture on the hunt for where her story is biblical, and she often legitimates her preaching vocation based on how her life script aligns with the scripts supplied in Scripture. Biblical citation in her mystical hermeneutic has a particular function, therefore. It is not just that a verse or story is in the Bible and thus carries an inherent authority. What makes biblical texts authoritative in Lee’s contemplative preaching model is the extent to which they are script-worthy in the present moment and fundamentally a script “in production.”

In addition to Jonah, Lee finds her “script in scripture” in another figure of the Hebrew Bible, Balaam. Lee not only cites the Bible when referencing Balaam, but she appears to invert the biblical narrative as she takes ownership of the story. The most popular Jewish tradition of Balaam is found in the books of Joshua and Nehemiah. They present Balaam as one who constantly accepts bribes to draw Israel into idolatry (see Deut 23:4; Josh 24:9–10; Neh 13:2). Second Peter 2:15–16 appears to pick up on this common cycle. It is not, however, the tradition of preference in the writings of early African American contemplative women like Lee and Zilpha Elaw. They prefer to use the tradition of Numbers 22 to contrast women’s intellectual speech acts against that of nonhuman creations. The Balaam story cast in Numbers 22 portrays him positively. He is a prophet who refuses to curse Israel (Num 22:22–38) after following the guidance of his donkey. It is the donkey—a nonspeaking and irrational animal—and not Balaam, who acts rationally and even prophetically in the story by verbally warning the prophet of the dangers ahead on the road (Num 22:27–30). As I have noted elsewhere, “The donkey speaks in service to preserving life. It observes and responds appropriately to God’s revelations (Num 22:31–33).”⁷ Lee’s reading of the Balaam story champions the place and voice of women within her religious communities. She employed a particular script in the Balam tradition as material to describe the efforts and attitudes of people she encountered—be it agents of resistance or support. Biblical scripts equipped her with the material necessary to reflect on her religious experience and those of others in her community.⁸

Similarly, in another place in her autobiography, Lee likens her travel experience on a road to Balaam’s encounter with the angel.

The following day I walked fourteen miles to a meeting, where also we were greatly favored with the presence of God. Soon after this, I thought of going home to Philadelphia. I got about three miles on foot, when an apparent voice said, “If thou

⁶ Jarena Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” in *Spiritual Narratives*, Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17.

⁷ Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 169.

⁸ Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 23.

goest home thou wilt die.” I paused for a moment, and not comprehending what it meant, pursued my journey. Again I was startled by something like a tapping on my shoulder, but, on turning round, I found myself alone, which two circumstances created a singular feeling I could not understand. I thought of Balaam when met by the angel in the way. I was taken sick and it seemed I should die in the road. I said I will go back, and walked about four miles to Bridgeport.⁹

Paul’s Damascus Road experience is a popular biblical script in nineteenth-century African American interpretive writings.¹⁰ Here, Lee departs from that tradition by using the story of divine intervention and encounter narrated in the Balaam account as biblical precedence for her religious experience. She was going one way, and intuition warned her against continuing. Lee, in response, reversed course on the road. The Balaam story supplies her with proofs from biblical wisdom discourses (Sirach 22:22) about the reversals that occur in ministerial intentions.¹¹ She uses biblical citation to make sense of her “changing course” act and articulates how it aligns with biblical precedence. In this way, her story becomes an extension and even re-enactment of the Balaam story. Again, she is not merely a scriptwriter; her spiritual autobiography is the biblical script in production, just as Carter Florence’s essay encourages us to consider.

The Bible She Cites, but the Poetry She Quotes

Mapping Lee’s use of the Bible in her autobiography, informed by Carter Florence’s insight, leads to another consideration. Lee’s autobiography not only captures her call story to preach and its unfolding travels, it also records her call to write. Script-finding as a mode of mystical hermeneutics gives way to script writing in Lee’s life story. She moves from reading biblical scripts as sources for clarifying her preaching ministry to writing her story as an authorizing source, informed by the Bible, to explain the callings of others. Despite the lack of formal education, Lee published two autobiographies in her name during her lifetime. Opting for full disclosure, as opposed to some of her contemporaries who deployed the rhetorical strategy of pseudonymity (i.e., Ida B. Wells, Sarah Louisa Forten Purvis, etc.), Lee kept her name on everything.¹² Her name and personal story went hand in hand as a script that others needed to read to find their stories. She says:

In 1836 I travelled 556 miles, and preached 11 sermons, and felt under much exercise to print a book, and I had some friends to encourage me. . . and every circumstance was so favorable that I finally succeeded, and when they were brought home, I sat down in the house and wondered how I should dispose of them; to sell them appears too much like merchandize.¹³

For Lee, biblical scriptwriting was not intended for economics, though it did help support her itineracy at times. Instead, her mystical writing endeavor aimed to share her story as an authorizing text akin to how the Scripture functioned for her. In this way, Lee chose to participate in public discourse, which is both biblical and civil, as well as testimony and story. She “appropriated the English literary tradition to reveal, interpret, challenge, and change

⁹ Quoted in Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 154; Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 33.

¹⁰ Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 117, 383, 385, 405.

¹¹ Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 170–171.

¹² Smith, *Interpreting 2 Peter through African American Women’s Moral Writings*, 105.

¹³ Lee, “Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee,” 77.

perceptions of” herself and the world in which she found herself.¹⁴ In some ways, her spiritual autobiography extends the biblical scripts of calling and encounter. Carter Frances’ focus on “scripture as script” provides analysis for tracing the use of biblical texts in “the preaching writers” of the Black contemplative tradition.

Ultimately, Carter Florence’s paper is a compelling invitation to revisit Lee’s autobiography and the stories of others equipped with our own stories and the stories from our communities. It is not enough to merely read Lee, Murray, Baldwin, Thurman—they must read us. Studying Black contemplative preaching requires forging approaches that reexamine these figures and the resources of African traditions, contemplation, and preaching—all of which offer and lend themselves to a two-way testimony and reading process.

¹⁴ Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746–1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.

The Sermon as Essay: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher

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Abstract: *From the ages of fourteen to seventeen, James Baldwin was an African American Pentecostal preacher, and this church period of his life significantly impacted the entire corpus of his writing. One of Baldwin's most celebrated essays, "Down at the Cross," was labeled by one scholar as "the essay that comes closest to representing his ideas in total, not in a schematic way, but in the form of a mature and exemplary worldview." It is, in fact, a sermon. I propose that "Down at the Cross" is an African American sermon essay in the contemplative tradition and worthy of serious study in order to expand and encompass the often unheralded tradition of the African American contemplative sermon that invites hearers into their own conversation with God.*

I deeply appreciate David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda D. Barnes for convening such an outstanding group of colleagues and scholars to explore Black contemplative preaching and its bridge-building capabilities. The different perspectives were refreshing, unique, and inspiring. I experienced generous hospitality, collegiality, and deep, profound spirituality. The contribution herein was made significantly better by my gathering in conversation with Shively Smith, Anna Carter Florence, Edgar "Trey" Clark III, and Donyelle McCray. Together, we committed to the exploration and chronicling of contemplative preaching.

The Sermon as Essay

There is a consensus among several scholars that two of Baldwin's published essays are, in fact, sermons. The first is "Down at the Cross," published in *The New Yorker* (1962) as "Letter from a Region in My Mind" and in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) as "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind"; the second is "White Racism and World Community," delivered during the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala, Sweden, July 7, 1968.¹ In making this argument, the natural question is, what is meant by the term "sermon" given that Baldwin functioned in no religious capacity in any given church congregation on a Sunday morning past his teenage years? Gore Vidal appeared on C-Span for an interview on the art of writing and was asked by an audience member about his relationship with Baldwin. Vidal said Baldwin was "a wonderful orator and a great sermonizer," and though most of his novels seemed "a bit 'show biz,'" his "sermons hold up well."² According to Professor Clarence E. Handy III, Vidal regarded Baldwin's essays as sermons because they are "spiked with the language of passionate and explicit moral commitment."³

When I define these two essays as sermons, following Handy, I mean Baldwin "challenges a nation still captive to white supremacy with a moral rhetoric percolating with

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. was to have preached the opening sermon, but because King was assassinated in April of that year, Baldwin was invited in King's place.

² C-Span Interview with Gore Vidal, October 1, 2000, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?159496-1/depth-gore-vidal> (time stamp 25:26).

³ Clarence E. Handy, III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 110.

language (including rhythm and themes) of black holiness culture.”⁴ Baldwin’s sermons include the apocalyptic language of the storefront preacher, recurrent images, poetry, and metaphors consistent with and taken from the King James Bible, and a Black evangelical rhetoric that includes critical components of moral vengeance and judgment. Within the framework of Black Holiness culture, Handy suggests that Baldwin was determined to save as many souls as possible.

As further evidence from Baldwin himself, in an essay written in the 1980s, Baldwin laments America’s tendency for self-congratulation. He says: “If I was still in the pulpit, some people (and they may be right) claim I never left, I would counsel my countrymen to the self-confrontation of prayer, the cleansing breaking of the heart which precedes atonement.”⁵ Handy suggests these words are the clear sentiment of self-confession and evidence of Baldwin’s “long standing role as a preacher and moralist.”⁶

Finally, evidence can be found in the work of Frederick Buechner’s *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. Buechner surprises much of the traditional church-based preaching community when he suggests that the most powerful preaching does not necessarily come out of preachers:

There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of poets, playwrights, and novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God in the world and about the storm of his absence, both without and within, which because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm.⁷

For Buechner, a true sacramental theology speaks of a doctrine of the “Real Presence” and also needs to speak of the “Real Absence” of God. He remarks, “Absence can be sacramental too, a door left open, a chamber of the heart kept ready and waiting.”⁸ Buechner’s concern is that most preachers do not talk about the real absence of God and, therefore, in this instance, are not telling the truth, or, in my words, the whole truth.

Buechner calls Shakespeare’s *King Lear* “the mightiest of all preachments.” The central paradox of *King Lear* for Buechner is as follows:

I think of *King Lear*, especially with its tragic vision of a world in which the good and the bad alike go down to dust and, it would seem, equally meaningless death with no God to intervene on their behalf, and yet with its vision of the world in which the naked and helpless ones, the victims and fools, become at least truly alive before they die and thus touch however briefly on something that lies beyond the power of death. It is the worldly ones, the ones wise as the world understands wisdom and strong the way the world understands strength who are utterly doomed. Shakespeare points to the apparent emptiness of a world where God belongs and to how the emptiness starts to echo like an empty shell after a while until you can hear in it the still, small voice of the sea, hear strength and weakness, victory and defeat, presence in absence.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperOne, 1977), 44.

⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

Buechner regards the real absence and silence of God as a prelude to the real presence of God.

For Buechner, *King Lear* is a homily on the passage in First Corinthians where Paul says the same thing: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” (1:27–28)

When we expand the definition of sermon beyond the church pulpit, we open up other forms that could be regarded as preaching, such as creative writing in poetic and essay form. In the contemporary moment, we do not give much consideration to the sermon as essay in the written form—the sermon as a contemplative document that can be carefully read over and over again to glean continuing insight, interpretation, revelation, and meaning. We are more familiar with the sermon as a time-bound oral pronouncement on Sunday morning heard within the confines of a church or on digital platforms. I often ask my students, “Do you write your sermons for one hearing? Would you consider your sermons disposable, that is, worthy of one hearing and to be cast aside?” Are our sermons exegetically, theologically, and existentially “weighty” enough for consideration past one hearing so they could be read and studied to encounter fresh truths across time? The contemplative sermon calls for continued dialogue and raises questions that are searching and require meditative reflection in a process that requires time and space.

For far too much of the church culture, let alone secular culture, sermons are one-hearing events that are one-use experiences. While this may speak to the quality of sermons being preached, very few people would go back and listen to a sermon again or study a written form of the sermon. Some study, glean, revisit, and reencounter afresh the insight and beauty of a well-crafted sermon. But for the majority in the church, sermons are, as worship is, consumable and disposable from Sunday to Sunday, centered upon the personal needs of congregants alone. For far too many, sermons are cast aside and forgotten for the most part. While some people will watch movies and television shows over and over again, very few replay or read over sermons again. The sermon is a spiritual vitamin that energizes us in the moment or for a short time, then dissolves into our system and, for the most part, is no more.

This then hits directly on the contemplative sermon we are here to discuss and discern. I am quick to say that I do not write sermons for one hearing. I write sermons for thought, reflection, investigation, discussion, and numerous listens, readings, or views to discern the depth of meaning, not only the sermon’s intended meaning based upon the preacher’s study, but how the hearer constructs meaning for their own lives. In some sense, the audience overhears the conversation of the preacher, the text, and God, which inspires their own conversation with the three. A sermon constructed as such in writing could be called sermon as essay—sermon as thoughtful or contemplative composition that takes the hearer inside to ponder what is true in the sermon, what is true for them, and what is true in life.

Defining the Contemplative Sermon

Recognizing that David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda Barnes, in the Introduction to this volume, have taken special care to detail how Black contemplative preaching has been defined, and likewise Edgar “Trey” Clark also in his essay herein, I offer my definition of the term contemplative in contemplative preaching. Contemplation is the process of thoughtful observation based in continued attentiveness that prompts “inwardness,” or the recognition of aspects and particulars of the inward spiritual journey. The path to inwardness is often via quietude and reflection—sometimes what could be considered meditation. Contemplation is the

process that ushers us to the inward journey, the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual process to discover inner meaning to the essential questions inside ourselves. This usually occurs not singly and solitarily but in conversation with contemplative texts, preachers, poets, playwrights, orators, and novelists.

It is an honest and truthful look into the heart of things and sometimes the dark heart of things, as Buechner calls it. As such, contemplation requires absolute honesty—to look at a given situation and to face and name both hope and despair, the absence and the presence of God. Contemplation takes courage. Many sermons feature one or the other. Far too many foreground the absence or the presence of God, but not both. Yet both provide meaning greater than either alone, for we often experience both in life. One without the other is not entirely true.

Contemplation is the process, and from the process comes an output to the world—a prayer, meditation, poem, sermon, or essay that invites inwardness as a response. The process that Baldwin follows is inward contemplation; the output is a sermon essay that leads the hearer/reader to an inward journey to discover what they believe about God and religion and, ultimately, as Baldwin would have it, to discover and overcome the effects of racism and white supremacy on global and American citizens.

The Alpha Narrative

Baldwin's "Down at the Cross" is a sermon/essay, dare I say, contemplative sermon, that Charles Johnson would call an "alpha narrative," that is, Baldwin accomplishes "*an imaginative and original story that compresses the complexity and difficulty of modern life into a few stark and massive symbols in which all our experience and all human history are locked.*"¹⁰ I propose that "Down at the Cross" is an African American sermon essay in the contemplative tradition and worthy of serious study in order to expand, encompass, and continue to define the often unheralded tradition of the African American contemplative sermon as well as to challenge contemporary preachers to preach non-disposable sermons or consider the value of creative and contemplative sermons that lead hearers to inwardness.

To develop this thesis, I offer an analysis of the sermon essay that is a close reading of a portion of "Down at the Cross." Indicative of the genre of theater and plays, I have divided the essay because, in my reading of it, given its length, my mind and body required a physical and mental break. I argue that this format is the best way to understand the sermon. Again, based upon the space limitations of this article, we will only be able to discuss what I call "Act 1."

Close Reading of the First Act of "Down at the Cross"

Act 1 clearly characterizes Baldwin's entrance into and leaving the Black church and his abandonment of the Christian God of his youth. In my characterization, Act 1 has five scenes. Each scene culminates in a central idea, indicative of traditional Black preaching—a crescendo that is the rhetorical, lyrical, and poetic summit Baldwin's thought reaches as the concluding thought. Each scene builds into a cohesive thought pattern, and the five central thoughts of Act 1 are: "The Wall Between the World and Me," "The Bargain at the Foot of the Cross," "Jesus Failed the Bargain and So Did the Church," "Renewal at the Fountain of Our Own Lives," and "The Viable and Useful God."

The Wall Between the World and Me

¹⁰ Charles Johnson, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 106.

Baldwin opens the essay with himself as the protagonist with a profound religious crisis at the age of fourteen. The fourteen-year-old Baldwin has awakened to the reality that religion meant God, saints, angels, and “a blazing Hell.”¹¹ Religion and God were synonymous with safety and represented deliverance from the fear of the evils within and without. Baldwin acknowledges being raised in a Christian nation, accepting this deity as the only one, and supposing that God only existed in the walls of the church.

Harlem, or in Baldwin’s words, “the Avenue,” was the place where whores, pimps, and racketeers were the menace. Baldwin sets the context of the Avenue. First, there were the girls, who, besides their “budding breasts and round behinds,” were matrons for God and kept reminding the boys, “You had better be thinking about your soul.” Baldwin says that girls knew the price for one misstep, knew they had to be protected, and knew that the only protection was the boys. So, they functioned as God’s decoys, saving the souls of the boys and binding the bodies of the boys in marriage (a reference to St. Paul’s admonition in 1 Cor 7:9 that it is “better to marry than to burn”).

The boys at this age were settling in for the “winter of life.” They all knew that they would rise no higher than their fathers. They also could not say what oppressed them. They knew it was “the man,” the white men who, for example, practiced vicious police brutality. Their choices were wine, whiskey, the needle, or Baldwin’s choice to flee into the church.

Baldwin is very direct about white power in the ghetto and examines its source. Because white people in America do not love and accept themselves and each other, they are not willing to understand that black people are not trying to be “accepted” by white people; black people simply do not want to be “beaten over the head by whites every instance of our brief passage on the planet.” When white people learn to love themselves and each other, which Baldwin says will not be tomorrow, and maybe never, the Negro problem will not exist because it will no longer be needed.

Baldwin admits that those “more advantageously placed than those in Harlem” will find his psychology and view of human nature dismal and shocking in the extreme. But his views are perfectly justified by the fact that “the Negro’s experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claims to live.” Whites had the judges, juries, shotguns, and the law—power. But it was a criminal power, “to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever.” The values preached by the white world but not practiced were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection. Based upon this criminal power, the barriers between Baldwin and crime diminished.

Baldwin needed a thing, a gimmick, to lift him out of the ghetto and start him on his way. It did not matter what the gimmick was—in reality, the choice was the Avenue or the church. Baldwin summarized his entrance into the church as his only option based upon the fact that Black people are taught by white society to despise themselves, and the Black response to the teaching of self-hate is fear.

Baldwin clarifies his central thought for this first scene: based upon his being fourteen years old—“all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision for the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me and drove me into the church.”

¹¹ James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1962, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>. All subsequent Baldwin quotations are from this source.

The Bargain at the Foot of the Cross

Baldwin admits that his entrance into the church was curiously deliberate, though he did not know it was so at the time. He intentionally did not join the church where his father was a member.¹² Rather, he went with a friend in school, who had already surrendered his life to Christ, to a church to meet the friend's woman pastor. Mother Rosa Artimus Horn looked at the young Baldwin and smiled and offered a question that was exactly the same question posed by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue: "Whose little boy are you?"¹³ In response to the pastor's question, Baldwin states, "my heart replied at once, Why, yours." He was fortunate that he found the church racket instead of some other and, as he says, "surrendered to spiritual seduction long before he came into carnal knowledge." The summer wore on for Baldwin, and he became more frightened and guilty.

The struggle was all kept inside until one night when the preacher woman finished preaching, everything came "roaring, screaming, crying out and I fell on the ground before the altar." One moment, he was on his feet, singing and clapping, and, as he says, "working out in my head the plot of a play," and in the next moment, with no transition and no sensation of falling, he was on his back "with the lights beating down into my face and all the saints vertical above me."

All he remembers is the anguish and pain, unspeakable pain, "as if I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me." For Baldwin, if heaven would not hear him and love not descend to make him clean, then "disaster was his portion."

He recounts that to be born black in an Anglo-Teutonic, anti-sexual white country means that very soon one gives up all hope of communion, noting that black people look up or down, but not at each other, never *at* you. He says, "and white people, mainly, look away"—what hope is there for communion? It did not seem possible to get through life, that is, to love or be loved. The universe and other people had no room for him, and if love would not swing open the gates, no other power would or could. In this despair of human love, only God's love is left. But, Baldwin says, "God . . . is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why are . . . the black cast down so far? Why?"

He was on the floor all night and found no answer to this question. Over him, to bring him "through," the saints sang, rejoiced, and prayed. And when they raised him in the morning, they told him he was "saved." He responds that, indeed, he was saved in some manner, for he was utterly drained and exhausted. He was released from his guilty torment and was only aware of his relief. He wondered why human relief had to be purchased in such a pagan and desperate fashion. In response to his wonderment, it was here that he was able to see that the governing principles of rites, rituals, and customs of black and white churches were the same: "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror." Blindness was often cultivated to deny loneliness and terror. While

¹² I have decided to leave Baldwin's comments about his father (stepfather) outside of the scope of our discussion. This topic deserves more attention than time allows in these few pages.

¹³ Stephen York recounts that Mother Rosa Artimus Horn (1880–1976) was a popular African American Holiness-Pentecostal preacher in Harlem after she established the Mount Calvary Pentecostal Faith Church in 1926. The Mount Calvary Pentecostal Faith Church was incorporated in 1932, and the movement of five churches eventually had some twenty thousand members and adherents. While she was also considered "one of the most controversial black Pentecostal women," by 1934, the church was located in five cities. Dubbed "Mother Horn" by devotees, she was described as having a powerful presence, being an extremely effective speaker, and possessing great charisma (Stephen York, "The Influence of African American Holiness-Pentecostalism on James Baldwin," thesis dissertation, Rochester, New York: Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, 2020).

“Faith, Hope, and Charity” (love) were the professed principles, they were clearly not so for most Christians or the Christian world.

In order to not be bored and revert back to the unsaved wretchedness of the Avenue, Baldwin became a preacher and preached sermons as a young minister for three years. It was the most frightening time of his life, and he says, the most dishonest. The resulting hysteria lent great passion to his sermons—for a while. He relished the attention and relative immunity from punishment from his father and, above all, the right to privacy. He was to prepare one sermon per week. He preached more often than that and could not be interrupted for hours and whole days. Baldwin had immobilized his father; it took him some days to realize that he had also immobilized himself and had escaped from nothing. Baldwin says the church was very exciting, and it took a long time to disengage himself from the excitement, “and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will.”

Though he left the church, he described what he could not disengage from—the enchantment, wonder, mystery, and hope of the black church:

There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to rock.

Baldwin continues and takes us inside to experience the preaching moment and writes what many preachers feel in great moments of preaching:

Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, “the Word”—when the church and I were one. Their pain and joy were mine and mine were theirs—they surrendered their pain and joy to me, I surrendered mine to them—and their cries of ‘Amen’ and ‘Hallelujah’ and ‘Yes, Lord,’ and ‘Praise His name!’ and ‘Preach it, brother’ sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar.

Baldwin says that for a long time, these experiences at the church were his “only sustenance and his meat and drink.” He would rush home from school, to the church, and to the altar to be alone and commune with Jesus, his dearest friend. Baldwin then communicates the second central thought of Act 1: Jesus knew all the secrets of his heart and would never fail him. Jesus knew his secrets, but Baldwin himself did not know them, and Jesus would never let him find out. His wall of safety was accomplished.

Jesus Failed the Bargain and So Did the Church

Baldwin could not escape the secrets of his heart, so he exclaims that Jesus failed at the bargain. He writes this ironic line: “He was a much better Man than I took Him for.” From that point, Baldwin describes the slow crumbling of his faith, what he calls “the pulverization of his fortress.” In my reading, there are seven reasons declared in the essay as to why and how Baldwin left the church.

First, about a year after he began preaching, he started to read again. His reading, as he says, began “fatally” with Dostoevsky. He attended a Jewish high school, and, as taught by his Pentecostal faith tradition, he would pass out religious tracts and leaflets. His classmates laughed at him and pointed out that the gospels had been written long after the death of Christ. This information forced him to really read for himself what he was handing out. He noticed that the tracts were impossible to believe unless one already believed their message. They were a kind of blackmail, and he felt that people should love the Lord *because* they loved the Lord and not because they were afraid of going to hell.

Second, he was told by his Jewish fellow high schoolers that the books of the Bible were written by human beings and translated by human beings out of biblical languages. He rebutted that they had been written under divine inspiration, but he inwardly questioned: Had they? All of them? Based upon how familiar he was with putting words on paper, how frequently he had worked himself into his own visions, how his visions from God differed from those of his father, as well as the fact that he did not understand the dreams he was having at night; and that all of them were not holy, he was not sure about divine inspiration. Alongside this, he spent most of his time in a state of repentance for things that he vividly desired to do and had not done.

Third, the fact that he was dealing with Jewish people in school raised the issue of color, which he had been avoiding. He realized that the Bible had been written by white men. According to Christians, blacks were descendants of Ham and cursed and predestined to be slaves. Most of Christendom seemed to believe that, from the beginning of time, he was meant to be a slave.

Fourth, the Jewish boys in high school were troubling because he could find no point of connection with them and the Jewish pawnbroker, landlords, and grocery store owners in Harlem. They were Jews, but he thought of them only as white. Jews, until he got to high school, were incarcerated in the Old Testament, and their names were Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel, etc. It was “bewildering” to find them so many miles and centuries from Egypt.

Fifth, being in the pulpit was like being behind the scenes in the theatre, and he knew how the illusion worked. He knew other ministers and the quality of their lives. It was not the hypocrisy of sensuality but deadlier and deeper than that. He knew how to work a congregation until the last dime was surrendered and knew ultimately where the money for the “Lord’s work” went. Baldwin said that he had no respect for the people with whom he worked and, if he continued, he would have no respect for himself.

Sixth, based upon the pulverizing of his faith, when Baldwin stood in front of the congregation, it took all his strength not to stammer, curse, and tell them to “throw away their Bibles, and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.” As he taught Sunday school, he felt like he was committing a crime, talking about the gentle Jesus and telling the children to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. He asked: “Were only Negroes going to heaven? Was heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?”

Finally, he might have been able to reconcile this if he had been able to see any loving-kindness in the church. But he had seen too many monstrous things from the pulpit: not only that ministers gained Cadillacs and fine homes while the faithful continued to work menial jobs and still drop their hard-earned dimes and quarters and dollars into the offering plate, but that there was no love in the church—only a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair.

According to Baldwin, the transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. Congregants were told to love everybody, but

that meant only those who believed as they believed—and did not apply at all to white people. He asks this second penetrating question: “What was the point, the purpose of *my* salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love towards others, no matter now they behaved toward me?” What Baldwin did, and what every person did, for that matter, they all would have to answer for when the judgment trumpet sounded—unless there was in heaven a special dispensation for the “benighted black, who would not be judged in the same way.”

Then Baldwin closes with the central thought of this third scene of Act 1: “In the same way that we, for white people, were descendants of Ham, and were cursed forever, white people were, for us, descendants of Cain. *And the passion with which we loved the Lord was a measure of how deeply we feared and distrusted and, in the end, hated almost all strangers, always, and avoided and despised ourselves*” (italics mine).

Renewal at the Fountain of Our Own Lives

And yet, with all of this said about Jesus and the church, Baldwin could not leave it at that. He says: “In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare.” Pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children were all bound together by the nature of oppression and yet “within these limits achieve with each other freedom that was close to love”:

I remember, anyway, church suppers and outings, and, later, after I left the church, rent and waistline parties where rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about “the man.” We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other and had no need to pretend to be what we were not.

Baldwin suggests that this is the freedom that is heard in black music. In gospel songs, jazz, and especially the blues, “there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged.” White Americans feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, but, as an example of the depth of complexity of black music, Baldwin cites Big Bill Broonzy’s song “I Feel So Good,” a joyful song about a man who is on his way to the railroad station to meet his girl. She’s coming home, and the singer is exuberant, indicating how he has missed her. But there is no guarantee that she will stay this time. Tonight, tomorrow, or in the next five minutes, he may be singing “Lonesome in my Bedroom” or “Ain’t we, ain’t we, going to make it all right? Well, if we don’t today, we will tomorrow night.” The song speaks of joy and sorrow, the anticipation of delight, and the possible pain of rejection.

Baldwin says that white Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an “ironic tenacity” comes, based upon their suspicion of the fact that the force is sensual. They are terrified of sensuality and do not understand it. For Baldwin, the word sensual is not meant to bring up stereotypical sexuality—“quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs.” To be sensual is “to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”

Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they distrust their own reaction as they do in America and become as joyless as they have become. Baldwin surfaces now the fourth central thought of Act 1:

It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for

reality—for this touchstone can only be oneself. Such a person interposes nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes between himself and reality. And these attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it (is unaware of so much!), are historical and public attitudes. They do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the person. *Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves* (italics mine).

The Viable and Useful God

According to Baldwin, white Christians have forgotten several elementary historical details. Liberation must involve the rise of energy buried before the rise of Christian nations. Most people are terrified of this based upon the great change that must occur. America and the entire Western world must reexamine and release themselves “and discard nearly all the assumptions,” including what has been deemed to be sacred, “that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long.”

In the realm of power, Christianity has operated from an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty. This true faith is more concerned about the soul than the body, to which the flesh (corpses) of countless people considered as “infidels” attests. The spreading of the gospel, regardless of the motives, integrity, or heroism of some missionaries, was, at its essence, justification for the planting of the flag—in other words, for establishing Western power and dominion. The Christian church, as distinguished from some of its ministers, not only participated in but sanctified and rejoiced in that conquest, formulating the belief that the conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of Western populations, was proof of the favor of God.

In the realm of morals, Baldwin notes that Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent. It was extremely arrogant to assume that the morals of others were inferior to those of Christians, and, therefore, Christians had every right to use any means necessary to change them. Then comes a magnificent crescendo and the bringing down of the curtain of Act 1 with its final central thought:

[T]he schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all of the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him (italics mine).

Act 1 concludes, the curtain falls, and the mind and body take an intermission for refreshment.

The Difficulties and Complexities of Modern Life

Alpha narratives are defined as original, imaginative, and compelling stories that compress the complexity and difficulty of modern life into a few stark and massive symbols within which all our experience and all human history is locked.¹⁴ Johnson says that alpha narratives are very difficult to achieve, maybe once in a lifetime of work, but I believe Baldwin has achieved it! And while I am not arguing that every sermon should be an alpha narrative,

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Way of the Writer*, 106.

there are things that we can learn from alpha narratives for producing high-quality contemplative sermons.

Therefore, let's grapple with delineating the difficulties and complexities of modern life that Baldwin articulates into which all our experiences and all human history are locked. In other words, what are the essential questions of life with which all human beings struggle and, hopefully, in whatever sense possible, come to terms? Not in any particular rank or order, here are the questions in which all human experience and human history are locked, which Baldwin raises and seeks to come to terms with in "Down at the Cross" and invites readers to do the same.

1. *What is the reality, nature, presence, absence, and ethics of God—if there is a God? Then whose God, and what must God be like?*
2. *Why is there suffering and pain? For example, Baldwin asks, why are black people (marginalized people) cast so far down? Why?*
3. *What is the true nature and reality of titles, status, money, power, privilege, position, and earthly resources?*
4. *What is sex? Is it life yearning for itself in procreation, the beauty of desire and sexual pleasure, or inappropriate lusts that dominate and harm others? Or is it something else?*
5. *What is the most important thing that human beings can do for one another? What is the most important thing one can do for oneself?*
6. *How do I construct my identity and authority in the context of culture? How do minorities, marginalized folks—LGBTQI A+, disabled folks, people of color, Asian folks—construct their identity and authority in the face of majority culture, and how do majority folks construct their identity and authority in the face of minority culture?*
7. *What is the nature and reality of death?*

Responses to these questions require contemplation, careful consideration with much inner thought, and reflection on the human experience. Responses require an inward spiritual journey. For me, these are the deeper questions of life, and many of the sermons that I hear and sometimes preach do not rise to this level of contemplation and challenge. I hope I am not being disrespectful because many sermons touch on these very questions, but too many responses fall into the category of what Baldwin called "impossible to believe unless one has already believed the Christian message." Many sermons skirt the hard issues, such as the absence of God, and mask the reality with clichés and theological sloganeering. Many of our sermons and our theological considerations can be surface, shallow, cute, and even clever and, therefore, have little ability to challenge us at the deepest levels of our inward journey.

I consider Baldwin a contemplative preacher, not because I agree with all of his logic and theological conclusions, such that Jesus knew all his secrets and his commitment was never to let Baldwin find out, or that God is white—a tremendously problematic idea. What I respect is the honesty and the depth of thought. Baldwin is not afraid to offer a prophetic critique of the church and raise the issues of our hypocrisy, fear, and even our hate. He is not afraid to be honest—not letting the black or the white church off the hook. Religion is not totally about safety; instead, it strives to tell the truth as best as we can see it from our limited perspectives. Life is about joy and sorrow, hope and despair, love and hate.

I wonder if a disposable sermon is one that avoids hard truths? One that will not deal with the absence of God but assures and reassures hearers of the continual presence of God without facing the occasional and sometimes relentless pain and despair of life that bring us to the place

where we put our fists in the air and ask, “Where can I go and meet with God? How do I make an appointment with God?” I wonder if the sermon can be deep enough to capture the full depth and breadth of the human experience, what Buechner calls the tragedy, comedy, and the fairy tale—the tragedy of human failure, the comedy of being loved by God regardless of failure, and the continuing human rejection of that love and yet the fairy tale of God’s transforming love? To preach not what one ought to say but to preach despair and hope? In the paraphrased words of Buechner, to look into the dark heart of things, the preacher’s own heart, the heart of the people, the heart of the text and the scriptural witness, and to tell as close to the whole truth as the preacher is able?

Baldwin goes there and describes the Pentecostal church that he served as “the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord.” What does he mean by “continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord?” Does he mean being able to say that, as he taught Sunday school, he felt like he was committing a crime talking about the gentle Jesus and telling children to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life? The experience of goodness and despair in the same sentence—not either or, but both. He captures the entire human experience and does not dismiss either. Life is the continuing goodness of the Lord *and* the despair of God’s presence. He tells the truth as best he can see it, know it, and feel it.

Baldwin uses the contemplative sermon essay form to bridge human divides by pushing all readers on both sides of the divide to go inward and closely examine the effect religion and white supremacy have had on all. The sermon essay “Down at the Cross” is a response to the central question of his work—the inward effects of bigotry and racism and how to learn to love. He contends that these effects can only be healed through an inward journey. This is evidenced in such phrases as renewing ourselves at the fountain of our own lives or rejecting the hypocrisies, prohibitions, and crimes of the Christian church to become a moral human being, or if the concept of God has any validity or use, it is to make us larger, freer, or more loving. He offers us a prophetic interiority and pushes us to ask and respond to the essential questions of life for ourselves.

Ultimately, the contemplative sermon flows out of the devotional life of the preacher—questions, biblical reflections, and commentary offered up to God from the preacher’s life that demand a response from God. The preacher listens to hear from God and offers the people the substance of a real conversation with God. The preacher understands their own heart and the hearts of the people enough to realize that the questions of the people are the questions of the preacher and vice versa. The purpose of the substantive conversation in preaching is to stimulate the hearers or, better yet, invite the hearers to have their own conversation with God. The point is for the hearer to travel their own inward journey to God. The people hear the conversation with God in the sermon as a conversation starter of their own.

James Baldwin unfolds his gospel of love in the second act of “Down at the Cross.” I pray that the reader will read Baldwin’s continued discourse as a part of their own inward journey.

Response to Frank Thomas, “The Sermon as Essay: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher”

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I would like to thank Thomas for his provocative, engaging, and insightful essay which usefully reframes the timely and timeless work of James Baldwin by considering his most enduring essay as a contemplative sermon. The year 2024 marks the hundredth anniversary of Baldwin's birth, and the year 2023 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Baldwin's most prominent year, 1963, a year which included the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, a speaking tour of the beleaguered American South in a pivotal year of the Civil Rights Movement, and an invitation to meet with Attorney General Bobby Kennedy about race relations (a meeting that did not go well). His prominence as a writer and a spokesman landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine. These anniversaries of his birth and the peak of his fame serve to remind us that Baldwin remains relevant long after his miraculous lifetime and premature death in 1987.

I will acknowledge from the start that my field of expertise is literature rather than theology, so my perspective will hopefully amplify or complement Thomas's rather than overlap with it. I will also acknowledge that I've been asked many times why a white, heterosexual, nonreligious, middle-class man has devoted much of his scholarly career to studying and teaching Baldwin, who does not share these identity labels. To me, it makes perfect sense, for I think Baldwin at times wanted to shake up and enlighten a reading audience like me: “Down at the Cross,” the main essay in *The Fire Next Time*, was originally published in the high bourgeois pages of *The New Yorker*. Some of his best friends were white liberals, and he pushed them hard, seeing their education as crucial to the goal he stated at the end of “Down at the Cross”: “to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”¹ But I would never claim Baldwin was only writing to people like me: his audience was vast and diverse, and he had (and still has) the uncanny ability to make all his readers and listeners feel like he was speaking directly to them. As to what really draws me to Baldwin, I nodded in strong agreement with Thomas's statement toward the end of his talk: “What I respect is the honesty and depth of thought.” Yes: and passion and the willingness to explore the self not for the purposes of elevating one's ego but instead for the purposes of insight and enlightenment and risk. This was his life's work and his grand achievement, and I find it inspiring even though his experiences and mine are markedly different.

I hope to expand on Thomas's excellent argument that “Down at the Cross” can be productively read as a contemplative sermon by broadening the context to consider other work by Baldwin that suggests exactly where he landed when he left the church. As Thomas points out, “Religion is not totally about safety but striving to tell the truth.” Part of what Baldwin silently rejects in “Down at the Cross” is the very suspect concept of safety, which is an idea he returns to throughout his career. The nameless narrator of his most famous story, “Sonny's Blues” (1957), and David, the anti-hero and narrator of his landmark novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956), are both taken to task for their false beliefs in the safety of any kind. In his story, Sonny is encouraged to play jazz as though he is venturing out into deep water, taking dangerous risks to embrace his humanity, which is the only way to make oneself available to love, which is the focus of my remarks here. Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming, claimed that Baldwin “left the

¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 105.

church in order to preach the gospel.”² That gospel is, in fact, a sophisticated understanding of what love is.

Baldwin narrates the experience of his conversion, his years as a boy preacher, and his rejection of the church at a number of key points throughout his career, in addition to what Thomas calls Act 1 of “Down at the Cross.” In his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), he contextualizes these experiences in terms of ancestry: the fictional John Grimes’s story is placed next to stories of his mother, his aunt, and his stepfather that occurred before his birth and that have yet somehow affected his journey. Echoing a line Thomas quotes from “Down at the Cross,” the novel ends with John calling down the stairs to his parents, who are rushing him to get to church, “I’m ready. I’m coming. I’m on my way.”³ The reader realizes John’s meaning: he may be on his way to church today, but like his author, he is on his way out. We see the dynamic replayed in his first play, *The Amen Corner* (1958), in which the teenage David is forced to choose between playing music in the church that is his mother’s congregation or playing jazz like his father, a lifestyle which includes behaviors his church considers sins (drinking, smoking, and premarital sex). His father’s world easily wins out. In this play, the church is rendered as divisive and backbiting, devoid of the love Baldwin sought. In the essay “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) – one of his finest – he again tells the story of how and why he left the church, this time in the aftermath of his father’s funeral, which happened to coincide with his own nineteenth birthday, the birth of his youngest sister, and the Harlem riots of 1943. His father’s career as a preacher in a Pentecostal church in Harlem had resulted in extreme bitterness against the white world, and Baldwin, who throws a water glass at a white waitress who refuses to serve him because he is Black, is terrified that he has internalized that bitterness, a reflection of the anger he sees on the destroyed streets of his neighborhood. Just as he fled the church, he flees segregated America for Paris at that moment.

To push against Gore Vidal’s claim that Baldwin’s novels are “a bit dated” – all novels are – I want to suggest that a full understanding of Baldwin’s message of love can be clarified through his novels, which Leeming views as “parables” alongside the sermons of his essays. Time constraints won’t allow a full reading of *Another Country* (1962), his novel published the same year as “Down at the Cross,” but I will briefly suggest how this novel, which has little to do with the church, works to amplify Baldwin’s unique and challenging gospel of love. Two of the points Thomas makes apply here; one is that white Americans’ inability or unwillingness to love themselves and each other has created the American racial nightmare, and the second is the question, “Why is there suffering and pain? Why are Black people cast down so far?” *Another Country* opens with a suffering Black anti-hero named Rufus Scott, who has been cast down so far that he sees no way up. In “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin speaks of “a gimmick” needed by anyone living in the ghetto “to lift him out and start him on his way.”⁴ For Baldwin, the church was his initial gimmick, but it was followed by his true calling, writing. For Rufus, the initial gimmick was music, but it was not enough to sustain him, nor to protect him from the feeling that he was being persecuted or “beaten down” by the white world even though some of his best friends are white. As he prepares to jump to his death off the George Washington Bridge, he curses God: “He raised his eyes to heaven. He thought, You bastard, you motherfucking bastard.

² Karen Thorsen (director), *The Price of the Ticket* (1 hr. 27 minutes), San Francisco, California Newsreels, DVD, 1990.

³ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 211.

⁴ Baldwin, *Fire*, 15.

Ain't I your baby, too?"⁵ Feeling rejected by humans and God alike, he initially lashes out, treating sex, as Thomas describes it, as "inappropriate lusts that dominate and harm others" rather than "the beauty of desire and sexual pleasure" in his relationship with Leona, a white southern woman who becomes the object of his vengeance. In their first sexual encounter, he imagines his penis as a "weapon" and his semen as "venom."⁶ After that, he abuses her physically and emotionally, sending her into a mental hospital before taking his own life.

Rufus's story is a tragic parable about the fate of individuals in a world devoid of love. The rest of the novel illustrates – without easy answers – the fifth of Thomas's questions "in which all human experience and human history is locked," namely, "What is the most important thing that human beings can do for one another?" The answer in Baldwin's case is clearly "love!" but a one-word answer is too easy. This is where the journey to understand Baldwin becomes long and challenging, "worthy of our contemplation," in the terms described here. At the end of Act 1 of "Down at the Cross," Baldwin provocatively suggests, "It is time we got rid of [God]," but only, he says, "If the concept of God" fails to "make us larger, freer, and *more loving*" (emphasis mine).⁷ When he turns to the Nation of Islam in Act 2, he is worried that the rejection of all "sinners" outside the Christian church of his youth is no different from the rejection of "white devils" outside the Nation of Islam. The misguided Christian suggestion that God was white he learned in his youth is flipped here to embrace a God who is Black, but both formulations in Baldwin's mind promote hierarchy and separation; as he says, "The dream, the sentiment is old; only the color is new."⁸ During his tense meeting with Elijah Muhammad, he feels chastised by the Nation of Islam leader's questions and tells him, "I did not care if white and black people married, and that I had many white friends." What he then tells himself but not Elijah, though he voices it in the essay, is, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?"⁹ Following the recurrent topics of his career, he could easily have added, "or faith, or sexuality, or nationhood, or class status, or ideology?"

Love is more important than anything, but it's not what most people think it is. This is the lengthy inquiry of *Another Country*. The many characters in the novel reel in the aftermath of Rufus's suicide, trying to understand how they failed him. It's a 436-page exercise – a really long contemplative sermon – in defining exactly what love is and committing to it, for though many say they loved Rufus, they don't realize until it's too late that they couldn't get him to feel loved. Sensing another life slip away, the character Eric says of his one-time lover Cass, "He wished that he could rescue her, that it was within his power to rescue her and make her life less hard. But it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making a life bearable – only love, and love itself mostly failed; and he had never loved her."¹⁰ The novel's arguable protagonist, Vivaldo, has affairs with Eric as well as with Rufus's sister Ida, the latter of which ends badly. Ida admits that she was permanently damaged by her brother's suicide, claiming, "Rufus had always been the world to me. I loved him." "So did I," [Vivaldo] said – too quickly, irrelevantly; and for the first time it occurred to him that, possibly, he was a liar; had never loved Rufus at all,

⁵ James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 87.

⁶ Baldwin, *Another*, 22.

⁷ Baldwin, *Fire*, 47.

⁸ Baldwin, *Fire*, 57.

⁹ Baldwin, *Fire*, 71.

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Another*, 404.

but had only feared and envied him.”¹¹ His interest in Ida, which he also labels love, might just be an attempt to avoid facing that possibility.

Though painful, and though it occurs too late to save either Rufus or his relationship with Ida, this realization is a valuable breakthrough, for Vivaldo has to learn what it is to love if there is to be hope for the future. Fear and envy – divisive forces in a society like the hierarchy and separation I mentioned earlier – prevent it. Toward the end of “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin offers his own definition of love clearly based on what he wants the concept of God to do so we don’t necessarily have to get rid of the Divine; he says, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”¹² This sets up his conclusion that “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks...must, *like lovers*, insist on, or create the consciousness of others” in order to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country” (emphasis mine).¹³ These words echo down six decades to prove emphatically what Thomas argues, that “Down at the Cross” is an enduring document “that can be carefully read over and over again to glean insight, interpretation, meaning.”

¹¹ Baldwin, *Another*, 413.

¹² Baldwin, *Fire*, 95.

¹³ Baldwin, *Fire*, 105.

**A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century
Womanist Contemplative Homiletic**
La Ronda D. Barnes

Abstract: *In this article, I present nineteenth-century preacher Zilpha Elaw as a model for a twenty-first-century homiletic. I discuss particularity, as understood through deep interiority and contemplation, as the key to connecting with other beings. As preachers, we have the ability and the responsibility to model the need for and benefits of understanding and owning our particularities and to guide others in embracing their particularities in ways that affirm self and community. Thanks to the incomparable gifts of African American contemplative preachers, I believe that we can bridge innate differences and societally created divisions through a psycho-spiritual interiority that acknowledges and encourages communication in the spiritual realm.*

In conjunction with Zilpha Elaw's life and work, I also engage the contemplative work of preacher, mystic, and theologian Howard Thurman and the scholarship of Womanist theologians Phillis Sheppard and Karen Baker-Fletcher. The writings and lived experiences of these four African Americans, Elaw, Thurman, Sheppard, and Baker-Fletcher, set forth the importance of spirituality, interiority, and particularity that opens the doors for understanding and communication across societally created racial divides.

Introduction

In 1977, Carly Simon recorded a movie theme song, “Nobody Does It Better.” “Nobody does it better, makes me feel sad for the rest. Nobody does it, half as good as you. Baby you’re the best.”¹ In composing this essay for the sake of developing a womanist contemplative homiletic, I found that the words of the song rang true. For in the United States of America, even before it existed as an independent nation, nobody does it better than African American women.² Nobody else does it better because nobody else has been forced to, has learned to, and even has made an art, a spirituality, a ritual, of doing it better. What is it, you might ask? It is surviving, thriving, transforming, and creating for self and for communities within and across racial, sexual, and class divides. It is a seemingly innate ability to reach deep within the self, below the disparagements and discriminations of systemic racism, sexism, and often classism, to encounter the world with the belief that we have value as living beings and that we can trust the inner calls to speak and act in ways often portrayed as foreign or unimaginable to others. It is the ability to move from ostracization because of the color of our skin or the texture of our hair to acceptance, embrace, and celebration of our innate qualities. And for all these reasons, nobody in the U.S. can better teach all of us, regardless of race or ethnicity or gender, about the importance of particularity on our internal transformation and our subsequent ability and desire to use our particularity to connect to the life around us.

In this paper, I discuss particularity, as understood through deep interiority and contemplation, as the key to connecting with other beings. As preachers, we have the ability and the responsibility to model the need for and benefits of understanding and owning our

¹“Nobody Does It Better.” Written by Carole Sager, composed by Marvin Hamlisch, and recorded by Carly Simon. Copyright: Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, 1977.

²The lyrical phrase, “Nobody does it better,” repeatedly used herein, is not an absolute claim regarding African American women. I use the phrase as an ode to African American women like Zilpha Elaw, who exemplify the genius of contemplative womanist preaching—preaching enhanced by learning how to embody multiple particularities that society attempts to marginalize.

particularities and to guide others in embracing their particularities in ways that are affirming of self and of community. Thanks to the incomparable gifts of African American contemplative preachers, I believe that we can bridge innate differences and societally created divisions through a psycho-spiritual interiority that acknowledges and encourages communication in the spiritual realm.

I present nineteenth-century preacher Zilpha Elaw as a model for a twenty-first-century homiletic that educates and inspires preachers and parishioners.³ to operate on a deep spiritual plane—a plane in which our particularity makes us one with God while simultaneously connecting us to each other in community. This connection, this oneing, in and through God, liberates us to cross racial divides on a spiritual level. In other words, we communicate not only with words or body language but in spirit and through Spirit based not on a descension into commonality but rather by embracing a comprehensive particularity. By doing so, we not only seek understanding but also communicate at a deeper spiritual level than the intellect alone can access. And by doing so, we connect more deeply across differences and the intersectionalities that shape so much of human life.

The term “oneing” is often associated with late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century theologian Julian of Norwich in her text *A Revelation of Love*. While ideas about the soul’s union with God were set forth by theologians prior to Julian and continue to be an element of contemplative thought, Julian’s version was unique to her time. During a deathbed experience in her early 30s, Julian had visions of the crucified Christ. She recorded those visions in her text *Showings*, and after years of theological and spiritual reflection, she recounted them in the expansive text *A Revelation of Love*. Her concept of oneing recognizes the need for contemplative prayer, which does not seek actions from God but instead opens an individual to awareness of the soul’s essence in God and to an awareness of God’s unwavering love. This awareness enables the individual to respond to God’s love by loving and having compassion toward others and by having a sense of peace or rest in God.

Unlike many mystical definitions of union with God as a state of being in which the individual becomes emptied of all worldly concerns and in some contexts of self-awareness, Julian’s oneing does not involve the annihilation of the will or human individuality. Instead, the individual becomes more self-aware as the veils of shame and loss of dignity created by sin are removed. Enhanced self-awareness supports a concept of oneing and of union with God in which the self remains present in God and through that presence is able to build relationship with God and with other creatures.⁴

In exploring Zilpha Elaw’s life and work in the context of building a twenty-first-century womanist contemplative homiletic, I also am engaging two other areas of scholarship that are foundational to the homiletic I propose. First are the contemplative writings of preacher, mystic, and theologian Howard Thurman. Thurman’s extensive published writings help to succinctly set forth concepts of interiority and particularity. The second area of scholarship I incorporate is Womanist scholarship on particularity and spirituality as articulated by Womanist theologians

³As I define parishioners, the term could be used interchangeably with listeners, congregants, or audience, as my work proposes that preaching and/or proclamation occurs in and out of traditional pulpits. Preaching and/or proclamation outside of traditional pulpits still seeks to influence in pastoral ways and to spiritually connect with beings who engage with the proclamation on spiritual levels. Thus, while these individuals may not be congregants when a congregant is defined as being a member of a particular congregation, they are parishioners.

⁴For a similar and more expansive discussion of maintaining self-awareness in the context of mystical self-emptying and oneing, see Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

Phillis Sheppard and Karen Baker-Fletcher. Together, these four African Americans, Elaw, Thurman, Sheppard, and Baker-Fletcher, set forth the importance of spirituality, interiority, and particularity that opens the doors for understanding and communication across societally created racial divides. While I do not agree with all the theological tenets and homiletical components of their work, each author's ways of being and communicating influence my ongoing scholarship.

**Spiritual Ancestors and Forerunners in Conversation with Zilpha Elaw:
Howard Thurman, Phillis Sheppard, and Karen Baker-Fletcher**

My heritage prizes ancestors and forerunners as bearers of special wisdom and strength and envisions them as continually in connection with us, even as we reconsider our past. Although Zilpha Elaw is the center of my study, I have come to appreciate her because of the great cloud of witnesses who helped me see her foundational insight and her limitations.

Howard Thurman

Howard Thurman, for example, sets forth the methods and reasons for developing a similar interiority to that of Julian of Norwich and Zilpha Elaw. It is an interiority that enhances our communication with the Divine and our ability to connect with our true selves, that is, who we are as creatures of the Divine without the labels society places upon us and without the masks and veils we wear to fit in, to hide things of which we are ashamed, and/or to protect self. Thurman states, "[A person] can become at home *within* by locating in his own spirit the trysting place where he and God may meet. Here it is that life may become private, personal, without at the same time becoming self-centered."⁵ For Thurman, union with God is a grounding for understanding our true selves and our ability imaginatively to relate to others across differences. He states, "All that [other people] are experiencing we can never know—but we can make accurate soundings which...will enable us to be to them what we could never be without such awareness."⁶ According to Thurman, when we experience God in our inner trysting place, we desire to have similar experiences with other creatures. We have "a sense of being at home in existence...on the hunt for clues to this experience in the world which is God's creation."⁷

In response, Zilpha Elaw models acknowledging, owning, and connecting with others within one's particularity for reasons of embodiment, partly because, as a nineteenth-century Black female in the U.S., her race and gender were always front and center in her public life. She also demonstrates the roles the Spirit and individual spirit can play in communicating with the Divine and penetrating the stereotypes and veils of other life on a spiritual level. Yet here, I also disagree with Zilpha Elaw precisely *because* of Thurman's work. While I agree with Zilpha Elaw's lived definition of salvation as a God-given gift in and for earthly life as well as a life beyond death, I disagree with her evangelistic zeal in which preaching was for the purpose of bringing all humans to an acceptance of Jesus of Nazareth as their savior. I struggle in this area to see Zilpha Elaw's ability to reach out across differences in light of Thurman's own emphasis on inter-religious insight and understanding. Thurman, for example, traveled to India in 1936 to engage in interfaith dialogue with Mohandas Gandhi, whose nonviolent movement would

⁵Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), 4. (italic emphasis in original).

⁶Ibid., 18. (italic emphasis in original).

⁷Ibid., 11. See also Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989); Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man's Experience of Community* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986).

become a basis for Thurman's work with Civil Rights leaders in the U.S. Later, Thurman put his thoughts on religion as a source of inclusion, instead of division, into his work as a co-founder of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples ("Fellowship Church"), an intentionally multi-ethnic and multi-religious congregation. Thurman speaks of Fellowship Church's worship theory, which states that worship of God is the "highest act of celebration of the human spirit."⁸ Worship becomes an act in which a person sees herself "as being in the presence of God."⁹ This presence is one in which the individual "is neither male nor female, black nor white, Protestant nor Catholic nor Buddhist nor Hindu, but a human spirit laid bare, stripped to whatever there is that is literal and irreducible."¹⁰ According to Thurman, "This kind of worship inspires a quality of life that makes barriers of separateness among [individuals] increasingly and finally untenable."¹¹

Womanist Theologians and Forerunners: Phillis Sheppard and Karen Baker-Fletcher

Womanist scholars Phillis Sheppard and Karen Baker-Fletcher speak to the importance of acknowledging and embracing particularity through embodiment and celebrating difference. They share Zilpha Elaw's concern while also elaborating critically on the way difference manifests itself in the experience of African American women intersectionally.¹² Sheppard, a womanist practical theologian and psychoanalyst, observes, "Particularity—who we are and where we stand in relation to each other, along with the effects that social structures have on our lives and on the communities around us—informs us and is a source of knowledge."¹³ Sheppard quotes womanist ethicist Emilie Townes in expressing the commitment womanists have to particularity as foundational to engaging with others. Townes states, "'For it is in exploring [the depths of African American life], in taking seriously my particularity—not as a form of essentialism, but as epistemology—where I can meet and greet others for we are intricately and intimately interwoven in our postmodern culture.'"¹⁴ Akin to Julian of Norwich's oneing that appreciates self-awareness and to Thurman's imagination and inner trysting place with God that lead to a better understanding of self and ability to interact with other life, Sheppard speaks of developing "hospitality toward self and the Holy."¹⁵ Her womanist practical theology "requires a deep self-awareness and an openness to helping others work toward awareness."¹⁶ She states, "[W]e are made to turn our eyes on what is within us, but just as important is the turning toward what is not yet there. To imagine a world that stands counter to the hate and hopelessness that we see 'out there' requires that the 'in here' be transformed."¹⁷

⁸Howard Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream: The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 69.

⁹Ibid., 69.

¹⁰Ibid., 69-70.

¹¹Ibid., 70.

¹²For a seminal definition of intersectionality, see Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*: Vol. 1989: Iss. 1, Article 8.

¹³Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

¹⁴Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology*, 7, citing Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Reproduction of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

¹⁵Sheppard, 195.

¹⁶Ibid., 194.

¹⁷Ibid., 195.

Womanist scholars also broadly define particularity to include the material and spiritual roles of the ancestors in forming and assisting the ongoing transformation of individuals.¹⁸ Baker-Fletcher, for example, views the importance Elaw gives to ocular visions, the authority of the Spirit, and spiritual connections to nature, suggesting that Elaw “had some exposure to an African heritage of understanding of the world of Spirit.”¹⁹ Exploring one of Elaw’s mystical experiences in which Elaw is in a state of elevation and engulfed by the rays of the sun, Baker-Fletcher states,

Elaw has a sense of a ‘me’ or ‘spirit’ inside the body that can leave the body and merge with the sun, with the universe, with nature...Spirit is for all in all, and our ancestors brought it with them from Africa. For Elaw, spirit merges with Spirit. The individual life is merged with the life of the universe. The ‘me’ inside ‘me’ is part of the Sacred Cosmos.²⁰

Even so, Sheppard and Baker-Fletcher represent just two of a plethora of womanist scholars who have written on spirituality and/or particularity, some of whom present perspectives different than my own.

And now to Zilpha Herself

Zilpha, Zilpha, there's something about that name.²¹ So, for the remainder of my article, I will not call her by her official name, Zilpha Panco Elaw Shum, Zilpha Elaw, or Mrs. Elaw, Mrs. Shum, or even Rev. Elaw, although I greatly respect her. I will call her simply Zilpha. Zilpha is the name given to her around 1793 by her free African American parents.

Zilpha was born and raised in Bristol Township, Bucks County, Pennsylvania—a relatively progressive community. She spent her early years in a Christian home where prayers were said and scripture read on a daily basis. At the age of 12, Zilpha’s mother died, and her father sent her to live with Rebecca and Pearson Mitchell as an indentured servant. The Mitchells were a European-American couple who lived in the same Bristol community.²² A community that Kimberly Blockett, English professor and literary historian, describes as being “steeped in the rhetoric of freedom and morality, [and that] seems to have significantly influenced [Zilpha’s] formative years.”²³ Zilpha remained in the community into her twenties.²⁴ Although the Mitchells were Quakers, Zilpha states in her *Memoirs* that there was little outward expression of

¹⁸See in particular the writings of Karen Baker-Fletcher and Monica Coleman, including Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Voice, Vision, and Spirit: Black Preaching Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Sisters Struggling in the Spirit: A Women of Color Theological Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Women’s Ministries Program Area, National Ministries Division, and Christian Faith and Life Program Area, Congregational Ministries Division, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1994), 31-42; Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998); and Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹⁹Baker-Fletcher, “Voice, Vision, and Spirit,” 38-39.

²⁰Baker-Fletcher, “Voice, Vision, and Spirit,” 38.

²¹I am paraphrasing a song, “There’s Something About That Name,” by Gloria Gaither and Bill Gaither, 1970, CCLI Number 14064, copyright (1970) William J. Gaither.

²²Zilpha Elaw, *The Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America* [Written by Herself]. Published by the author and sold by T. Dudley, 1846. (microfiche), 2.

²³Kimberly D. Blockett, “Introduction,” *Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw*, ed. Kimberly D. Blockett (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2021), xxiii.

²⁴Blockett, “Introduction,” *Memoirs*, xxiii.

faith in the home, and she missed the prayer and devotions of her early years.²⁵ She also states that due to the loss of her father and the absence of strict religious discipline, she “soon gave way to the evil propensities of an unregenerate heart...and heedlessly ran into the ways of sin, taking pleasure in the paths of folly.”²⁶ Zilpha writes that about the age of 14, after having taken “the name of God in vain,” she had a dream in which God “present[ed] before [her]...the awful terrors of the day of judgment.”²⁷ The dream “proved an effectual call to [her] soul” and an impetus to engage in regular meditation and prayer.²⁸

Yet the dream was certainly not her only moment of contemplative insight. Three subsequent major mystical experiences *form* Zilpha’s spirituality and her understanding of her call to preach.

The first experience was one evening while Zilpha was milking a cow and singing a hymn. She had a vision of Jesus. She says,

I distinctly saw the Lord Jesus approach me with open arms, and a most divine and heavenly smile upon his countenance. As He advanced towards me, I felt that his very looks spoke, and said, ‘Thy prayer is accepted, I own thy name.’ From that day to the present, I have never entertained a doubt of the manifestation of his love to my soul. . . [A]t the time when this occurrence took place, I was milking in the cow stall; and the manifestations of his presence was so clearly apparent, that even the beast of the stall turned her head and bowed herself upon the ground.²⁹

Zilpha states that through this mystical experience, God’s peace was brought to her heart, and her soul was set at liberty.³⁰ In 1808, Zilpha joined the Methodist Episcopal Society.³¹ Two years later, she married Joseph Elaw³² and, after moving with him to New Jersey, she continued attending Methodist meetings despite Joseph’s lack of enthusiasm for her religious zeal.³³

The second major mystical experience came in 1817. While attending a camp meeting, Zilpha became sanctified.³⁴ Describing the experience, she says:

Whether I was in the body, or whether I was out of the body, on that auspicious day, I cannot say; but this I do know, that at the conclusion of a most powerful sermon.... I became so overpowered with the presence of God, that I sank down upon the ground and laid there for a considerable time; and while I was thus prostrate on the earth, my spirit seemed to ascend up into the clear circle of the sun’s disc; and, surrounded and engulfed in the glorious effulgence of his rays, I distinctly heard a voice speak unto me...[saying] ...“Now thou art sanctified; and I will show thee what thou must do.” I saw no personal appearance while in this stupendous elevation, but I discerned bodies of resplendent light; nor did I appear to be in this world at all, but immensely far above those spreading trees, beneath whose shady and verdant bowers I was then reclined. When I recovered from the trance or ecstasy into which I had fallen, the first thing I observed was, that hundreds of

²⁵Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs*, 2.

²⁶Elaw, 2.

²⁷Elaw, 4.

²⁸Elaw, 4.

²⁹Elaw, 5-6.

³⁰Elaw, 7.

³¹Elaw, 8.

³²Elaw, 13; Blockett, “Introduction,” *Memoirs*, xxiii.

³³Elaw, 16-17.

³⁴Elaw, 19, 22.

persons were standing around me weeping; and I clearly saw by the light of the Holy Ghost, that my heart and soul were rendered completely spotless.³⁵ Zilpha's sanctification experience provides another instance of her communication in spirit with Spirit. Womanist theologian Yolanda Pierce defines sanctification as "the start of a process whereby believers come to experience Christ as dwelling continuously within them. Sanctified believers feel that this process *constantly* purifies them and that their lives, souls, and bodies are set apart for a special purpose."³⁶

Despite Zilpha's visions, sanctification, and ongoing participation in Methodist events, she was reluctant to accept God's call to preach even after her sister had a mystical experience. Zilpha reports that her sister, who was gravely ill, after "having laid in a swoon for some time,...revived...[and] began singing, and appeared to sing several verses; *but the language in which she sung was too wonderful for me, and I could not understand it.*"³⁷ When her sister finished singing, she told Zilpha that "she had seen Jesus, and had been in the society of angels; and that an angel came to her, and bade her tell Zilpha that she must preach the gospel."³⁸

It would be several years later, however, after what Zilpha interpreted as God subjecting her to a two-year illness, before she would believe she was called to a preaching ministry.³⁹ During what I note as her third major mystical experience, her call was confirmed and could no longer be ignored. It was near the end of a Methodist camp meeting. Zilpha heard God's voice and "began as it were involuntarily, or from an internal prompting...to exhort the people."⁴⁰ She further states that after preaching, she heard God's voice again telling her that she must travel and preach the gospel.⁴¹ Zilpha subsequently became an itinerant preacher, traveling throughout the Northeastern U.S. and in areas where enslavement of Black people was legal, including Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia.⁴² She preached to free and enslaved Blacks as well as to numerous whites, including those who enslaved Blacks.

In 1840, Zilpha traveled to England following a call from God to preach abroad. She preached in London and other areas of England with both commendation and disparagement. Blockett observes, "Less than five months after her 1840 arrival in Liverpool, Zilpha Elaw was a well-known presence among the predominately white, Methodist communities from London to Yorkshire."⁴³ Zilpha's spiritual autobiography, titled *The Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour; Together with Some Account of the Great Religious Revivals in America*, was written in England and dedicated to an English audience. Although Zilpha states her intention to return to the U.S., research by scholars such as Kimberly Blockett shows that Zilpha remained in England, remarrying in 1850 to Ralph Bressey Shum, an Englishman of German descent.⁴⁴ Blockett notes that while it is unclear how much Zilpha preached during her second marriage, she clearly

³⁵Elaw, 22-23.

³⁶Yolanda Pierce, "Chapter 4: Zilpha Elaw, Prophesying Daughter: Speaking (Writing) a New Language" in *Hell Without Fires: Slavery, Christianity, and the Antebellum Spiritual Narrative*. Foreword by Stephen W. Angell and Anthony B. Pinn, Series Editors (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 87-110. (italic emphasis in original).

³⁷Elaw, 32-33. (italic emphasis mine).

³⁸Ibid., 33.

³⁹Ibid., 37 and 42.

⁴⁰Ibid., 46.

⁴¹Ibid., 47.

⁴²Blockett, "Introduction," *Memoirs*, xvi.

⁴³Ibid., xii.

⁴⁴Ibid., xi, xii, and xxvi.

traveled and preached after Shum's death in 1854.⁴⁵ Blockett states, "From April to July 1855, at least forty newspapers in England, Scotland, and Ireland confirm that Zilpha was busy on the Primitive Methodist English circuits and drawing large crowds."⁴⁶ Zilpha traveled and preached into her late sixties and died in 1873 in England.⁴⁷

Navigating, Owning, and Connecting with Others in Her Particularity

As I go through Zilpha's autobiography and other accounts of her life, I am amazed at her accomplishments. From the moment I read snippets of her story in Kate Hanch's *Storied Witness: The Theology of Black Women Preachers in 19th-Century America*, something about Zilpha, something about her presence in and in between the lines of the book, reached beyond history into my heart, connected with my soul, and sparked my imagination.

I kept thinking and I keep thinking—How could she? How did she—a Black female preacher in nineteenth-century America, where everything about her physicality and its public display made her suspect? How did she enter the churches, the town halls, and the homes of Southern white men who bought and sold people who looked just like her and convince them of her authority and the truth of her message? Based on her *Memoirs*, Zilpha would attribute these miraculous connections to the power of the Holy Spirit moving in her and in others and to the potency of her gospel message. I'm all in favor of the Holy Spirit resting within and among us, and yet, I believe there was something more in Zilpha's cross-racial, cross-gender, cross-class communications and conversions. I believe she communicated at a deep spiritual level, through the Holy Spirit *and* spirit to spirit, with individuals who otherwise would not and could not see beyond the particularities of Zilpha's race and gender.

Zilpha's mystical experiences, akin to those of the Hebrew Scripture's Hagar and the Medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich before her, sealed her belief not only in God but in a God who dwelt within her and spoke through her. As Kate Hanch observes, Zilpha "had a 'direct encounter with God' that freed her to preach truths she had never considered."⁴⁸ And nobody did it better. Zilpha's ongoing spiritual formation and ability to communicate across racial and other divides in the U.S. and England should assist *our* belief in a God who dwells within us and enables us to communicate across racial and other divides. Zilpha's ability to act across divides, not by hiding or seeking to diminish who she was in her particularity but by allowing *all* of who she was to help build a spiritual bridge across those divides, should encourage us to do the same.

Explaining the extensive reach of Zilpha's ministry, Hanch, quoting in part from Zilpha's memoirs, states,

Word spread of Elaw's work to the extent that enslavers around Alexandria, Virginia, became curious and invited Elaw to preach. In her sermon to these enslavers, she depicts them as thinking 'it surpassingly strange that a person (and a female) belong[ing] to the same family stock with their...[enslaved people] should come into their territories and teach the enlightened proprietors the knowledge of God, and more strange...when in the spirit and power of Christ, that female drew the portraits of their characters, made manifest the secrets of their hearts, and told them all the things that they ever did.' Here, she declares solidarity with the

⁴⁵Ibid., xxvi, xxvii.

⁴⁶Ibid., xxvii.

⁴⁷Ibid., xxvii.

⁴⁸Kate Hanch, *Storied Witness: The Theology of Black Women Preachers in 19th-Century America* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 38.

enslaved people and insinuates she (and implicitly, they) express deeper spiritual insight than the enslavers.⁴⁹

Hanch, furthermore, lauds the interpretive and transformative work of Zilpha's preaching. Hanch observes,

[I]n her sermon to the enslavers, Elaw compares herself to Jesus in explaining that she 'told them all the things they ever did.' In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the woman at the well in Samaria 'all that ever [she] did.' Elaw purposefully connects the white Virginians—those living in the slave states—to the Samaritans of the New Testament, who, like the woman at the well, are associated with heresy and considered enemies of Jesus's community. By purposefully seeing herself as (and acting as) a Christic figure, Elaw exemplifies 'foolishness'—how could she, a Black female preacher, be considered like Christ vis-à-vis the white enslavers? This was outside the realm of the white enslavers' idea of common sense. She engages in a 'social role reversal' as she claims spiritual authority. She as Christ *is* sacred, not just a 'vessel designated for honor,' as she depicted herself elsewhere in her *Memoirs*, but especially holy precisely *because* of her Black female body. In that moment, she was representing Christ to the enslavers. Further, in telling the enslavers 'all the things that ever they did,' she questions their comfort with their own selves and in their own communities. While she does not list exactly 'all the things' in her memoir, her sermon convicts the enslavers who listen to her.⁵⁰

Zilpha Elaw as Exemplar of a Proposed Womanist Contemplative Homiletic

Three elements of Zilpha's proclamation serve as models of a preacher employing what I am proposing as a twenty-first-century womanist contemplative homiletic. First, Zilpha's *call* to preach is Spirit driven. Through visions and other mystical revelations, she discerns her vocation as a preacher and recognizes her call as one authorized by God. New Testament scholar Mitzi Smith observes that by "advocating that God's commissioning is neither synonymous with nor subject to mortal authority, Zilpha discursively challenges and subverts any attempts to constrain and discredit her gifts and calling."⁵¹

Second, Zilpha is open to spiritual communication in many forms. As New Testament and Howard Thurman scholar Shively Smith states,

For Elaw, the created world- both seen and unseen- is full of spirit activity. Authentic religious experience is characterized in her writings as dynamic exchanges between Divine Spirit (which she often identifies as 'Holy Spirit') and the spirits of individuals, ancestors, creation, and even antagonistic spirits, which she often brands as 'Satan.'⁵²

Zilpha Elaw reminds us of the existence of Black contemplative proclamation a century before Howard Thurman's work. In her lived faith and in her quest to bring individuals to accept Jesus as the Christ and the key to salvation, Zilpha articulates ways in which the Divine connects with, communicates with, and motivates individuals in visions, dreams, and the Hebrew and

⁴⁹Hanch, *Storied Witness*, 35, citing Zilpha, *Memoirs*.

⁵⁰Hanch, *Storied Witness*, 36. (italic emphasis in original).

⁵¹Mitzi Smith (2011) "'Unbossed and Unbought': Zilpha Elaw and Old Elizabeth and a Political Discourse of Origins," *Black Theology*, 9:3, 287-311, 304.

⁵²Shively T.J. Smith, "Zilpha Elaw and the 'Spirit.'" In *1-2 Peter and Jude*. Pheme Perkins, Eloise M. Rosenblatt, and Patricia McDonald, Wisdom Commentary, Vol. 56. Ed. Linda M. Maloney, Barbara E. Reid (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Pub., 2022), 29-32.

Christian scriptures as well as through nature and other creatures. As a nineteenth-century African American woman in the antebellum United States, Zilpha models the impact of particularity in religious and spiritual encounters. Being Black and being a woman rendered Zilpha easily susceptible to everything from slights and microaggressions to arrest for public speech to being kidnapped and enslaved. Her ongoing ability to discern her call and navigate hostile terrains could not be attributed to formal education, wealth, or the support of any American institution, including the institutional church. Yet, she preached and converted individuals across the class, gender, and racial lines and restrictions of the 19th century, and nobody did it better.

Third, in addition to Zilpha's Spirit-driven call to preach, her *ongoing* discernment as to how to navigate the challenges in her life and as to where, when, and how to preach are also based on Divine revelations and what Zilpha refers to as her "inner spiritual promptings."⁵³ Yolanda Pierce traces Zilpha's actions based on Spirit-granted authority beginning at the time of her sanctification. Pierce states,

The courage and the liberty to speak, preach, evangelize, and witness in word and letter are at the heart of the sanctification experience. While Elaw claims that she is not sufficient in herself and that she alone has no power, sanctification allows her to lay claim to spiritual and material blessings. Not only does she receive salvation for her soul, but she also receives divine revelation to spread the gospel and decipher mysteries that were otherwise beyond her comprehension: [Zilpha says] How often have I said, 'Lord! send by whom thy wilt send, only send not by me; for thou knowest that I am ignorant: how can I be a mouth for God!—a poor, coloured female; and thou knowest we have many things to endure which others do not.' But the answer was 'What is that to thee? [sic] follow thou me.'⁵⁴

I believe the things Zilpha endured, including the injustices suffered as a Black female preacher and the relationships engendered through those same particularities, were something to Zilpha and were something to the God she followed as well. I struggled with this quote that Zilpha attributes to God, "What is that to thee? [sic] follow thou me."⁵⁵ I struggled with the mystery of how Zilpha did the things she did. So, I did what I would tell my Introduction to Preaching students to do. I took a page from homiletics scholar Anna Carter Florence's book.⁵⁶ Opening my sketchbook, I used one of her describing exercises and "lettered it," writing a letter to someone I associated with the passage - I wrote a letter to Zilpha. And it is with this letter that I discern God nudging me to close:

Letter from Sketchbook:

10/12/23

Dear Zilpha,

I have had the God nudge to write to you for days (maybe weeks! :-). As you're probably aware, I'm presenting a paper on you as a contemplative preacher this weekend. I've been a huge fan of yours since I first read about you in Kate Hanch's book. I'm amazed by you—now there's

⁵³Pierce, 95.

⁵⁴Pierce, 93.

⁵⁵Elaw, 59.

⁵⁶Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

another song that thoughts of you brings to mind - “Baby I’m Amazed By You,” “[Zilpha], [Zilpha], there’s something about that name.” And I am truly amazed. How did you have the insight, the courage, the resources, the stamina, the belief in self and in God to the extent that you were able to do what you did—especially to take the risk of going into territories where you could easily have been kidnapped or arrested and sold. Yes, sold like a piece of furniture or a work machine. I keep thinking that there must have been some deep level of communication between you and God and between you, God, and the people to whom you preached—I echo again, especially the enslavers. I talk about your particularity in the paper and mention that of the enslavers, but now I’m sitting with their particularity a little longer and reversing the script—not so much how they got, or God got them to engage with you in your particularity but more of the question how you were able to engage with them in their particularity. How did you deal with not only the fear but the anger, rage, and heartbreak of encountering people who could treat other people as belongings—as something to be used up and disposed of as easily as throwing away a cleaning rag or a worn-out garden hose? How do you even desire for them to know the God you know, the God we know, the God we love? How did your soul, your heart open to let them in, to speak the words and take the actions (whether in gestures or otherwise) that gave you the ability to reach them at a level deeper than their arrogance and ignorance, deeper than society's narrative to them and to you that they, because of their designation as “white” and “male” were entitled to be human, to be God's children, God's children while so many other lives were not so entitled. You must have had a union with God that was so tight, so seamless, so in tune with what was needed from you as you in order to open their hearts and connect with their souls—connect in Spirit. That’s the type of communication, the type of language I believe we're called to bring forth to preach—to say a word from God that has the ability to touch us in deeply moving and sustaining ways—that call on us to see beyond our own prejudices and fears, to allow who we are to be a source of spirit, of Godliness that opens our hearts and the hearts of others.

I am asking you to help me communicate what I feel in my heart and what I believe you understand—how do we speak to spirit, how do we use who we are as we are to communicate to others who are so different from us (both in perception and in reality)? How do we teach others how to communicate in a language without words—a language that is older than any humans could imagine or create—a language that combines all of our means of communication (words, gestures, etc.) and takes it to a deeper, holier place?

I know in my heart that you can speak this language—a language of One-ing with God and with other life. Help me to understand how to do so in ways that are deeper than I have imagined. Help me to express that understanding to others on Sunday and beyond this Sunday. I admire you, Zilpha. I am inspired by you. Please, please, let me in.

Love,

La Ronda

Response to La Ronda Barnes, “A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century Womanist Contemplative Homiletic”

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I was grateful to have been invited to Boston University School of Theology's consultation on “Spirituality, Preaching, and Bridging Racial Divides: Exploring Black Contemplative Preaching” with colleagues whose work I have long admired. And I was especially glad to have the opportunity to respond to La Ronda Barnes's excellent paper, “A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century Womanist Contemplative Homiletic.” La Ronda had been a student in my seminar on Christian contemplative prayer at Harvard Divinity School, and the scholarly seriousness and spiritual depth she brought to our work together elevated the class. She is a generous listener, a careful and critical reader, and a writer who is attentive to the relationship between our interior lives and our life together. Her paper, outlining the contours of what she calls a Womanist Contemplative Homiletic, reflects the very heart of her scholarly and existential concerns. It was an honor to be invited to make a response to it.

In an essay published after his death in 1968 called “Contemplation in a World of Action,” the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton asked, “What does the contemplative life or the life of prayer, solitude, silence, meditation, mean in the atomic age? What can it mean? Has it lost all meaning whatever?”¹

The force of Merton's question remains undiminished in our day, which remains an atomic age, among many other things. Our consultation, held on October 15-17, 2023, came at the end of a week that saw civilians—families, children, the elderly—murdered and kidnapped in the Hamas attack on Israel. And we were standing at the beginning of a week in which Israel's military response was already having dire and fatal consequences for civilians—families, children, and the elderly. What can the contemplative dimension of religion mean in such a moment? Is it the opposite of action? Is it a way to avoid engagement with realities that are too painful to imagine and too complicated to address? Is contemplation the “prayers” in “thoughts and prayers”? Does contemplation have any meaning in a time of crisis, when the challenges are so urgent, when there is so much at stake?

I understood La Ronda to be saying that the contemplative—whether we're talking about contemplative prayer, a contemplative homiletic, or a contemplative way of living—is not a practice of avoidance but a matter of life and death, for individuals and for communities alike.

La Ronda argued for contemplative homiletics as a practice that enables survival, especially for those, as Howard Thurman puts it, “with their backs against the wall.”² She further insisted that contemplative homiletics nurtures our ability to cross the racial, gender, and class divisions that structure our society, warp our understanding of ourselves and others, and do real damage to real people. Particularity and interiority are the keys to La Ronda's understanding of contemplative homiletics, and she turned first to Zilpha Elaw to explore these themes. Crossing boundaries and divisions was central to Zilpha Elaw's ministry—she understood God to be

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action: Second Edition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 154.

² Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), xxvii.

calling her to pray with and preach to the poor and the rich, Black and white, the enslaved and the enslavers. She crossed the ocean to pursue her calling and, at great risk to herself, crossed into states where she feared being arrested and enslaved.

La Ronda argues that Zilpha Elaw's boundary crossing was grounded not in the erasure of particularity but in the embrace of it, not in the emptying of self but in nurturing a presence to oneself without which genuine presence to others is impossible. It is from our particularity, our specificity, our difference La Ronda insisted, that we connect to God and to one another.

Zilpha Elaw's attention to particularity not only shaped her preaching but undergirded her analysis of white supremacy. She described with crystalline clarity how white skin is regarded as "a bauble of great value" by those who "readily sacrifice their intelligence to their prejudices and possess more knowledge than wisdom."³ The boundaries Zilpha Elaw felt called to cross and did cross were often policed by the violence to which this view of whiteness gave rise.

I understood La Ronda to be saying that Zilpha Elaw's contemplative attention to the particular, both within herself and outside herself, was a form of resistance to that violence. It allowed her, as La Ronda puts it, to "discern her call and navigate hostile terrains." For Zilpha Elaw, being Black and being a woman mattered. These dimensions of her particularity rendered her vulnerable in almost every situation, but they also rendered her open to the life of the spirit. I was reminded in reading this part of La Ronda's paper of the twelfth-century writer Hildegard of Bingen, whose tropes of being "merely a woman" with "poor feminine abilities" appear in Zilpha Elaw's autobiography as well. Women, Hildegard of Bingen wrote, possess an "airy temperament" which makes them vulnerable to illness and weakness. But that airy openness, she also insisted, makes them vulnerable to the movement of God's spirit,⁴ perhaps more open than those who are more well-defended by their gender privilege. Like Hildegard, Zilpha Elaw knew how to feel along the edges of tropes that seem to denigrate her and find the latch that, when opened, made more space, not less, for the pursuit of her calling to preach and to develop the contemplative homiletics that makes of our particularity a ladder to lower into the depths where God is found.

Howard Thurman is another important interlocutor for La Ronda. As for Zilpha Elaw, Thurman's contemplative attention to particularity is also a form of resistance to violence. In his powerful testimony against segregation, *The Luminous Darkness*, Thurman writes that religious experience, for him, "seems to swing wide the door, not merely into Life but into lives"—lives in all their particularity. In the midst of the violence of Jim Crow, Thurman wrote, "I am confident that my own call to the religious vocation cannot be separated from the slowly emerging disclosure that my religious experience makes it possible for me to experience myself as a human being and thus keep a very real psychological distance between myself and the hostilities of my environment."⁵ Thurman was sometimes mistrusted in his day for seeming to prioritize contemplation over action. But Thurman was not operating within that dichotomy, and his call to contemplation *is* a call to resistance. At a conference on mass incarceration several years ago, Andre C. Willis noted that he had been returning to the work of Howard Thurman *because* of its contemplative orientation. The dehumanizing systems held in place by violence, racism, and incarceration, he said, estrange us from ourselves, drench our subconscious in "phantom

³ Zilpha Elaw, "Memoirs of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw" in *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 85.

⁴ Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, *Patrologia Latina* 197:1038a.

⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1965), 111.

narratives,” and constrain our capacity to love. We’re going to need contemplative practice, he said, to heal this estrangement.⁶

That healing is what I believe La Ronda is talking about when she talks about womanist contemplative homiletics—a homiletics that freed Zilpha Elaw to speak and be heard across seemingly uncrossable borders and Howard Thurman to resist the dehumanizing systems that threatened to overwhelm the sacred particularity of each person.

Zilpha Elaw and Howard Thurman were not just great preachers; they were also powerful practitioners of public prayer. But for both of them, the richness of their interior life with God made it difficult, at first, for them to pray in public. Zilpha Elaw reports the first time she prayed in public, she could hardly get started because, as she wrote, “God was so powerfully near to me.” A “solemn stillness rested” on her soul, she said, and she felt that she was somehow above the earth—above, as she put it, all earthly things. How could she lead others in prayer from such a transcendent place? But finally, she begins to pray, and it seems to her that she can hear God rustling in the tops of the mulberry trees.⁷ No longer is she above the earth, but on the earth, part of the creation through which God’s spirit is moving. Everyone present is so moved by her prayers, so caught up in them, that they ask her to pray at every meeting, and they seek out her counsel and her pastoral care. In many ways, her vocation to ministry was born in the moment when she opened her life with God to others.

Howard Thurman tells a similar story in his autobiography. He did not have trouble finding his voice, but he felt very self-conscious in public prayer and found it difficult to speak authentically, from his inner spirit. “My felt needs were so profound,” he wrote, “that at first there seemed little room for the...needs of my congregation. But as I began to acquiesce to the demands of the spirit within, I found no need to differentiate” their need from mine. “I became more and more a part of the life of my people and discovered that at last I was able to pray in public as if I were alone in the quiet of my own room. The door between their questing spirits and my own became a swinging door.”⁸ Through bringing his own particularity into his public prayer, he began to experience his quest and the quests of his congregants as one—a common quest, a common journey.

One question I raised for La Ronda had to do with a word that was noticeably absent from her paper: “identity.” I wondered if that was a conscious choice, and if so, what was she thinking about it? La Ronda writes of particularity, which seems to me a larger category—our particularity includes our identities, for sure, but it also feels like more than our identities. And yet, identity is the word on everyone’s lips these days. Is there somewhere particularity can take us that a focus on identity can’t?

La Ronda replied that she understood particularity to include our connections with other beings, especially with our ancestors. More attention to and engagement with ancestors, La Ronda believes, is a way to both understand ourselves and connect with others across all that divides us. A womanist contemplative homiletic, she argues, could help us explore the engagement with ancestors as a shared human experience undergirding our spirituality.

My other question for La Ronda had to do with Howard Thurman. La Ronda says that Thurman’s ideas of particularity, interiority, and spirituality remain, as she puts it, tethered to

⁶ Andre C. Willis, Conference on Christianity, Race and Mass Incarceration, Harvard Divinity School, October 19-20, 2017.

⁷ Elaw, 67.

⁸ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 73.

reason and an intellectual form of understanding. Is this fair to Thurman? He's an intellectual, to be sure. But he also draws on many forms of knowing. When he's talking in *The Luminous Darkness* about listening for the sound of the genuine in another, he writes, "Such an experience cannot become a dogma—it has to remain experiential all the way."⁹ And his image of the swinging door, and how his prayer flows out and the prayers of others flow in also seems very experiential and difficult to describe in any sort of systematic way. My question for La Ronda had to do with how she was thinking of Howard Thurman as a resource for her project and, more broadly, how she thought of reason and intellectual forms of understanding as resources. How do they fit into a womanist contemplative homiletic?

La Ronda answered this question, in part, by her own intellectual work on the writings of Zilpha Elaw and Howard Thurman, work that is suffused with her attention to her own particularity—a particularity that doesn't stop at the boundaries of her identity but that pushes further out, into her connections with other living beings and with her ancestors, both known and unknown. La Ronda's understanding of particularity challenges me to reconsider what I mean by "interiority" and "contemplative life." With Howard Thurman, she insists that religious experience opens "not merely into Life but into lives." And with Zilpha Elaw, she is crafting a womanist contemplative homiletic that nurtures attention to particularity as the ground of genuine connection with others

⁹ Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, 111.

Daniel I. Block. *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021. 704 pages. \$38.49.

In *Covenant: The Framework for God's Grand Plan of Redemption*, biblical scholar Daniel I. Block contends that "covenant" brings coherence and cohesion to the larger message of the Bible. It offers an overarching narrative that surrounds and frames other themes and motifs. "After five decades of marinating in the Scriptures," he writes, "I have found, among those themes, that the notion of 'covenant' represents the heart of all biblical revelation, and the 'covenants' themselves provide the framework for that revelation" (1). Block is the Gunther H. Knoedler Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, where he taught from 2005–2017. A much sought after lecturer and preacher in the United States and around the world, he also served as a senior translator for the New Living Translation (NLT).

Covenant represents Block's post-retirement "Here I stand" declaration in biblical theology (xiv, 7), a veritable magnum opus written to the church rather than the academy (xiv). His prose reflects a commitment to reaching church leaders, with the expressed hope that some laypeople, too, will benefit from the book (xiv). To structure his argument, Block divides *Covenant* into four parts: the cosmic and Adamic covenants (Chapters 1–2), the Israelite covenant, which he claims goes through four separate stages (Chapters 3–9), the Davidic covenant (Chapters 10–12), and the New Testament covenant (Chapters 13–20).

According to the traditional view, covenants can be separated into two subcategories: covenants of grant that are unconditional, such as those made with Abraham and David, and covenants of obligation that are conditional, such as the Deuteronomic covenant. Block refutes this view. Such a binary is false, he claims: different types of covenants "all exhibit both signs of irrevocability and contingency" (2). All covenants share a fundamental commonality in that they are divinely initiated suzerain-vassal pacts that have unconditional and conditional aspects. God functions as the principal Suzerain who makes covenant promises and expects covenant obligations to be fulfilled. Humanity can either accept or reject the relationship that has been offered by God (2). They may not negotiate terms.

Those who read *Covenant* will be able to identify more than a few strengths. For the purposes of this review, I will identify just two. First, readers who think they know a good deal about biblical covenants will be surprised by how much they learn. In my case, this book closed gaps regarding the particularities of the Levitical covenant and the critical "afterlife" of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants in the Old Testament and the New Testament (105, 331). Second, *Covenant* pushes back against a common tendency, as old as the church itself, to "perceive the relationship between the two Testaments of our Bible as radically discontinuous" (394). Block argues instead for a New Testament message that "records and celebrates the climax of God's covenantal agenda" (394). If Block is right that "we have invested too much time into digging the ditch between the Testaments," then the claim he makes for continuity will require a sizeable number of preachers to rethink their theological constructs and rework their homiletical claims (10).

The main weakness of this book is found in the mode in which it comes to us and not in its primary claim. A book that purports to be exhaustive in its account of a doctrine or a theme can become so comprehensive that it loses some of its rhetorical force and power along the way. *Covenant* weighs in at 704 pages. Block did not need to develop or expand on every sub-argument to be persuasive; neither did he have to follow every road that led to an excursus.

Covenant can be a good resource in the hands of Christian leaders and scholars who are interested in a comprehensive biblical theology of covenant written in popular prose. Scholars who want a heavily footnoted academic tome on the subject should look elsewhere. Block says as much when he writes: “This is, after all, intended as a *biblical theology*, not as a theology of biblical interpreters” (xv; emphasis original). In the hands of homileticians and preaching practitioners, *Covenant*’s insistence on continuity can offer a much-needed theological corrective by challenging false dichotomies and problematizing reductive frameworks. To borrow imagery from Block, it can assist preachers in “filling the ditch” they have created between the two Testaments (10).

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Kate Bruce and Liz Shercliff. *Out of the Shadows: Preaching the Women of the Bible*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022. 224 pages. \$28.

Out of the Shadows: Preaching the Women of the Bible is a compelling resource for preachers seeking to amplify women's voices in the Bible. The book centers on female figures and their perspectives, which are often overshadowed by more prominent male figures and perspectives of the Bible. It is written skillfully, paraphrasing scholarly resources while consistently weaving contemporary applications, particularly from the authors' ministry context in England.

The authors select a mixture of well-known and obscure women in the Scriptures. They challenge dominant interpretations of the more well-known women (such as Eve and Mary Magdalene) as they shine a spotlight on lesser-known women, whose stories of faithfulness and courage should be woven into preaching (such as Jephthah's daughter and Abigail).

Each of the 17 chapters opens with a table that shows the reader where this woman's story or voice appears (if at all) in the Revised Common Lectionary and/or the Common Worship Lectionary. Unique to this resource is the choice not to include the whole passage in which the woman is discussed. Rather, each woman's words are highlighted on their own, no matter how many (Woman Wisdom of Proverbs) or few (the hemorrhaging woman of the Synoptic Gospels). In their exegesis, Bruce and Shercliff engage with empathy and imagination the complexity of the woman/women, her/their historical and social situation, and our accumulated interpretations of the text. A brief sermon is included, followed by "homiletic points" for reflection. These points may be helpful for independent reading or as discussion prompts with a preaching lab or cohort. An original collect inspired by the witness of the woman/women featured concludes each chapter. The authors also include outlines for possible sermon series in the appendix.

Out of the Shadows demonstrates an awareness of the dynamics of preaching in contemporary church contexts. Bruce and Shercliff recognize that preaching about women in the Bible can be challenging, particularly in settings where patriarchal interpretations of Scripture may be deeply ingrained. To address this, they provide practical advice for how preachers can navigate potential resistance or discomfort when addressing these topics. The authors encourage preachers to be courageous in confronting difficult texts and to offer new, liberating interpretations that affirm the dignity and agency of women without chastising the reader for previously held understandings. The book's tone is empowering, inviting preachers to step into these stories with confidence and imagination.

Theologically, *Out of the Shadows* is rooted in a vision of the Bible as a living text, one that continues to speak to the church today. The authors challenge static or literalist readings of Scripture, advocating for interpretations attentive to context, gender dynamics, and the broader narrative of God's work in the world. In doing so, they offer a vision of preaching that is not only faithful to the text but also attuned to the needs and concerns of contemporary communities. Their emphasis on justice, equality, and inclusion resonates throughout the book, making it a timely and prophetic contribution to ongoing conversations about gender and faith at a time when women's voices are still being pushed to the margins.

This is not an exhaustive resource for scholars seeking comprehensive research on women in the Bible. Nor does it extensively integrate biblical scholarship; while the authors demonstrate an understanding of the complicated reception history of these texts, most of their conversation partners are figures from recent decades working in English. Notably absent is engagement with the essential Hebrew Bible scholarship of Wilda Gafney in *Womanist Midrash*,

Volume 1: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne (2017). Also missing is engagement with internationally recognized feminist biblical scholars such as Juliana Claassens, Christy Cobb, Musa Dube, Rhiannon Graybill, Jacqueline Hidalgo, Kwok Pui-lan, Christl Maier, Susanne Scholz, Carolyn Sharp, and Mitzi Smith. Nonetheless, this is a solid introduction to the voices of women in the Bible for preachers.

Out of the Shadows: Preaching the Women of the Bible is a helpful resource for anyone interested in deepening their understanding of the women in Scripture. Whether used as a guide for preachers or as a source of personal reflection, the book challenges readers to hear women in the Bible in new and empathic ways. Most importantly, the book calls on the church to embrace a more inclusive and liberating vision of Scripture—one in which women are no longer confined to the shadows but are recognized as central to the story of God's people.

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Thomas G. Long. *Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2024. 439 pages. \$50.

What does one do in retirement? Well, what Thomas G. Long has done is to write the longest book of his career, longer even than his influential introductory textbook, *The Witness of Preaching* (360 pages).¹ Clearly, the subject and approach of the book are important to him.

As I opened *Proclaiming the Parables*, I assumed it would be an expansion and application of his short chapter on parables in his classic, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*.² While there are elements of that now thirty-five-year-old essay that carry over into Long's new work, there is also a tone of "How my mind has changed" to the book. It modifies his earlier approach through the lens of the turn toward explicit theological concerns represented in some of Long's more recent work.³ A book on the parables in the Synoptic Gospels gives Long the opportunity to model critical exegetical (especially narrative) methodology in service to a homiletic that has something of theological importance to say. One is reminded of Barth's commentary on Romans.

In the opening chapter, Long offers a brief review of parables scholarship to set the table for his own approach. The main thesis of the book comes to the fore when, against a purely literary approach to the parables, Long says, "the real power of parables is not in the naked parables as performance art or in the recesses of metaphorical process alone, but somewhere else. The main power of parables is in their capacity to point to what God is doing in the world, that is, to the kingdom of God. The power is not in the trope, but in the referent" (11). In the second chapter, Long discusses decisions preachers must make when interpreting parables: how to define a parable, whether to preach the parable in its final form as embedded in one of the Gospels or in some reconstructed form that attempts to get closer to Jesus' original words, when explanation of a parable is helpful and when too much explaining gets in the way of proclamation, and whether the parables offer a realized or future eschatology. This chapter alone is worth the price of the book.

The remainder of the book is focused on the parables themselves as found in each of the Synoptic Gospels, recognizing that each Gospel writer views parables as functioning differently. Following an overview of each Gospel that contextualizes the individual parables, Long discusses five parables in Mark, sixteen in Matthew, and eighteen in Luke.

In every chapter, I found much with which I disagreed. But such disagreement was not due to some failing of research or reasoning on Long's part, and I do not mean it as a critique of the work. It was primarily theological disagreement. Long offers a theological worldview through his commentary on the parables that is different from my theology. And this made the book as worthwhile for me to read as it would have been if Long and I were theological twins. At times, Long made me stand firmer over against him in some pre-understanding of Mark or in choosing a different analogue between a Matthean parable and our contemporary context; at other times, Long coaxed me into a new understanding of a Lukan parable. I suspect this is

¹ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016).

² "Preaching on the Parables of Jesus," in *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 87–106.

³ E.g., "No News is Bad News," in *What's the Matter with Preaching Today?*, ed. Mike Graves (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 145–157; *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

exactly the kind of theological conversation Long hopes his readers will have as they engage this tome.

Most preachers will likely use this book as a reference book, a commentary to consult when preaching on an individual parable. And, indeed, I will never preach or teach on a Synoptic parable again without pulling *Proclaiming the Parables* off the shelf. Long's theology, however, is embroidered throughout the book with a parabolic stitch here, an expository stitch there, and illustrative stitches throughout. To consult instead of reading this book would be to miss the full theological tapestry Long offers us.

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David M. Stark. *Singing and Suffering with the Servant: Second Isaiah as Guide for Preaching the Old Testament*. Arbeiten zur Pastoraltheologie, Liturgik und Hymnologie 101. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022. 311 pages. \$138.

The Servant Songs of Deutero-Isaiah have been of momentous significance for Christian theology ever since the Gospel of Matthew was composed. David Stark's *Singing and Suffering with the Servant* is a nuanced and substantive resource for preachers drawing on Isaiah to explore dynamics of domination, resistance, and resilience. This volume is assiduously researched, demonstrating Stark's erudition in homiletics and biblical studies.

Chapter 1 argues that the Hebrew Scriptures have been neglected in much contemporary Christian preaching and homiletical scholarship. Evangelical expository preachers, Hebrew Scripture scholars who preach, and many highly visible preachers, including Teresa Fry Brown, Wilda Gafney, Kenyatta Gilbert, and Howard-John Wesley, regularly engage the First Testament in the pulpit. Nevertheless, Stark is right to flag the implicit neo-Marcionism lurking in some ecclesial and theological-school cultures.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of post-Holocaust homiletics, focusing on six influential scholars from Presbyterian, evangelical, United Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and United Church of Christ traditions. Stark's treatment is generally judicious, though some of his critiques might not do justice to every dimension of the works under review (see pp. 44–45, 47–48, 67–70). He alerts readers to attenuation of the authority of the Hebrew Bible through facile metaphorization, the supersessionism of moves promoting the displacement of the Hebrew Scriptures in promise-fulfillment schemata, and distortions engendered by sermons that force Christian doctrinal claims onto Hebrew Bible texts. Affirming strengths wherever he can, Stark also offers incisive criticism of logical flaws and missed opportunities he spies in the works under consideration. Graduate students in homiletics will learn much from the analyses here.

Chapter 3 argues that the “language of preaching” in Deutero-Isaiah (114) allows for open-ended trajectories of interpretation as regards the focus of Judean resistance (Babylonia? Persia?) and the identity of the Servant. That insight is not new to biblical studies, where layered voicing and textual polyvalence have been theorized for years, but it bears underscoring for homiletics pedagogy. Stark avers that Deutero-Isaiah provides a valuable model for preaching because the prophetic scribe holds historical referentiality lightly, amplifying the power of older traditions in mysterious poetic speech intended to address the present circumstances of the listening community. The sermon studies on offer here are rich. Stark urges preachers to move beyond historicist interpretation and narrowly christological readings of the Servant Songs; his analysis of a sermon on Isaiah 42 by Óscar Romero is scintillating in this regard. Also compelling is his framing of the Servant's testimony in Isaiah 49 via the work of Anna Carter Florence and Lucy Rose, and he does a brilliant job of limning key points about “prophetic weariness” (148) in sermons by Pauli Murray and Charles Campbell on Isaiah 50. Stark lifts up inner-biblical allusiveness as treasure for dialogical homiletics. Since many Scripture texts brim with inner-biblical allusions, this gestures toward wonderful terrain for homileticians to explore.

Chapter 4 focalizes the work of Alexander Deeg as exemplifying a sophisticated homiletical sensibility shaped by Jewish-Christian dialogue. Stark commends the rabbinic praxis of honoring a text's surplus of meaning through polyphonic debate. He identifies a challenge of Christian lectionary-based preaching: interpreting a Hebrew Scripture text through a perceived thematic link to the Gospel lection can distort the witness of the First Testament reading. The appalling resurgence of anti-Semitism in the United States and Europe is abetted by the reality

that in some Christian contexts, anti-Judaism has never been effectively repudiated. Reparative work is urgently needed. Here, Stark reflects on the importance of imaginative reading, bold preaching that disrupts prejudice, and Jewish-Christian dialogue as salutary for the postcolonial church.

Chapter 5 highlights Black Church preaching traditions. Stark is committed to interrogating the tacit privilege accorded to works by white scholars of Anglo and European heritage in North American theological-school curricula. In his detailed review of African American homiletics, readers learn from the wisdom of Donna Allen, Dale Andrews, William Barber II, James Forbes, Kenyatta Gilbert, Cleophus LaRue, Otis Moss III, Luke Powery, Gardner Taylor, Lisa Thompson, William Turner Jr., and more.

Researchers will lament the lack of a Scripture index, and eagle-eyed readers will find some typographical errors. But these are minor quibbles. In this superb book, Stark illuminates issues vital not only for preaching but for ecclesiology and pastoral theology. This volume will be indispensable for homileticians working on Isaiah, anti-Judaism, and biblical theology.

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Eliana Ah-Rum Ku. *Lament-Driven Preaching: Proclaiming Hope amid Suffering*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024. 270 pages. \$36.

Amidst countless poignant crises and profound suffering that permeate the world and our daily lives, many preachers often find themselves tempted to proclaim a God of formidable power, who breaks through silence to offer us hope. This book questions such an image, aspiration, or perhaps illusion that preachers may hold regarding God, thereby leading to a deeper exploration of the fundamental purpose of preaching. By tempering the tendency to hasten toward easy hope, the author proposes that lament not only bridges suffering and hope but also deepens theological perspectives on the world's pain. Throughout this book, Ku provides a broad and nuanced understanding of lament—one that may enable preachers to engage with human suffering and confront unresolved questions of faith.

In Chapter 1, the author delves into theological interpretations and hermeneutical approaches to the Book of Lamentations, highlighting its significance as a sacred text for preaching. She explores how the mourning voices within Lamentations strive to engage in dialogue with God in the face of perceived divine silence. Special attention is given to Lamentations 5, which presents the communal aspect of lament, illustrating how collective grief fosters a shared conversation about suffering. Ultimately, lament paves the way to diverse voices and multiple perspectives on suffering rather than adhering to a singular theological viewpoint.

In Chapter 2, Ku expands the discussion of lament beyond biblical experiences by employing a cultural lens, especially within the Korean context of public crises and structural injustice. She emphasizes the concepts of *han*, a deeply internalized grief, and *hanpuri*, the acts of expressing pain and demanding justice. The author then suggests that the relationship between *han* and *hanpuri* can facilitate Christian dialogue on social justice while enriching personal faith.

In Chapter 3, the author shifts the focus of the discussion to the theological significance of lament, linking it specifically to the Paschal Triduum narratives as “an expression of divine participation and solidarity in the reality of [human] suffering” (81). Ku invites the reader to contemplate the biblical imagery of Jesus's descent into hell and Holy Saturday, framing this space as a merging of divine and human lament. Divine lament is thus portrayed as a transitional space that connects the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

In Chapter 4, Ku investigates recent homiletical discourses on lament since the 1950s to explore their connection to genuine hope. Despite the limited interest in lament among homileticians, some scholars advocate for its practice by highlighting the dynamics of suffering and hope. Drawing on insights from four scholars—Paul Wilson, Luke Powers, Joni Sancken, and Christine Smith—Ku illustrates the transitional role of lament and establishes its theological and homiletical viability.

In the final chapter, the author proposes practical guides for lament preaching. Moving beyond homiletical rhetoric, she incorporates psychological concerns and pedagogical aspects of lament to enrich the lament preaching. Based on these diverse considerations, she offers eleven practical insights for lament-driven preaching that enable congregants to envision God's future hope while acknowledging the reality of suffering. The book then concludes with a call for lament to be embraced and proclaimed as an integral part of the gospel.

This book is a timely and significant contribution to the discourse on lament within the context of preaching, offering readers a profound understanding of the complexities of suffering and hope. The author challenges the binary perception of suffering and hope, presenting God as being on the move amid suffering—an embodiment of hope for faithful people. She expands the

limited understanding of lament as mere inner sorrow by providing a broader interpretation. Skillfully interweaving theological, social, and cultural insights on lament with practical applications, she creates a rich resource for preachers and faith leaders alike. By underscoring lament as an integral part of the gospel, the author encourages deeper engagement with the human experience of suffering in ways that are both compassionate and theologically sound. This work not only enriches the homiletical field but also offers valuable insights for other practical theological areas, including pastoral theology, faith formation, and Christian education, where the lives of congregants are critically considered. Ultimately, this book invites a broader conversation about the role of lament in fostering community resilience and spiritual growth, making it essential reading for anyone seeking to navigate the complexities of faith in today's world, where grieving voices yearn to be heard.

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Kara K. Root. *Receiving This Life: Practicing the Deepest Belonging*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2023. 306 pages. \$25.

Kara Root has many years of experience serving churches and pastoring believers, including leading “a community shaped around noticing God together, then helping one another participate in God’s love in the world” (back cover). This work is the companion volume to Root’s earlier work, *The Deepest Belonging* (2021), which explored the places where God meets his people.

The present work is a creative endeavor comprising various sorts and modes of writing in order to accomplish Root’s purpose. “In this book I am inviting us to practice a kind of openness and receptivity to something we can’t conjure or create” (4). There are six parts to the book, and a total of thirty chapters. The six parts fall under the headings “receiving what is,” “receiving what’s difficult,” “receiving what God is doing,” “receiving what God has already done,” “receiving what will be,” and “receiving this life.” These subjects prod readers to awareness of and openness to God in their midst in various life circumstances. She writes, “Our living, every moment, is infused with the presence of God. . . . The most fundamental calling of the human being is to receive with gratitude this life we have been given” (10).

Each of the six parts begins with prose-style chapters, exploring these various themes. Root weaves together her own stories and excerpts from various source materials (especially theological) to bring readers to an appropriate disposition of receptivity. Each part also includes prayers and practices. For instance, Root offers a “Liturgy of the Cell Phones” with a “Prayer for Releasing Phones,” and a “Prayer for Retrieving Phones.” The book includes dozens of prayers and blessings, such as “A Garden Blessing,” “Prayer for the Remembrance of a Painful Day,” “The Hedgehog Blessing—A Back-to-School Blessing for Children and Teachers,” and “A Prayer for the Anxious.”

The merits of the book are many and these include its ushering readers into communion with God and others. The book is crafted sincerely, reverently, honestly, and joyfully. It invites readers and communities of readers into an experience of God. It engages readers holistically, not only cerebrally. The book offers devotional-esque chapters and practices. The work is more than a mere anthology of prayers. The prose chapters counterbalance the practical content, offering helpful commentary and guidance for readers. The interplay between the two (prose and prayer) is very helpful. Still, weaknesses of the work may be perceived. In places, the smorgasbord of materials lacks obvious unity and direction. In other places (within the prose writing, for example), greater concision in writing may have been achieved. But, these weaknesses are small in proportion to the many strengths of the work.

Audiences for such a book include anyone desirous of deepening their relationship with God, and especially those who have benefitted from Root’s first volume, *The Deepest Belonging*. The book also could function as a reference work (for instance, no one knows when they may need a “Prayer for a Difficult Person” (222–23) or any number of the prayers and blessings Root provides). The book would work well for small group gatherings, as something to guide discussion and practice which would also foster relationship. It would function well in a course that seeks to teach spiritual disciplines. The book has much to recommend it, including its broad appeal to various readerships.

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Dwight Zscheile, Michael Binder and Tessa Pinkstaff. *Leading Faithful Innovation: Following God into a Hopeful Future*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023. 162 pages. \$16.99.

For any church leader, lay or ordained, who is navigating new ways of being the church, this book is a great resource. With a blend of biblical insights, practical advice, and real-world examples, this book not only inspires but also equips leaders to lead with purpose and authenticity in their communities and beyond. Experienced leaders or those just beginning their journey will find an exploration of what it means to lead in the light of faith.

The authors describe faithful innovation as “the process of learning new ways to embody Christian identity and purpose in a changing cultural context. It is about rediscovering how to be the church in the 21st century and reconnecting with God, one another, and neighbors” (4). The biblical foundation is laid early and supports the discussion throughout the book. The authors develop the themes of the book based on the narrative in Acts 16:6-15 that tells of Paul and his companions following the leading of the Holy Spirit and finding themselves outside of the city walls at a women’s prayer group where they meet Lydia. This biblical narrative tells of people following the lead of the Holy Spirit which is not the same as maintaining the institution of the church. As culture shifts and institutional loyalty dwindles, the church must ensure that they are following the Holy Spirit rather than trying to “fix” or maintain an institution.

Each chapter includes examples and anecdotes of situations that are familiar to many people and churches. This helps the reader to make practical sense of what is explained in each chapter. Chapters two, three, and four look specifically at the three core practices that the authors are suggesting for leaders. The core practices described are listen, act, and share.

Chapter two describes the practice of listening. Leaders are encouraged to actively listen to God, others in their faith community and neighbors in the larger community. Again, the authors give practical steps on how to achieve this goal. Three practices to enhance listening are described in detail. Those practices include Dwelling in the Word, Spiritual Journey Conversations, and Prayer Walks. In this stage of the process, the participants seek to really listen so that they might move to the next step.

Chapter three is act. This is the second practice explained. Here the authors describe what they call action learning experiments. Based on the discernment that comes from listening, action should then be taken. The action learning experiments are to be simple, repeatable, and affordable. The less elaborate and expensive the more likely they are to be accepted by the broader congregation and can be repeated. The action learning experiments are meant to engage the community in new ways so that relationships can form as the congregation sees how God is at work in the world around them.

Chapter four is share. This is the third practice. The authors explain that sharing what has happened in the listening and action phases is important to energize people and create transformational change. Sharing is not something that is done once like a report on the activity. Sharing is to be done often and in different ways to different audiences. Sharing reflects on what has happened, allows people to share their experiences, and it is an opportunity to name how God might be inviting others into the work God is doing.

These three practices of listen, act, and share are the foundation of faithful innovation which the authors are careful to state is a way of living and not another program to enact. They help the church to discover new ways of being the church which is important in a time of institutional decline. It also helps the church to move away from the idea that church needs to be

fixed and into the space of following the leading of the Holy Spirit. The purpose is to ensure that God is at the center of the church and all that the church does.

While the book provides a solid framework for church leaders with practical strategies and biblical insights, it could benefit from deeper exploration of the challenges that leaders may face when implementing these practices in diverse or even resistant congregational contexts. Many of the churches in greatest need of being revitalized are change averse, making this shift more difficult. Additionally, while the authors do not consider this to be another program, it should be acknowledged that moving any church in a completely different direction takes more time and intentionality than creating another program. This is a significant shift for a church to make.

Overall, this book is great resource for anyone in denominational leadership. During a challenging season for many churches, these strategies and practices inspire a deeper understanding of the spiritual and relational dynamics at play within congregations.

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Eunjoo Mary Kim. *Preaching Jesus: Postcolonial Approaches*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2024. 162 pages. \$22.00.

Offering a groundbreaking exploration of fresh theological insights and practical homiletical strategies, *Preaching Jesus: Postcolonial Approaches* encourages readers to reorient their understanding of Jesus in sermons and interpretations, thereby dismantling traditional colonial depictions of Jesus. In five chapters, Kim showcases five dazzling images of Jesus, including postcolonial self, song, child, body, and friend. She uses postcolonial hermeneutical and homiletical methods that connect with biblical, historical, literary, and cultural studies.

In the first chapter, Kim presents Jesus as a postcolonial self who is “a boundary-breaker, boundary-connector, and boundary-transcended” (17). Examining the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:5-42 through postcolonial approaches based on Asian American women’s experiences, Kim introduces Jesus as a model of postcolonial self who invites people to a new identity and encourages them to live in a complicated world as postcolonial selves. Emphasizing listening to marginalized voices and utilizing dialogue as a crucial homiletical strategy, Kim empowers preachers to reconsider Jesus’ identity as a postcolonial self as the active agent of God’s reconciling work.

In the second chapter, “Preaching Jesus as Postcolonial Song,” Kim delves into the meaning of the postcolonial imagination in order to recognize its contributions to postcolonial preaching practice. Evaluating Luke’s account of Mary’s pregnancy through a postcolonial imagination, Kim invites readers to hear Mary’s eschatological song of an unborn Jesus as “a proleptical sign of God’s humanizing activity” (34). Kim highlights that preaching Jesus as a postcolonial song is rather a communal prayer invoking the Holy Spirit who envisions revolutions in our actions, not merely in words and melodies.

The third chapter, “Preaching Jesus as Postcolonial Child” focuses on Jesus as a colonized Jew of the Roman empire. Underscoring global migration as a complex and serious phenomenon which calls preachers to engage, Kim scrutinizes Matthew’s account of Jesus’ escape to Egypt. Engaging in concurrent global issues of immigrants, foreigners, and refugees, Kim presents Jesus as a postcolonial child who has a hybrid identity shaped by colonial and postcolonial environments, resisting and reconciling the world. Kim encourages preachers to remember that preaching Jesus is both advocating for the marginalized and reconciling between victims and the privileged.

In the fourth chapter, “Preaching Jesus as Postcolonial Body,” Kim emphasizes decolonizing traditional interpretations of biblical texts as a primary task of postcolonial preaching. Decolonizing the conventional reading of the Easter message narrated in John chapter 20, Kim proposes a new image of Jesus as a postcolonial body based on colonial experiences of African Americans and Native Americans. Introducing a postcolonial cultural reading of the text, Kim perceives Jesus as a postcolonial body embracing brokenness of the world in the divine presence for healing and reconciliation. Postcolonial preaching, argues Kim, should create a Third Space where the divine Spirit and people cooperate in an optative mood for complete reconciliation (76).

The final chapter, “Preaching Jesus as Postcolonial Friend” overhauls the traditional colonialist interpretation of the Great Commission in Mathew 28:16-20. Examining the text through a postcolonial intertextual reading, Kim characterizes the risen Jesus as a postcolonial friend instead of an authoritarian teacher or a commander. Christian mission pursues building friendship—which is Trinitarian, inclusive, and communal—highlighted in cross-cultural

relationships. Kim introduces “meta preaching,” (96) a way of preaching Jesus as a postcolonial friend, which highlights a self-reflective personal conversation for building friendship.

So, after all things are considered, what now? What does preaching Jesus through postcolonial approaches sound like and look like? In concluding her book, Kim offers us an exemplary sermon titled “A Letter to Mary and Elizabeth” based on Luke 1:39–45. In this sermon, Kim demonstrates how the biblical narrative of Mary’s encounter with baby Jesus resonates with the current context and congregation and challenges the unjust world by preaching Jesus.

By challenging the colonial Christology that homiletics has centered, Kim provides readers a crucial guide for reimagining an unprecedented way of preaching Jesus. Throughout the book, Kim encourages readers, particularly those with colonized experiences and their descendants, to engage in an active dialogue with Jesus who resists yet reconciles the world. This book echoes Audre Lorde’s powerful sentiment, quoted by Kim at the Academy of Homiletics 2023 annual meeting: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” If you aim to equip yourself with postcolonial preaching tools, put this book on your must-have list. For those wanting to expand their understanding of Jesus and improve their preaching ministry, *Preaching Jesus: Postcolonial Approaches* is an indispensable resource. I highly recommend this book to both preachers and scholars, advocating for a reimagined, revolutionary approach to preaching Jesus.

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Matthew V. Novenson. *Paul, Then and Now*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. 248 pages. Hardcover. \$20.49.

The cover of Matthew Novenson's book features a painting entitled "Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul." Like so many of the great works of Dutch art in this period, the self-portrait is surrounded by darkness, which allows the light to illumine parts of the face of the subject while almost seeming to hide others. As you read Novenson's collection of essays on Paul, it becomes clear that the painting is a powerful metaphor. The self-portrait on the cover is of the artist Rembrandt *as Paul*. Novenson seems to revel in the juxtaposition: our pictures of Paul are never far from being pictures of ourselves.

Of course, it need not be so. With Novenson, we recognize that in the desire to appropriate Paul (say, for proclamation), we too easily flatten Paul's strangeness out of desire to have a living dialogue in the present. The impulse is good, but the result is, too often, rendering Paul as if we ourselves were ventriloquists (2). Novenson does not gainsay the importance that invested readings can and ought to have. But as a historian, he asks interpreters to hold what we claim Paul is saying in tension with the Paul who remains in all of his otherness, shading off into the darkness of Rembrandt's painting. Theologians can and should engage with Paul. Historians, however, should be just as committed to ensuring that critical scholarship refuses to collapse the distance. Novenson thus also aims to "make Paul weird again" (5).

And the collected essays in his volume do just this work. Novenson is aware of the theological *Wirkungsgeschichte* between then and now and treats the work sympathetically, even if he also is constantly reminding his reader, or his other NT interlocutors, of the firm limits of theological claims in the face of irascible historical limits that constantly pose questions back on the theological interpreter. In his many essays in the book, which range from "Our Apostles, Ourselves;" "The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the Actual Jews of Romans 9-11;" and "Anti-Judaism and Philo-Judaism in Pauline Studies, Then and Now," Novenson is relentless in keeping theological readings of Paul and historical criticism of Paul tethered—not because they are doing the same thing, but because they are *not*. The exercise is a healthy one for a tradition that needs to account for otherness: both the otherness of contemporary communities *and* the otherness of Biblical texts in ancient contexts.

Why should a journal on preaching make note of Novenson's collection of essays enveloped in Rembrandt's uncanny self-portrait as apostle? While Novenson would never say so, I think his work goes to the heart of how many of us in homiletics have aimed to account for otherness in preaching: whether out of a commitment to social location and the need for advocacy, or out of ethical concern for the irreducible face that meets us in the preaching moment, or out of a broader desire to initiate bona fide conversation across difference. Yet the value of this volume takes us one further step in that mystery that we in homiletics have started to chart. Novenson wishes interpreters to take the otherness of Paul and perhaps even all scriptural traditions with the same theological (and homiletical) seriousness. Let's do theology, preachers; but let's also keep Paul weird.

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W. David O. Taylor. *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of Our Physical Body in Worship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 199 pages. \$22.99.

I grew up as a protestant in the 1990's when many of our churches made their first forays into contemporary worship. I remember how free I felt when I attended my first "contemporary" worship night – not so much because of the style of music – but because of the freedom of movement. People were moving their bodies – sitting, standing, kneeling, raising hands, and some even danced. This was an astounding moment for my teenage self who had grown up being told to be still and quiet in church. For the first time, I experienced what it was like to worship, as Vatican II expressed, with "full, conscious, and active participation."³⁹⁰

W. David O. Taylor's timely volume, *A Body of Praise: Understanding the Role of our Physical Bodies in Worship*, comes on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, a season in which most of us realized how we had taken the physicality of the gathered assembly for granted. Zooming a worship service just doesn't invite embodied worship. It suits itself much more to couch potato participation. Stated succinctly by the author, the volume is "about the unique glory of the physical body in corporate worship" (4). Taylor's argument is twofold: first, the human body is not neutral in worship: it brings sensations, joys, burdens, and life experiences into the worship life of the church. Second, Taylor pulls instruction from scripture with three descriptors: we *must* worship God with our bodies (God mandates); we *need* to worship God with our bodies (it is actually good for us); and finally, we *get* to worship God with our bodies (sometimes it's fun, fitting, and helpful).

Taylor fleshes out these two lines of argument through a diversity of lenses, including church history, biblical analysis, a theology of the incarnation, science, art, and ethics—each lens is given a chapter. He defines limitations clearly, acknowledging that an exhaustive look at the body at worship in all denominations or traditions is beyond the capacity of the volume. Taylor also states clearly that he is addressing the gathered assembly in congregational worship and not a broad, "worship-as-a-way-of-life" paradigm. He notes that the work is intended for both lay readers and academics alike, and I suggest that he succeeds at this with a tone that is both theologically articulate and user-friendly.

Taylor could have easily written his volume with the sole use of "Christian" sources (church history, biblical scholarship, and theology), but his use of the arts and sciences make the argument particularly intriguing and more substantive. He asks the reader compelling questions like "how might the psychology of color enable us to inhabit more viscerally the christological story...?" (90); or "how might the visual arts train our bodies to embody the love of Jesus in...a radical way?" (99). Another charism of the book is the sensitive treatment of ethical issues one might encounter concerning the body in worship, addressing disability, invisibility, and the growing impact of our digital world.

While Taylor writes with a hint of preference for his own denominational experiences as an Anglican priest; he also does well in offering a balance that those on both ends of the liturgical spectrum might find challenging or even revelatory. In his pairing of chapters 10 and 11, he walks first through the discipline of liturgical movements in which the entire congregation is invited to participate—like making the sign of the cross, passing of the peace, and more; then turns to the freedom of an individual body in worship—with expressions like dancing, raising hands, and other Spirit-inspired physical expressions.

³⁹⁰ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican City: Vatican Council II, 1963).

Taylor's final chapter almost feels like a benediction, sealing the value of the body in worship as a valid and necessary means toward Christlikeness. If "in him, we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28), then the discipleship of all our senses is necessary for our sanctification. Taylor writes:

We offer our bodies to God so that the life of Jesus might be made manifest in our...broken bodies (2 Cor. 4:10). We offer our bodies to God so that all of it—hand and foot, eye and ear, breath and brain, touch and taste, skin and sinew—might be given over fully to Jesus... (153).

Overall, the volume covers an important topic with great depth and care, all the while noting complexities, limitations, and areas for expansion. *Body of Praise* is an excellent read for pastors, artists, parishioners, and anyone interested in offering their whole selves to God in worship.

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James White. *Introduction to Christian Worship*. Fourth Edition. Edited by L. Edward Phillips. Nashville: Abingdon, 2023. 378 pages. \$41.99.

Since the publication of the first edition in 1980, James White's *Introduction to Christian Worship* has become a classic, whether for practitioner, celebrant, teacher, or student of worship. *Introduction* offers a comprehensive overview of key aspects concerning worship, such as meaning of worship, theology of baptism and eucharist, liturgical time and space, sacraments and sacramentality, liturgical arts, music, architecture, daily prayer, and liturgical books. It is ecumenical in scope, and it is didactic in tone and style of writing. Now, the fourth edition of this classic manual includes welcomed updates and stylistic revisions.

The *raison d'être* for this edition is clearly stated in the preface: the fourth edition seeks to address significant changes that the world of worship practice and scholarship has witnessed since the previous edition published in 2001. All mainline Christian churches have revised and published new liturgical books in the past two decades, thereby changing the way people worship. A significant change occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a drastic shift in the use and meaning of technology in worship. Scholars of liturgy have gained significant awareness and sensitivity toward pluralistic culture and history of communities of worship around the globe. But, as the general editor Edward Phillips states in the preface, the true spirit of publishing a new edition lies not so much in the need to add new content but in following, therefore honoring, White's own rigorous commitment to continuously revising and expanding his own scholarship in response to the changing world.

Thus, the editor and the contributors, some of whom are White's students, kept most of the text from the older editions and, at times, wrote entirely new sections. Whether for readers who are familiar with the previous editions or for whom the fourth edition is their first encounter with White's *Introduction*, this edition features many didactical benefits. It includes boldface type for key words and liturgical documents that teachers, students, and ministers of worship should know. Readers can quickly browse and access the topics that interest them. The book also includes diagrams, charts, and tables to visually showcase the information. These features are especially helpful for making comparisons between historical periods or understanding how different denominations relate to one another. Each chapter provides a historical overview of the given topic from early Christianity to Reformation and modern. The book is an excellent source for teaching.

Reading any written text is an encounter with the author who is behind the text. Readers of White's *Introduction* will encounter an author who possessed an enormous breadth of knowledge and who presents it in a lively and accessible language that would appeal to anyone. Readers will find that they can almost hear White's voice throughout the book. For example, while explaining that the word "cult," from the Latin *colere*, indicates a relational responsibility, White shifts to describe feeding and watering his chickens and weeding the garden, without which he would not have eggs and vegetables (13). Readers will be delightfully caught off guard by White in this way throughout the book.

Being caught off guard is not always as welcomed, however. Although the editor clearly states that entirely new texts were written by the contributors, it is nevertheless jarring when, for example, the reader is immersed in thinking with White about early Christian church architecture and suddenly they read in the next paragraph about COVID-19 and online worship, which is obviously an added text by a contributor.

A new chapter titled, “Christian Worship in Global Context” is written by Deok-Weon Ahn, who suggests seven proposals for how one might think about worship in consideration for the younger, culturally pluralistic ecclesial bodies around the globe. It is an important chapter, not because it encapsulates worship practices of the non-west in its entirety, but because it offers concrete methodological approaches for recognizing and embracing worship in the global church. Ending the book with this chapter will entice a reader inclined to creative imagination to ask: Could there be a textbook of this sort that places global contexts as the departure point rather than the current dominant model of expansion narrative that sees worship originating in the west and being received by the non-west? Perhaps a book of that nature will not be a fifth edition of *Introduction*, but like any good teacher, the fourth edition, with the added content, could inspire the future generation of scholars to imagine the next step forward.

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