

Introduction to the Essays of the Consultation on Black Contemplative Preaching

David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda D. Barnes

Co-Editors

Boston University School of Theology

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.