

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

Anna Carter Florence

Peter Marshall Professor of Preaching

Columbia Theological Seminary

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.