

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-la-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 sermonic 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.