

**A Particular Oneing: Zilpha Elaw as a Model for a 21st Century
Womanist Contemplative Homiletic**
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Abstract: *In this article, I present nineteenth-century preacher Zilpha Elaw as a model for a twenty-first-century homiletic. I discuss particularity, as understood through deep interiority and contemplation, as the key to connecting with other beings. As preachers, we have the ability and the responsibility to model the need for and benefits of understanding and owning our particularities and to guide others in embracing their particularities in ways that affirm self and community. Thanks to the incomparable gifts of African American contemplative preachers, I believe that we can bridge innate differences and societally created divisions through a psycho-spiritual interiority that acknowledges and encourages communication in the spiritual realm.*

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Howard Thurman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹Ibid., 69.

¹⁰Ibid., 69-70.

¹¹Ibid., 70.

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

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

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

¹⁵Sheppard, 195.

¹⁶Ibid., 194.

¹⁷Ibid., 195.

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

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

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

And now to Zilpha Herself

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁵Zilpha Elaw, *Memoirs*, 2.

²⁶Elaw, 2.

²⁷Elaw, 4.

²⁸Elaw, 4.

²⁹Elaw, 5-6.

³⁰Elaw, 7.

³¹Elaw, 8.

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

³³Elaw, 16-17.

³⁴Elaw, 19, 22.

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

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

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

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

³⁵Elaw, 22-23.

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

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

³⁸Ibid., 33.

³⁹Ibid., 37 and 42.

⁴⁰Ibid., 46.

⁴¹Ibid., 47.

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

⁴³Ibid., xii.

⁴⁴Ibid., xi, xii, and xxvi.

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

Navigating, Owning, and Connecting with Others in Her Particularity

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁵Ibid., xxvi, xxvii.

⁴⁶Ibid., xxvii.

⁴⁷Ibid., xxvii.

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

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

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

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

Zilpha Elaw as Exemplar of a Proposed Womanist Contemplative Homiletic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Letter from Sketchbook:

10/12/23

Dear Zilpha,

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

⁵³Pierce, 95.

⁵⁴Pierce, 93.

⁵⁵Elaw, 59.

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

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

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

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

Love,

La Ronda