

Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers

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Abstract: *In recent decades, scholars have challenged monolithic characterizations of African American or Black preaching. Still, an essentialist image of Black preaching is perpetuated in many contexts. This article contributes to a broader understanding of the diversity of Black preaching through exploring what Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas in their pioneering anthology *Preaching with Sacred Fire* call Black contemplative preaching. Unfortunately, though key aspects of Black contemplative preaching can be seen in the life and speech of prominent Black preachers, it may be one of the most overlooked streams of preaching inside and outside of Black church contexts. This lack of awareness and acknowledgment of the Black contemplative preaching stream seems to suggest that it is a mode of proclamation that, like other contemplative practices in the Black church, is hidden in plain sight. Thus, this article aims to increase the visibility of the witness and wisdom of Black contemplative preachers.*

INTRODUCTION²

Throughout the world, homiletical classrooms, houses of worship, and literary and cultural productions have perpetuated what Lisa Thompson has called the “ghostly image” of the Black preacher.³ This stereotypical image of the Black preacher tends to be a particular masculine performance of proclamation characterized by rhetorical prowess, extroversion, and ecstatic celebration.⁴ Of course, this image does reflect characteristics of some streams of Black preaching. Indeed, at its best, it reflects a rich folk heritage—a heritage that I respect, appreciate, and, at times, reflect in my own preaching.⁵ Still, the dominance of this essentialist image of

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² This article is a revision and expansion of a presentation titled “Howard Thurman and the Black Contemplative Preaching Stream” given in a co-sponsored session of the Black Theology Unit and Theology of Martin Luther King Jr. Unit at the online American Academy of Religion conference in 2020.

³ Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 28-32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28-32. Thompson builds on the work of Alisha L. Jones, “Are All the Choir Directors Gay? Black Men’s Sexuality and Identity in Gospel Performance” in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, and Representation*, ed. Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 216-235. See also Jones’s more recent work *Flaming?: The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵ For classic works that offer an exploration of Black folk preaching, see James Weldon Johnson, *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: Penguin, [1927] 2008); Gerald L. Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Jon Michael Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1987); Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live?: The Art of the American Folk Preacher, Revised Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); and Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990). It is worth noting that homiletician O.C. Edwards helped to popularize the distinction between the Black folk and intellectual preaching streams. Drawing on William E. Montgomery’s discussion of “elite” and “folk” Black worship traditions in *Under their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), Edwards articulated what he described as the “learned” and “folk” streams of African American preaching. See Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 531-553. See also Frank A. Thomas, *Introduction to*

Black proclamation all too often eclipses other valid and valuable streams in the broader river of Black proclamation. It seems, as literary scholar Kevin Quashie notes, that Black culture is perpetually characterized as dramatic and expressive, and there is no serious attention given to its “quiet” or contemplative dimensions.⁶ As a result, the breadth and depth of Black humanity is circumscribed by a racialized vision of “proper” Black performance.⁷ Many would-be Black religious leaders experience immense pressure to suppress their unique voice to conform to popular expectations. And congregations of all backgrounds miss out on the insight and perspective that comes from learning from a wider spectrum of approaches to Black preaching. Clearly, there is a need to affirm a more diverse array of Black preaching practices.

Thus, this article gives special attention to what Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas in their pioneering anthology *Preaching with Sacred Fire* call Black contemplative preaching, a meditative mode of preaching that weds mystical and theological insights to promote spiritual and social transformation.⁸ Unfortunately, though key aspects of Black contemplative preaching can be seen in the life and speech of some prominent Black preachers of the past, such as Gardner C. Taylor, Pauli Murray, and Bishop Barbara Harris, it may be one of the most overlooked streams of preaching inside and outside of Black church contexts today. This lack of awareness and acknowledgment of the Black contemplative preaching stream seems to suggest that it is a mode of proclamation that, like other contemplative practices in the Black church, is “hidden in plain sight.”⁹

This article begins with some of the roots of Black contemplative preaching and delineates its three distinctives. The second section considers Howard Thurman as one of the clearest representatives of Black contemplative preaching in the twentieth century. The third section explores contemporary Black contemplative preachers. I highlight sermons from two

the Practice of African American Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), 14-15. Of course, there is much overlap between the streams and the terminology used to describe them is not without its problems.

⁶ Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 3. Quashie utilizes the notion of “quiet” to call for a more capacious understanding of African American identity and culture. While no attention is given to preaching, he explores the quiet dimensions of art, poetry, novels, and more.

⁷ Unfortunately, in this article, I will not be able to give explicit attention to the politics of performance/aesthetics that surround Black contemplative preaching. However, future work should attend to this important area of study in conversation with Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) as well as Amy E. Steele’s “Howard Thurman and the Roots of a Black Mystical Aesthetic,” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* vol 9, no. 1-2 (Autumn 2021): 183-210. I am especially interested in the ways that Black contemplative preaching disrupts the popular images of Black identity and performance that are often naturally associated with a Black aesthetic. I am indebted to Kyle Brooks for making me aware of Iton’s work and its relevance for my project and Dr. Lisa Thompson for the reference to Steele’s article.

⁸ The actual term used by Simmons and Thomas is contemplative preaching, but I qualify their term with “Black” given they are focused on how such preaching manifest among ministers shaped by African American cultural contexts. For me, Black contemplative preaching is similar yet distinct from contemplative preaching embodied by preachers of other cultural backgrounds, but space does not permit me to explore this here. Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton), 491-492. A groundbreaking unpublished paper that explores contemplative preaching in the Black church is James Earl Massey’s “Contemplative Preaching.” I am indebted to Dr. Frank Thomas for graciously making the paper available to me for my research. Massey originally wrote it for publication in *Preaching with Sacred Fire*. Only a portion appears in the book. I build upon the work of Simmons, Thomas, and Massey.

⁹ Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church, Second Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 75.

particular preachers: Kelly Brown Douglas and Frank Thomas. The article concludes with three ways that the wisdom of Black contemplative preachers can enrich the teaching and practice of preaching today.

THE ROOTS AND DISTINCTIVES OF BLACK CONTEMPLATIVE PREACHING

The Black church is known for many things, but contemplation is not one of them.¹⁰ In *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Barbara Holmes aims to change this fact. Her groundbreaking work argues that Black contemplation consists of a constellation of holistic, personal, and communal practices that can be traced back to the spirituality of West African religious traditions, the often-forgotten African desert mothers and fathers, and the prayerful gazing upon God that emerged among Blacks on ships during the Middle Passage (Maafa), auction blocks, and hush arbors of American slavery. For Holmes, unlike Eurocentric contemplation, Black contemplation entails collective and individual practices that may or may not be accompanied by silence and stillness as they foster attentiveness to the living God.¹¹ In this sense, she challenges the notion that contemplation is a privilege reserved for those who have the luxury of extended times of retreat in solitude. For her, contemplation is learning to attend to God amid the complex and often challenging realities of everyday life. Moreover, with James Noel, Holmes contends that practices of contemplation in the Black church are not easily divorced from the pursuit of social justice and transformation.¹² In this article, building on Holmes's work, I focus particularly on the practice of Black contemplative preaching. I argue that Black contemplative preaching has at least five key historical and cultural precursors. These include an African traditional worldview, African orality, African monasticism, the tradition of African and European mystic preachers, and the emergence of the Black church. Unfortunately, space does not permit me to explore all these precursors.¹³

However, I would like to note how Black contemplative preaching emerges from the broader history of preaching in the Black church. Specifically, it is critical to state that there is a history of early African American preachers who have reflected a contemplative orientation in at least some of their life, thought, and/or preaching. I briefly note three early African American preachers. One of the earliest Black preachers who demonstrates a contemplative dimension in his preaching is Lemuel Haynes (1753-1833), a bi-cultural Congregationalist minister and early

¹⁰ There is much debate surrounding the term "the Black church." Some scholars question whether there is such a thing as "the Black church." However, following Stacey Floyd-Thomas and others, I use this term to refer to "those churches whose life and cultural sensibilities have reflected, historically and traditionally, a connection to the larger African American community." This includes independent Black churches, churches inside and outside of historically Black denominations and movements, and multiethnic churches whose leadership and cultural identity is African American. For more on this definition see, Stacey Floyd-Thomas and others, *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), xiii-xxiv. While all the preachers that I focus on in this article are African Americans, many are preachers who engage in ministry inside and outside of predominantly Black church contexts. Still, their African ancestry along with their formation in Black ecclesial environments were critical for their sense of identity and practice of preaching.

¹¹ Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 17-21. Drawing on Charles Long, Holmes is careful to note that there is a speech that emerges from the enforced silences that have come as a result of European colonization. She surmises that in African contexts "an ontological silence can occupy the heart of cacophony" in the midst of celebratory worship, 21. For Long's intriguing meditations on silence, see Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 1995), 61-70.

¹² Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 111, 114. See James A. Noel, "Contemplation and Social Action in African-American Spirituality," *Church & Society*, 83, no. 2 (Nov-Dec 1992): 55-67.

¹³ I give some attention to these in "Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation: Reclaiming the Homiletical Theology of Black Contemplative Preaching," (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2021), 33-53.

advocate for human liberty. This is evident in Haynes's sermon entitled "The Presence of God" that called his listeners to live with reverence before the ubiquity of the divine presence.¹⁴ A second example is found in Richard Allen (1760-1831), the founder of the AME Church and one-time Quaker affiliate.¹⁵ Allen's profound prayers on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love in his autobiography reveal a deep contemplative spirituality that fueled his proclamation and fight against racial and economic oppression.¹⁶ One final early Black preacher who reflects a contemplative orientation is Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), a Shaker eldress and mystic.¹⁷ Though there are no extant sermons of Jackson available, her autobiographical writings explore her personal mystical experiences that contributed to her pioneering ministry of proclamation and activism in a patriarchal context. While none of these preachers should be reduced to the label of contemplative preacher, I would argue that at least some of their life and ministry reflect traits of the Black contemplative preaching stream.

In light of this history,¹⁸ I propose the following definition of Black contemplative preaching: *Black contemplative preaching is sermonic discourse that (1) emerges from a habitus or disposition of prayer, (2) employs a mystical hermeneutical lens, and (3) embodies a meditative homiletical style in order to lead listeners into an inner divine encounter that contributes to the outer flourishing of African Americans and all creation.* My definition highlights three distinctives of Black contemplative preaching. First, I proffer that Black contemplative preaching emerges from a disposition or habitus of prayer.¹⁹ Almost all Black preaching emerges from prayer, but 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. Given that the habitus of prayer is integrally connected to the contemplative life of the preacher, it is not always easily discernible in the sermon itself. Nevertheless, it can be glimpsed. As rhetorical scholar Edwin

¹⁴ Haynes is introduced as a representative of the Black contemplative preaching stream in Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 56. See "The Presence of the Lord" in Richard Newman, ed., *Black Preacher to White America: The Collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774-1833* (Brooklyn: Carlson, 1990), 143-147.

¹⁵ I first heard Allen mentioned as a contemplative preacher in Dr. Teresa Fry Brown's 2019 address at the Academy of Homiletics on "challenging homiletical myopia." While Allen was exposed to the contemplative spiritual practices of the Quakers during his time with the Free African Society that he founded, he eventually departed from Quaker affiliation because it did not fully suit his liturgical inclinations.

¹⁶ See Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (N.p.: Hanse, [1793] 2020), 29-32.

¹⁷ James Earl Massey makes a reference to Rebecca Jackson as part of the contemplative stream of Black preaching. See Massey, "Contemplative Preaching," 10. See Rebecca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* ed. Jean McMahon Humez (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981). See also Joy Bostic's treatment of Jackson's mystical activism in *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 95-117.

¹⁸ The definition and distinctives that follow emerge from an in-depth study of the roots of Black contemplative preaching. See Clark, "Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation," chapter one.

¹⁹ I draw this phrase from James Keating, "Contemplative Homiletics: Being Carried into Reality" *Nova et Vetera* 17 No. 1 (2019): 5. Keating does not offer a clear definition of the term. In *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), Aristotle uses the term *hexis* (later translated into Latin as *habitus* by Aquinas) as he develops his understanding of moral virtue. According to Loïc Wacquant, for Aristotle, it is "an acquired yet entrenched state of moral character that orients our feelings and desires, and thence our conduct." See Loïc Wacquant, "A Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus" in *The Oxford Handbook of Pierre Bourdieu*, eds. Thomas Medvetz and Jeffrey J. Sallaz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 528. I use the term habitus of prayer to reference the cultivation of a contemplative way of being and seeing that is attentive to God and God's world.

Black notes, there are “tokens of the author” that can be observed in a speech or sermon.²⁰ As such, a preacher’s habitus of prayer can be glimpsed in an opening or closing sermonic prayer, a personal story or illustration, or in sermonic content related to prayer or spirituality in general.²¹

Second, Black contemplative preaching employs a mystical hermeneutical lens. At its most basic level, a mystical hermeneutic is not about the venerable tradition of seeking the *sensus plenior* (or fuller meaning) of texts²² nor is it simply about ecstatic mystical experiences, but rather it refers to reading and interpreting Scripture and other texts with a bias toward an emancipatory encounter with God.²³ Of course, all Black preaching is committed to seeking to encounter the living God in Scripture. However, the mystical hermeneutic of Black contemplative preaching is further characterized by three things that set it apart: 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.²⁴

Third and finally, the most obvious distinctive of Black contemplative preaching is its meditative homiletical style. It almost never involves whooping.²⁵ In this sense, Black contemplative preaching often appears to lack what Frank Thomas calls the most characteristic

²⁰ This is to say that glimpses of the character of the preacher can be revealed through close analysis of a sermon. Something of the person of the preacher is unavoidably manifested in the sermon itself. Edwin Black, “The Second Persona” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., eds. Mark J. Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016), 296. For Black, the fact that discourses can reveal the character of their author is indicative of an implied author or first persona. Second persona, for him, refers to the implied auditor of a discourse. Other personas could also be named. See Phillip Wander, “The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., 303-319; Dana L. Cloud, “The Null Persona: Race and the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of ’34” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., 320-340; Charles E. Morris III, “Pink Herring & Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover’s Sex Crime Panic” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed.; and Andre Johnson, “The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology,” *Black Theology* 8, no. 3 (2010): 266-285.

²¹ In other work, I have delineated a theo-rhetorical framework to explore the habitus of prayer and the other distinctives of Black contemplative preaching. Within this framework, I use autobiography, biographies, interviews, and other sources to discern a preacher’s habitus of prayer. I do not have space to elaborate on this framework here. See Clark, “Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation.”

²² Origen (184-253 CE) was one of the first Christian theologians to propose a systematic way to read Scripture for its multiple senses with his three-fold allegorical method. See Origen, *On First Principles: A Reader’s Edition*, trans. John Behr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²³ For a helpful articulation of the importance of encounter for a mystical hermeneutic, see Celia Kourie, “Reading Scripture through a Mystical Lens,” *Acta Theologica* 31, no. 15 (2011): 132-153. Kourie states: “A mystical hermeneutic of scripture is one in which a direct experience of God, or Ultimate Reality, or the One is the end result” (141). Future research should relate the mystical hermeneutic of Black contemplative preachers to Barbara Holmes’s intriguing notion of “griosh,” a contemplative reading of Scripture informed by the tradition of the African storyteller or griot and the practice of Jewish midrash. See Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 95.

²⁴ I sense there may be a kind of womanist impulse in much—though not all—Black contemplative preaching. For example, I am thinking of how Delores Williams’s survival and quality of life ethic resonates with Black contemplative preaching’s concern for life-giving encounters with God in the midst of structures and systems that remain oppressive. See Delores Williams, *Sister in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013). I explore this more in “Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation,” 125, 174-212.

²⁵ In *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, Frank Thomas defines whooping as a “rhetorical practice, traditionally at the end of the sermon, in which the preacher sings or chants in rhythmic cadence in the vernacular of call and response that raises the emotional intensity and impact of the sermon,” 15.

feature of Black preaching—a celebratory, uplifting sermon close.²⁶ However, it may be that Black contemplative preaching does not completely lack a celebratory dimension, but it simply transposes celebration into a different modality than is commonly expected. Cleophus LaRue reminds us that there are many forms of celebration in Black preaching, including meditative, contemplative expressions.²⁷ In other words, Black contemplative preaching often reflects a blending of “folk” and “intellectual” streams of Black preaching.²⁸

To be sure, the definition of Black contemplative preaching that I have articulated is fluid—not the least because I am speaking of something as slippery as contemplation.²⁹ And, of course, all labels have their limits. Nevertheless, I argue that while the three distinctives of Black contemplative preaching—a habitus of prayer, a mystical hermeneutic, and a meditative homiletical style—partially appear in other expressions of Black preaching, together they reflect the unique Black contemplative preaching stream.

HOWARD THURMAN AS BLACK CONTEMPLATIVE PREACHER

One of the earliest and clearest practitioners of Black contemplative preaching in the twentieth century was Howard Washington Thurman (1899-1981). Thurman was a pioneering African American mystic, theologian, and pastor who lived during tumultuous times of war, racism, and segregation. In the midst of the various personal and social crises he faced, he started one of the first interracial churches in the United States—The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, worked as the Dean of Chapel at Boston University and Howard University, and served as the Director of Religious Life at Morehouse College and Spelman College.³⁰ In *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas describe Thurman as one of the most notable exemplars of the understudied Black contemplative preaching stream.³¹ I wholeheartedly agree. This complements the work of Luther Smith, the dean of Thurman studies, whose pioneering work *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* argued that Thurman’s “primary identity was that of mystic.”³² Of course, it is important to note that Thurman never explicitly described himself as a contemplative preacher. Moreover, he was resistant to labeling his religious experience.³³ Nevertheless, I would suggest that his life and ministry witness profoundly to the distinctives of Black contemplative preaching. In what follows, I briefly

²⁶ Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, Revised and Updated (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2013).

²⁷ Cleophus J. LaRue, *Rethinking Celebration: From Rhetoric to Praise in African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 52.

²⁸ See Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, 14-15. See also Wallace D. Best’s discussion of “the mixed-type sermon” that emerged in Chicago during the migration era in *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 94-100. I am indebted to Kyle Brooks for the reference to Best’s work.

²⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Donyelle McCray for this helpful point.

³⁰ 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 recent work *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville and London: 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).

³¹ Simmons and Thomas, *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, 492.

³² Luther Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*, 3rd ed., (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United, 2007), 15.

³³ See *Mysticism and Social Action: Lawrence Lecture and Discussions with Dr Howard Thurman* (International Association for Religious Freedom, 2015, Kindle ed.), location 358.

highlight some of the ways these distinctives were revealed in Thurman's practice of preaching.³⁴

Habitus of Prayer

Reflecting the religious worldview of his African ancestors, for Thurman, all of life was sacred.³⁵ Thus, his habitus or disposition of prayer was not segmented into one part of life. Rather, prayer was a way of being in the world. Thurman once stated that "[w]hen a man prays he is not merely performing an act, he is *being* something."³⁶ In other words, for Thurman, prayer is cultivating a way of being out of which a preaching ministry should emerge. Indeed, he once told an audience in a lecture on preaching that "the sermon is the distillation of the thinking, reading, observation, brooding, and meditation of the preacher."³⁷ Contemplation is the context for proclamation.

Thurman's sermons often called others to develop a habitus of prayer. For example, he was known for offering readings of meditations and prayers before his sermons. "Their primary purpose," Thurman said, "is to aid the listeners in bringing their minds into focus upon some searching insight and to make available the centered spirits."³⁸ Sometimes these meditations were excerpts from books, poems, and prayers that Thurman found valuable in his personal and ministerial life but they were also, at times, from Thurman's own private musings before the presence of God. Thurman's sermon content also focused on encouraging a life of prayerful attentiveness to God and God's world. In his sermon entitled "The Mood to Linger," reflecting on his experience of becoming alert to previous unknown sounds while walking at night, Thurman states: "There are things of which you cannot become aware, things you cannot sense until at last all of the surface of confusion and chaos and noise of your life is somehow quieted. And it is then that your ears pick up sounds that come from the deeper regions of your life."³⁹ For Thurman, stillness was crucial to cultivating a prayerful attentiveness to God and God's world.

Many people were deeply impacted through hearing Thurman preach. As one student reportedly said, "Some men talk about God, which is of value if it inspires devotion to him. But, when Howard Thurman speaks, you somehow experience God. He seems to take God with him;

³⁴ I have given in-depth attention to how these distinctives are present in Thurman's life, thought, and formation as a preacher. See Clark, "Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation," 91-113. For the most extensive study of Thurman's preaching that I am aware of, see Patrick Clayborn, "A Homiletic of Spirituality: An Analysis of Howard Thurman's Theory and Praxis of Preaching" (PhD diss., Drew University, 2009). For a succinct study of Thurman's preaching, see Patrick Clayborn, "Preaching as an Act of Spirit: The Homiletical Theory of Howard Thurman" *Homiletic* 35, no. 1 (2010): 3-16.

³⁵ Patrick Clayborn also recognizes the African religious and philosophical roots of Thurman's emphasis on the indivisibility of life. See Clayborn, "A Homiletic of Spirituality," 108.

³⁶ Howard Thurman, *The Centering Moment* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United, 1969), 11, author's italics. Though I prefer gender-inclusive language and realize its absence is deeply offensive for many, I have not altered Thurman's usage in this article recognizing he was a product of his place and time.

³⁷ Howard Thurman, "Worship and Word: A View of the Liberal Congregation and Its Sermons" in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume 4: The Soundless Passion of a Single Mind, June 1949-December 1962* ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 331.

³⁸ Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United, 1956), ix.

³⁹ Howard Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables* ed. David B. Gowler and Kipton E. Jensen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 122.

or rather, he seems propelled by God.”⁴⁰ Thurman was one who did not just say prayers but he lived prayer.

Mystical Hermeneutic

The second distinctive of Black contemplative preaching that is seen in Thurman is a mystical hermeneutic. For example, some of his sermons encouraged the contemplation of spiritual exemplars and mystics in history as seen in his sermon series entitled “Men Who’ve Walked with God,” which explored the spiritual wisdom of figures such as Buddha, St. Francis, and Meister Eckhart.⁴¹ Given Thurman’s wide learning, his sermons were also populated with references from literature, philosophy, personal stories, poetry, and poignant observations from everyday life and nature.⁴² Of course, at times, Thurman specifically addressed matters of prayer and contemplation. This is seen, for example, in his sermons “Prayer and Silence,” “Prayer and Pressure,” and others.⁴³ However, to cite Mozella Mitchell, even when Thurman is not explicitly speaking of prayer and divine encounter, he is almost always seeking to encourage “closer communion with God and with all of life.”⁴⁴

Thurman’s mystical hermeneutic united spirituality and social engagement.⁴⁵ Indeed, Thurman’s life-long pursuit was “the search for common ground,” that is, the search for community.⁴⁶ As Gary Dorrien writes, Thurman’s “sermons expounded a mystical vision of spiritual unity and an ethical-spiritual commitment to nonviolence, urging that all forms of violence, oppression, and prejudice offend against the divine good.”⁴⁷ Thurman’s mystical hermeneutic also led him to engage the more-than-human creation in his sermons. A few months after the first Earth Day in 1970, Thurman preached a sermon entitled “Jesus and the Natural Order.”⁴⁸ His words are worth quoting at length: “In our power over nature, and in our radical unremembering of the fact that we are a part of nature, we feel that we can ab-use nature....But

⁴⁰ Mary Jenness, *Twelve Negro Americans* (New York: Friendship, 1936), 153.

⁴¹ See Howard Thurman, *The Way of the Mystics, Walking with God: The Sermon Series of Howard Thurman, Volume 2*, eds. Peter Eisenstadt and Walter Earl Fluker (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).

⁴² James Earl Massey, “Thurman’s Preaching: Substance and Style,” in Henry J. Young, ed., *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1983), 112. See, for example, the range of references in his sermons included in Howard Thurman, *The Growing Edge* (Richmond: Friends United, 1956).

⁴³ See, for example, Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, 29-53 and Thurman, *Sermons on the Parables*, 116-123.

⁴⁴ Mitchell’s words emerge in the context of her intriguing exploration of Thurman as a shaman, particularly in relationship to his view of conversion. Mozella G. Mitchell, *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman’s Theology* (Bristol: Wyndham Hall, 1985), 90.

⁴⁵ For a thorough study of how Thurman saw mysticism and social transformation as inseparable, see Alton B. Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

⁴⁶ See Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground: An Inquiry into the Basis of Man’s Experience of Community* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United, 1971). See also Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Ideal of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 3-77.

⁴⁷ Gary Dorrien, *Breaking White Supremacy: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 169.

⁴⁸ Howard Thurman, “What Shall I Do with My Life?: The Natural Order,” Howard Thurman Virtual Listening Room, Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, <http://archives.bu.edu/web/howard-thurman/virtual-listening-room/detail?id=358566>. Thurman introduces the sermon’s title as “Jesus and the Natural Order or The Great Delusion.” It is important to assert that Thurman demonstrated environmental concern as part of his spirituality early on. See Howard Thurman, “Man and the World of Nature,” *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman, Volume 2: Christian, Who Calls Me Christian?, April 1936-August 1943* ed. Walter Earl Fluker (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 101-106.

in truth we are of the essence of the ebb and flow of the heartbeat of nature, so that we cannot do violence to nature without there being an echo of agony moving through all the corridors of the spirit, of the mind, of the psyche that makes for derangement of all kinds which will increase as the ravaging continues.”⁴⁹

Here we see Thurman calls for a new way of relating to a creation groaning in travail. Or, in the words of Douglas Christie, we might say he evinces “a contemplative ecological vision” in his sermon, that is, a vision that calls for a different way of seeing and being that supports creation’s flourishing.⁵⁰ Thurman’s mystical hermeneutic, then, was not one that was disengaged from the world. His contemplation of Scripture and other sources was a means of nourishing the spirits of listeners that they might foster a life-giving and liberating relationship with God, self, others, and all creation.

Meditative Homiletical Style

The final distinctive of Black contemplative preaching that I would like to consider is Thurman’s meditative homiletical style. Thurman was not a whooper. His sermons were more meditative and reflective than ecstatic or extroverted. Among other reasons, he learned early on to merge head and heart from the examples around him. Recalling the sermons he heard growing up, he said: “The preachers in my church were not “whoopers”....At the core of their preaching was solid religious instruction and guidance which augmented rather than diminished the emotional intensity of their words.”⁵¹ Their example impacted him.

Later in life, he deepened his meditative approach through insights he learned from other teachers. Echoing his homiletics instructor, Thurman opined that a “preacher is never under obligation to preach a great sermon, but he is always under obligation to wrestle with a great idea.”⁵² In other words, for Thurman, the sermon was an opportunity to contemplate a glorious insight or idea like a diamond from a variety of angles.⁵³ This was often facilitated through Thurman’s skillful use of silence. The late Evans Crawford argued that Thurman was a master of using “the sermon pause” to cultivate a shared silence.⁵⁴ For Thurman, this was not a technique or trick. Rather, it flowed from the prayerful disposition that he had cultivated over time. For, as Thurman once stated, “God speaks loudest in silence.”⁵⁵

Along with his penchant for silence, Thurman was known for his exaggerated gestures, energy, and animation. His proclamation was one of controlled passion. It was through this that

⁴⁹ Thurman, “What Shall I Do with My Life?”

⁵⁰ Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 51. 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.

⁵¹ Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 17.

⁵² Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, x.

⁵³ Dorothy Henderson, *Biographical Sketches of Six Humanitarians Whose Lives Have Been for the Greater Glory* (New York: Exposition Press, 1958), 163, quoted in James Earl Massey, “Thurman’s Preaching Substance and Style,” in Henry J. Young, ed., *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1983), 120.

⁵⁴ Evans Crawford with Thomas Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 25-35.

⁵⁵ Howard Thurman, “Dilemmas of the Religious Professional,” Hester Lectures III, Side A, (Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Mill Valley, CA, February 11, 1971). Transcript from The Howard Thurman Digital Archive, Pitts Theology Library at Emory University, Atlanta, GA, accessed October 18 2021, <https://thurman.pitts.emory.edu/items/show/258>.

he led his listeners to an emancipatory encounter with the living God. This is perhaps best seen in the testimony of Francis Hall, a noted Quaker author. Reflecting back on the impact of Thurman's preaching on his life in his younger years while attending a conference, Hall reports: "He had held me entranced each day by his deeply meditative style of speaking. You felt the creative spirit at work; indeed it was the Spirit of Christ that was speaking through him... Toward the end of his sharing he once more spoke... and suddenly the words were no longer transmitted by Howard Thurman. They were the living words of Christ and they sank deep into my being, where they exploded and infused me and gripped me."⁵⁶

Ultimately, Thurman's contemplative preaching was not about Thurman. He was a channel through whom the Spirit worked in a particular way to bear witness to the living God. Thurman's habitus of prayer, mystical hermeneutic, and meditative homiletical style all reflect his insistence on leading people to an inner encounter with the divine that they might be transformed to contribute to the outward flourishing of African Americans and all creation. For, as Thurman himself stated, "The core of my preaching has always concerned itself with the development of the inner resources needed for the creation of a friendly world of friendly men."⁵⁷ Thus, he is a profound example of the witness and wisdom of Black contemplative preaching.

BLACK CONTEMPLATIVE PREACHERS TODAY

While Howard Thurman is one of the most notable practitioners of the Black contemplative preaching stream in the twentieth century, there are numerous other preachers today who continue in this tradition. Some of these include Jay Williams, Ineda Adesanya, James Forbes, Willie Jennings, Veronica Goines, William Lamar IV, Luke Powery, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Frank Thomas. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all these preachers describe themselves as contemplative preachers—although Thomas has explicitly done so.⁵⁸ Nor do I contend that they follow Thurman's particular embodiment of contemplative preaching or that all of their sermons are contemplative. However, I would suggest that in different ways *at least some* of their sermons reflect the distinctives of Black contemplative preaching.

To further increase the visibility of Black contemplative preaching today, let me briefly highlight sermons from two of these preachers: Kelly Brown Douglas and Frank Thomas.⁵⁹ The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas is an ordained Episcopal priest, inaugural Dean of the Episcopal Divinity School at Union Seminary, and Canon Theologian at the Washington National

⁵⁶ Francis B. Hall, *Practical Spirituality: Selected Writings of Francis B. Hall*, eds. Howard Alexander, Wilmer Cooper, and James Newby (Dublin: Pinit, 1984), 13, quoted in Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change*, 96-97.

⁵⁷ Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 160.

⁵⁸ Even if some of these preachers would self-identify with aspects of contemplative preaching (and I believe some do) the reality is that almost no preacher's approach to preaching can be *fully* captured by any single label. Individuals are much too complex, and the practice and context of preaching is too varied. (I am indebted to Luke Powery for this point.) For example, while Thomas is well-known for his contributions to celebratory preaching and identifies as a narrative preacher, he has also stated that he sees himself as a contemplative preacher. See "A Conversation with Rev. Dr. Frank A. Thomas hosted by Dr. Gina M. Stewart," Frank Thomas, December 4, 2019, YouTube Video, 1:00:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCYkICe-Ick&t=1692s>. Thomas's discussion of his preaching style begins at the 9:15 mark.

⁵⁹ Space does not permit a more in-depth engagement with the various themes of their sermons and how the distinctives of Black contemplative preaching appear in them. Here I aim to simply illuminate some contemporary exemplars. For a slightly deeper engagement with these representatives, see Clark, "Contemplation, Proclamation, and Social Transformation," 222-226, 229-232.

Cathedral.⁶⁰ On Christ the King Sunday in November 2020, during a worship service at the Washington National Cathedral, Douglas preached a moving meditative sermon about how the Christ who breaks into history invites us to partner with him in pursuing justice through the story of our lives.⁶¹ Amid all the polarization surrounding the aftermath of the recent presidential election, Douglas drew on the story of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 as well as various contemporary and personal stories to paint a beautiful vision of the kind of radical and expansive inclusion and justice that is at the heart of God. However, she contended that if the story of our life is to be one that promotes the justice of God, then, above all it must be one marked by devotion to prayer. She states: “Of all of the images that run through my mind when I think of Jesus, the one that always stands out to me the most is that of Jesus going off to a lonely place to pray. The Jesus that is Christ the King, invites us to write a story with our lives that is marked by prayer... for it is through prayer that we can actually reach beyond ourselves to the mystery that is God’s transforming power.”⁶² Douglas ends her reflective sermon calling for her audience to participate with God in pursuing justice through the story of their lives.

A second notable contemporary Black contemplative preacher is the Rev. Dr. Frank A. Thomas. Thomas is the Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Th. Miller Professor of Homiletics and Director of the Ph.D. program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric at Christian Theological Seminary (CTS) in Indianapolis and a past president of the Academy of Homiletics. An example of Thomas’s contemplative proclamation is a message entitled “Why ‘Not?’”⁶³ that was preached virtually on January 27, 2021 to Phillips Theological Seminary on the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Riots, a tumultuous time in which Black businesses and other properties were destroyed due to white supremacist violence. Drawing on Hebrews 11, Thomas considers why some of the faithful people of God seem to be “conquered bodies and destroyed lives” that did not receive the fulfillment of God’s promise in their lifetime.⁶⁴ This leads him to consider the injustice that led to the destroyed lives of Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and others. In the face of such injustice, he concludes that it is “the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus that gives us power and authority.”⁶⁵ For him, “even though it looks like conquered bodies and destroyed lives,” this is ultimately not what the people of God “are looking at.”⁶⁶ In other words, his celebrative yet contemplative sermon reframes our perspective through calling us to contemplate the hope of Christ’s resurrection—not as a way of dismissing injustice and evil but rather as a way to deepen our strength to address injustice and evil.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I sought to increase the visibility of the witness and wisdom of Black contemplative preachers. Of course, there are many important issues that I have not been able to explore, such as (1) the extent to which Black contemplative preaching reflects a quest for a kind of Eurocentric homiletical respectability, (2) the relationship between Black contemplative

⁶⁰ For example, see Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas’s sermon at Washington National Cathedral, November 22, 2020, YouTube video, 18:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8p-y-Zeg1LY&t=37s>.

⁶¹ Douglas, “Sunday Sermon.”

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Frank Thomas, “Why ‘Not?’” Hebrews 11:13 Dr. Frank A. Thomas,” Frank Thomas, January 27, 2021, YouTube video, 30:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQGKw8MX5J8&t=627s>.

⁶⁴ Thomas, “Why ‘Not?’”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

preaching and what Kenyatta Gilbert calls the trivocal nature of Black preaching,⁶⁷ and (3) the degree to which the meditative nature of Black contemplative preaching may reinforce the social silencing of Black women.⁶⁸ These and other topics are critical for future research. However, I would like to conclude by gesturing at some of the wisdom that Black contemplative preachers offer for the teaching and practice of preaching today. Firstly, Black contemplative preaching reminds us that there are many different preaching voices and styles within any cultural group. Just as there is no singular white, Asian American, or Latinx preaching style, there is no singular Black preaching style. While appreciating the wisdom and insight of the prevalent practice of ecstatic, celebratory Black preaching in the past and present, the reclamation of the Black contemplative preaching stream helps to honor the multiplicity of expressions of Black agency, creativity, and personhood. Through introducing students to the Black contemplative preaching stream, teachers of preaching can help students find their own unique voice rather than feeling forced to fit any given cultural or gendered stereotype. Or, to put it in the words of Howard Thurman, they can help preachers of all backgrounds to “follow the grain in [their] own wood.”⁶⁹

Secondly, Black contemplative preaching can help preachers to reclaim Augustine’s insistence that the preacher “be a pray-er before being a speaker.”⁷⁰ This is especially urgent because, as Luke Powery has noted, prayer is often tangential in homiletical classrooms despite its importance in the life of preaching.⁷¹ In a culture full of noise and distractions, prayer as a way of being and seeing is desperately needed no matter a preacher’s background. Attention to the lived practices of Black contemplative preachers may serve as a helpful resource in this endeavor.

Lastly, Black contemplative preaching challenges proclaimers of the gospel to hold in tension lament and hope, pain and beauty, loss, and longing. This is especially urgent in the contemporary moment with our myriad national and global crises. While other forms of proclamation hold lament and hope in tension, Black contemplative preaching seems to naturally do this well because it reflects a non-dual mindset due to its mystical hermeneutic. As such, in an age of superficiality, it can serve as a resource to expand the homiletical imagination of preachers of diverse backgrounds. To echo Howard Thurman, Black contemplative preaching can remind teachers and students of preaching that we are not called to preach “great sermons” but rather to wrestle with glorious truths in ways that are faithful to both the full story of Scripture and the full story of the human experience.⁷²

⁶⁷ Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 10-15.

⁶⁸ I am indebted to Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman for raising this last issue in a response to my paper during a session at the American Academy for Religion in 2020.

⁶⁹ Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise*, 19. I have been unable to find the original source for this popular quote.

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, in *The Works of Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-First Century*, trans. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1996), 4.15.32.

⁷¹ Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 53-54.

⁷² Thurman, *The Growing Edge*, x.