

E. Trey Clark. *Black Contemplative Preaching: A Hidden History of Prayer, Proclamation, and Prophetic Witness*. Baylor University Press, 2024. 202 pages. \$39.99.

For the last two decades, scholars of Black preaching have contributed scholarship that has explored and described many compelling nuances and rich diversity within this broad preaching landscape. Their varied answers to the question, “What is Black preaching?” have given new insights for homileticians to consider. E. Trey Clark’s recent contribution to the body of contemporary scholarship on Black preaching is a valuable addition that casts light on another expression that has remained relatively hidden. His guide into the understudied subject of Black contemplative preaching embarks on describing, clarifying, and offering unique examples of this underappreciated homiletical expression, all while situating it within the broader conversations of Black preaching traditions.

Students of Black preaching will find Clark’s book to be more than an introduction to this distinct mode of preaching. What Clark offers is a lucid description of the theology and spirituality that underpins this sermonic expression, and he accompanies this descriptive work with clear and compelling examples from sermons of some of the most impactful Black preachers of their era. From beginning to end, Clark answers the question “What is Black contemplative preaching?” by pointing readers to preaching models of the past—in Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Barbara Harris, as well as the present—in Frank Thomas, Luke Powery, and Ineda Pearl Adesanya. Constructively, Clark’s list does not end with these notable preachers but also includes the names of other contemporary preachers who embody the Black contemplative preaching tradition. While he does not offer extensive treatment of the latter group, Clark’s list lays the groundwork for students who wish to build on this tradition. Clark accomplishes his goal of presenting a clear definition of Black contemplative preaching as well as providing persuasive examples of preachers who model this tradition.

Helpfully, Clark’s methodological decision to include close readings of the sermons of his main subjects grants students opportunities to reflect on how contemplative preaching looks in practice. Despite the absence of audio/visual media to accompany his readings, Clark does an admirable job of describing the world of each text as well as how it functions within a Black contemplative homiletic framework. While finding the right balance between explanation and demonstration is always a challenge, my one wish was for additional examples of how the contemplative homiletic functions across multiple sermons for each of the model preachers. Further evidence of where and how the contemplative homiletic appears would have strengthened Clark’s claims.

For scholars interested in fresh interpretations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Howard Thurman, this volume satisfies. Those familiar with Thurman’s preaching might anticipate finding him among Clark’s list of preaching examples in the contemplative tradition. However, Clark’s chapter on King might be surprising. Was King, who is commonly noted for his stirring sermons that have rhythm, cadence, and passion, a contemplative preacher? Clark answers in the affirmative, and he provides good evidence to support his claim. Clark’s careful approach to re-interpreting King and suspending popularized images of him offers new insights that reveal a preacher who fits compellingly within the contemplative categories that Clark describes.

As with any attempt to place a preacher within a specific preaching tradition, some will certainly question the preachers that Clark elevates as models for the contemplative tradition, and for various reasons. One overarching concern might be that his list is too narrow. For example, each of the preachers on Clark’s list are “seminary trained,” a distinction that has been described

in scholarship as being in contrast to the Black “folk preaching” tradition. Folk preachers appear to be outside the scope of Clark’s inquiry, nevertheless, a more diverse list may strengthen his overall argument.

In the end, Clark’s project showcases another branch of the diversity within Black preaching traditions. For teachers of preaching, this volume will be a useful supplemental resource that will pair well with the more foundational texts on Black preaching, especially in courses that engage or at least survey the history and vast field of African American preaching.

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