STORYTELLING AND MYTHMAKING TO ENGAGE CULTURE: USING AFRICAN AMERICAN PREACHING AS A CASE STUDY

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In this presentation, I am drawing on the literature of the African American preaching style of storytelling and mythmaking as a case study for engaging culture. In this endeavor, I am also in conversation with African American spirituality to examine themes of liberation, social protest, and freedom in the slave narratives and sorrow songs of the black church to provide context for the African American preaching style of storytelling and mythmaking.

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The exilic motif of Psalm 137 is a virtual mosaic of African American spirituality. Shaped by unique history and rooted in a more holistic sense of community, the spirituality of the African American tradition has much to teach other evangelical traditions about the integration of theological conviction and a lived faith.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
    when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars

we hung our harps,

for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;

they said, “Sing to us one of the songs of Zion!”

How can we sing songs of the Lord

while in a foreign land?

Psalm 137:1 – 4

The exilic motif that defines the existence of the people of God is that we are in the world but not of the world. We are holders of a dual citizenship. We are pilgrims and strangers.

This world is not my home, I’m just a passin’ through
My hopes and all of my treasures lay somewhere in the blue
The angels are beckoning me from heaven’s open doors
and I just can’t feel at home in this world any more.[1]

The exilic motif that defined the existence of Jewish slaves in Babylon is that they were in Babylon but not of Babylon. In seventy years, there would be a homecoming in Jerusalem! The exilic motif that defined the existence of African slaves in America is that they were in America but not of America. Perhaps William Edward Burghardt DuBois, in his classic book *The Souls of Black Folk*, most aptly depicts this ambivalence,

[1] Traditional African American spiritual, “This World Is Not My Home.”

this dilemma, this tug of war that he calls "double consciousness." He says, "One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps him from being pulled asunder."[2] And yet, in the midst of this ambivalence, the African slave was able to demonstrate and to manifest a depth of spiritual wisdom that is a testimony to the glory and the power of God. As an African American, I have been fascinated at the depth of wisdom in this tradition. Slaves who had nothing were able to leave behind them a legacy that thrived for generations.

Where did they get this kind of wisdom? In 1831, Nat Turner led an insurrection. Shortly after that riot, all the slave states, with the exception of Tennessee, reduced the teaching of slaves to oral instruction. By 1855, nine out of fifteen slave states outlawed the distribution of Bibles to slaves. If slaves could not read, write, or even own a Bible, where did they get that wisdom, particularly spiritual wisdom? They got it from what I call the "sitting at the feet" phenomenon. The youth would listen to the elders talk about the customs and laws of the land, the Bible, and maturing as adults. They sat at the feet of their elders, and there they were imbued, filled, and saturated with information.

Where did they get this kind of wisdom? They got it from the oral transmission of information. They turned their ears into tape recorders. What they heard and recorded in their ears they wrote on the tablets of their minds. What they wrote on the tablets of their minds they transferred to their eyes and turned them into camcorders. What they photographed with their eyes they transmitted to their mouths and turned them into

[2] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989), xv.

megaphones. Thus, what they saw, they talked about. They could say what they saw so graphically that people who heard them could see what they said.

Where did they get this kind of wisdom? They got it from the "grapevine telegraph." It is amazing. In a time of no education, no mass media, no fax machines, no e-mail, no telephones, in a single night through the grapevine telegraph they were able to communicate what was happening in the community to people down the road for miles. In a week's time, news would travel over hundreds of miles, relating who succeeded in making it to Canada through the Underground Railroad, what was taking place in the Civil War, what was taking place on the political scene, and what were the new agricultural inventions.

It was not just wisdom. It was spiritual wisdom. Henry and Ella Mitchell define spirituality as "sensitivity or attachment to religious values involving a belief system about God and creation that controls ethical choices and behavior and supports calmness of spirit in times of distress."[3] Slaves were able to deal with the inhumanities and the atrocities because they had a core of beliefs about God and creation that enabled them to keep sanity at a time of great human degradation. Their spirituality allowed them to respond to the questions:

> Why should I feel discouraged.
>
> Why should the shadows come,
>
> Why should my heart be lonely

[3] Cited in Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136.

And long for heaven and home,

When Jesus is my portion?

My constant Friend is He:

His eye is on the sparrow,

And I know He watches me;

I sing because I'm happy.

I sing because I'm free.

For His eye is on the sparrow,

And I know He watches me.[4]

This belief system enabled them to keep equilibrium when they were going through rough footing.

Robert Franklin, the president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, has developed a topology of African American spirituality. It is important because it debunks the myth that all African Americans are the same. There are at least six traditions of African American spirituality: first, the Afrocentric tradition of African American spirituality, which concentrates on a retrieval of African American cultural distinctions, particularly a recovery of liturgics, drums, guitars, tambourines, and African dress; second, the charismatic tradition of African American spirituality, which emphasizes the impartation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; third, the contemplative tradition of African American spirituality, which focuses on intimacy with God; fourth, the evangelical tradition of African American spirituality, which

[4] Civilla D. Martin, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," in *Songs of Zion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 33.

concentrates on the proclamation of faith and the teaching of the Word; fifth, the holiness tradition of African American spirituality, which points toward purity of life and thought; and sixth, the social justice tradition of African American spirituality, which focuses on the transformation of the soul, the liberation of the oppressed, and the reformation of society.[5]

Consider the Hebrew slaves of Psalm 137, at least two generations removed from Jerusalem. By the rivers of Babylon they sit down. They weep. They have a nostalgic fit. They remember Jerusalem. They hang their harps on the poplar trees because their captors have required of them a song. Those who have taken them into captivity required of them mirth and entertainment. The request from their enemies is "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." We know you can do it. You are famous for it. In fact, your most famous king, David, was the sweet singer of Israel. We have heard of your singing. Sing us one of your songs. Make your choice – selection number 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing"; selection number 24: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it"; selection number 27: "The Lord is my light and salvation – whom shall I fear?"; selection number 46: "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever present help in trouble"; selection number 122: "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'"; selection 127: "Unless the Lord build the house, its builders labor in vain"; selection number 150: "Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens … Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Any of those selections. Render us a concert, because we know you can do it. But they respond,

[5] Sanders, *Saints in Exile*, 136 – 137.

"How can we sing songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" Now, why did they not sing? The text does not tell us.

James Sanders, who taught canonical hermeneutics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City for many years, has said that biblical characters do not primarily serve us as models of morality but rather as mirrors of identity.[6] The reason they did not sing is perhaps the reason we would not have sung. Maybe they did not sing because they were still hung up about their hang-ups. The Temple was demolished. Their society was ruined. Their ancestral city was plundered. Yes, the Temple of God had been destroyed, wrecked, and pulverized, but the God of the Temple was still alive. As long as the God of the Temple is alive, you can sing when the Temple of God is down. Israel was not a territorial jurisdiction for God, because God did not just reign in Jerusalem, God reigned all over the world. God was not defined by geography. God had the whole world in his hands. Why did they not sing? Maybe because of holy indignation. Perhaps the Babylonians were insensitive and they did not care how heartbroken the Hebrews were. Surely they did not appreciate the songs and struggles of the Hebrews. In a response of holy indignation, maybe the Hebrews were saying, "You don't know our God and you don't know the songs we sing to our God. And we're indignant that you would ask us to sing for your entertainment. We don't sing for that reason." Maybe they were too demoralized and despondent to sing. African slaves have done what these Jewish slaves refused to do. They have sung the Lord's song in a

[6] James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary volume (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976) 406.

strange land. They sang in the fields, they sang in the slave quarters, they sang in the big house, but, most important, they sang in the church.

Elsewhere in *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois writes that a Negro church had three components: preaching, singing, and frenzy – the shout. After a week of being tattered, torn, and told they were three-fifths human, and that they had tails and no souls, they put on their Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes because they were going to meet the Lord. There was freedom to express themselves, freedom to cry, freedom to shout, freedom to get happy. It was the one time during the week when they could let it all out and give God glory. Preaching, singing, and shouting – three components of the Negro church.

My mentor, Dr. James Cox of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, once shared this analogy with me: doctrines are to preaching what steel rods are to concrete – meaning, without solid, meaningful doctrine, our preaching weakens and ultimately collapses. The rods of doctrine hold our foundation firm. Likewise, there are three steel rods that hold the concrete of African American spirituality together. The first steel rod is singing.

Lord, I want to be a Christian in my heart.

Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus.

Every time I feel the Spirit moving in my heart, I will pray.

Somebody's knockin' at your door, oh, sinner, why don't you answer.

Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.[7]

Singing in the African American church is what breathing is to life, what blood is to the body. Spirituals were born out of great sorrow. After the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, slaves were prohibited from gathering without their white overseers. To worship freely then, slaves were forced to go down to the "hush harbors," hidden gathering places along the river banks. Here the sounds of flowing water hid the sounds of secret singing. The church during this period became known as the invisible institution. They would sing and pray and praise God. Spirituals were drawn from various sources. Sometimes they would sing about the auction block, where families would be separated forever. Sometimes they would sing about the creeping of old age. Sometimes they would sing about dying. Everything became a topic for the spirituals.

There was an eschatological dimension in their singing. They sang about the other side. Their singing was not an opiate for the masses, as Karl Marx suggested. They were not afraid of death. There were things more fearful than death. One of the spirituals asserts, "Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom all over me! … / An' be-fo' I'd be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, / An' go home to my Lord an' be free."[8] Hope had been feeding on hope for such an indeterminable period of time that hope had dissipated. Hope unborn had died – it was aborted. There was nothing left; no sign of freedom, no

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[7] "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," *Songs of Zion*, 76; Traditional African American spiritual, "Ain't Nobody Gonna Hold My Body Down"; "Nobody knows the Trouble I See," *Songs of Zion*, 170; "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," *Songs of Zion*, 121; "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door," *Songs of Zion*, 154; "Wade in the Water," *Songs of Zion*, 129.

[8] "Oh Freedom," in *Songs of Zion*, 114.

sign of getting through this world. They talked about a better place. They would say, "Got a Savior in de Kingdom, ain't dat good news? / I'm agoin' to lay down dis world, Goin' to shoulder up mah cross, Goin' to take it home to my Jesus, ain't dat good news?"[9] "There's a bright side somewhere / Keep on searchin' til you find it / There's a bright side somewhere."[10] Exilic eschatology enabled the slaves to keep their sanity in the midst of dehumanizing circumstances, believing that God's tomorrow would be better than their today.

African Americans sang because they were confident that God was not finished with them, nor with their world. They hid their messages in cryptic coding and transmitted them on a dual trajectory so that the insider received the intended message and the outsider did not. They would sing, "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home: / I looked over Jordan and what did I see, / a band of angels come after me."[11] The slave master would think about heaven. The slave would think about escape. To the insider, Jordan represented Canada, and the chariot, the conductors of the Underground Railroad. The insiders looked for freedom while the outsiders looked for glory. Slaves were talking about a terrestrial and not a celestial residence.

Sometimes they would say, "I'm goin' home on the mornin' train, the evenin' train may be too late, I'm goin' home on the mornin' train."[12] The Underground Railroad is stopping by this morning. Don't wait until this evening. It may be too late.

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[9] "Ain't Dat Good News," in *Songs of Zion*, 114.
[10] Traditional African American Spiritual, "Keep on Searchin'".
[11] "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," in *Songs of Zion*, 104.
[12] Traditional African American spiritual, "Morning Train."

The insider got the message, but the outsider did not. What an ingenious way of exemplifying wisdom. As Jesus said, those who really want to hear will have their ears open to the message, and those who do not want to hear will close their ears and miss the message.

Spirituals amplified a social protest emphasis. These were called sorrow songs. Slaves would talk about the slave master and he would not even know it. They would sing, "I'm gonna tell God how you treat me, one of these days."[13] The slave master would hear but not understand. Spirituals protested about inequity and injustice in a land where God had made all people equal, had made every individual in God's own image, and had written his signature in the fabric of the souls of all people.

In the preface of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, the translator wrote about a time when Bonhoeffer came to the United States in 1930 to study and eventually to teach at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Bonhoeffer visited the Abyssinian Baptist Church, which was established in 1808. The choir would sing the spirituals and the congregation would hear the dynamic preaching of Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Bonhoeffer was touched by the spirituals. He saw a mirroring effect between the African Americans' struggles and those of the Christians in the illegal Confessing Church in Germany. When he returned to Germany, he taught the Negro spirituals to this students in his underground seminary.[14] His friend Eberhard Bethge said that twenty years before

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[13] Traditional African American spiritual, "I'm Gonna Tell God."
[14] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and other spirituals were sung in concert halls and over radios, they were sung in the seminary halls by Bonhoeffer and his students.[15]

Negro spirituals are kind of theo-musicology. In his dual compendium *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks to Life*, Howard Thurman exegetes the Negro spirituals "Heaven" and "Balm in Gilead."

> I got shoes. You got shoes.
> All God's children got shoes.
> And when we get to heaven, we're gonna put on our shoes
> we're gonna shout all over God's heaven.[16]

Slaves struggled with the idea of one God and two heavens. They wondered if there must be two heavens, because the slave master and his family did not want to be with them on earth, much less in heaven. Yet both the slave masters and the slaves believed they were going to heaven. Were there two heavens? They concluded that there could not be two heavens, for there is only one God. Thus, they reasoned that if there is one God and one heaven, then the slave masters enjoy heaven on earth and suffer eternity in hell. Conversely, the slaves suffer hell on earth but anticipate the delights of eternity in heaven. They would sing, "I got shoes, you got shoes / all God's children got shoes / and when we get to heaven we're gonna put on our shoes / and we're gonna shout all over God's heaven." When they got close to the front door of the "big house," they

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[15] Ibid, 71.
[16] Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks to Life* (Richmond, IN: Friends Unite Press, 1975) 43 – 44.

would sing “everybody’s talking ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there / heaven, heaven; we’re goin’ to walk all over God’s heaven.” It was a way of articulating the eschatological destinies of the oppressed righteous and their wicked oppressors.[17]

“There Is a Balm in Gilead.” Jeremiah 8:22 asks, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Thurman that this is not a question that is asked to God, nor is it a question that is asked to Israel. It is a question that is asked to the entire ministry of Jeremiah. Jeremiah, you have been preaching and prophesying: Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? The Negro slave did an ingenious thing. Thurman said the Negro spiritual took the question mark of Jeremiah and straightened it out into an exclamation point, saying,

> There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
> There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul,
> Sometimes I feel discouraged, And think my work’s in vain,
> But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again
> There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole,
> There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.[18]

If there was going to be a meeting down on the hush harbor, a boy would go through the cotton fields delivering water to the slaves. The boy would deliver the message in a song: “Steal away, steal away, / steal away to Jesus! / Steal away, steal

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[17] Ibid.
[18] “Balm in Gilead,” *Songs of Zion*, 123.

away home, / I ain't got long to stay here!"[19] In the evening, slaves would gather on the hush harbor. They would pray and sing. When they returned to their slaves quarters, the house slaves would sing as they walked by the big house, "I couldn't hear nobody pray / Oh, way down yonder by myself, / And I couldn't hear nobody pray."[20] This was a way of informing the participants in the hush harbor meetings that the white master was oblivious of their secret meeting.[21]

The second steel rod that holds African American spirituality together is that of theology. It is the core belief system of the Christian religion. Africans believed in God. They understood God as one who was transcendent above us. They did not believe in an abstract God. They believed God was omnipotent, although they did not use the word *omnipotent*. They expressed omnipotence in figurative speech: "He's got the whole world in his hands." They believed God was omnipresent, although they didn't use the word *omnipresent*. When they wanted to talk about the omnipresent nature of God, they exclaimed, "He's so high you can't get over him / He's so wide, you can't get around him / He is so low that you can't get under him / You must come in at the door."[22] In the Negro slaves' mind, God was so immense that God filled the universe, and when God decided to move, he had to bump into himself.

Slaves did not use abstract words like *omniscient*. They would say, "He sits high and looks low, and sees everything that we do and hears everything that we say." This

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[19] "Steal Away," in *Songs of Zion*, 134.
[20] "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray," in *Songs of Zion*, 78.
[21] Thurman, 43 – 44.
[22] Traditional African American spiritual, "So High."

was not an abstract God. They believed that God was eternal. In God they found something that was immortal and they saw someone who was eternal. They would talk about God as if time – past, present, and future – collapsed into immediate consciousness in him. God *is*. God is not an abstract God but a concrete, relatable, relational, and experiential God. They believed in Jesus Christ, the Son. They began to understand the incarnation. Africans believed in the most high god. When they came to America, they were able to relate to Jesus Christ as the Son of the Most High God. They believed in the Christ of faith and the Jesus of Nazareth. They were not concerned with Albert Schweitzer's quest for the historical Jesus. They were not concerned with all the theories about Jesus. He was just Massa Jesus, high enough to sit on his throne but small enough to be tucked away in our little bitty souls. There was no separation between Jesus and God in their Christology. They saw Jesus as God and God as Jesus. They believed in God, they believed in Jesus, and they believed in the Holy Spirit. They believed in the Trinity. Yes, there were spirits: bad spirits – demons – and good spirits – angels. In their thinking, the Africans converted the good spirit who lived within to the Holy Spirit, who was sent by the Father and promised by the Son.

The third steel rod that holds the concrete of African American spirituality together is preaching. The slave preacher preached their theology. To the African Americans, theology that is not preachable is really no theology at all. It must be preachable. The slaves preached about the immediacy of the presence and work of God. They talked as if they had just spoken with the biblical authors and their characters: "I saw John on the Isle of Patmos and he told me to tell you not to be nervous about it

because the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Christ." "I was talking to Paul the other day and Paul wanted me to remind those of you who are concerned about your destination after you die that once you are absent from the body you are present with the Lord." It was as if the slave preacher had a box seat and God was reminding him of how God created the world, standing on nothing because there was nothing to stand on, taking nothing and making something. Genesis 1:1 simply says, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."

The slave preacher transformed these words into pictures the people could cling to. God is pictured as placing the sky and flinging the stars from flaming fingertips, causing the black velvet of the night to be a background for them. God is pictured as making floating, fluffy, fleecy, white clouds and putting the sun in the middle. The earth and the moon and the other planets participate in a merry-go-round system, and there has not been a collision since the day of creation. God painted the sky blue without a stepladder or paintbrush. God wrote music for the robins, a song to sing.

The slave preacher turned theological ink into blood. It was incarnational preaching. They believed in preaching God as the deliverer of the oppressed. The slave preacher pictured Moses primarily as the liberator and David primarily as the shepherd boy who killed Goliath and jumped for joy. Did not the Lord deliver Daniel? Surely he will deliver me. Black congregations know that when the black preachers picture Jesus dying at Calvary on Good Friday, they never leave him in the grave. They declare that

on Sunday morning, he arose. Slave preachers preached the core belief system of the Christian religion.

Bonhoeffer struggled with what it meant to be a citizen of Germany and a Christian in a demonic state. In a German cell, struggling with conflict between flesh and spirit, seeking to understand his true identity, he penned a poignant and moving poem title, "Who Am I?" In spite of the external trials and internal doubts that plagued him, Bonhoeffer confidently concludes, "Whoever I am, Thou knowest, oh, God, I am thine."[23]

The question ultimately is not, "Who am I?" but "Whose am I?" *I am thine, oh Lord, I have heard thy voice and it told thy love to me. But I long to rise in the arms of faith and be closer drawn to thee. Draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord to the cross where thou has died, draw me nearer, nearer, nearer blessed Lord to thy precious bleeding side.* I am thine.[24]

Excerpted from "The Spiritual Wisdom of the African American Tradition," *For All the Saints: Evangelical Theology and Christian Spirituality* Timothy George and Alister McGrath, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 165 – 174.

The African American preaching tradition gave birth to a sequential homiletical structure that has been implemented by black preachers from generation to generation. It

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[23] Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*, 15.
[24] Fanny J. Crosby, "Draw Me Nearer," in *The Worshipping Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1990) 534.

is a paradigmatic dictum for biblical preaching today which can be translated into preaching delivery steps. This dictum consists of six movements. These steps were adapted from the United Kingdom tradition, and adapted for use in the African American preaching tradition. Dr. James Stalker, during a lecture titled "The Preacher as Man of the Word," made these comments: "An esteemed friend, the Rev. John McMillan of Ullapool, some years ago repeated to me the following rhyme on the method of constructing a sermon, and although I have never succeeded in coming up to its standard, it has often floated before me with advantage in the hours of composition:

> Begin low;
> Proceed slow;
> Rise higher;
> Take fire;
> When most impressed
> Be self-possessed;
> To Spirit wed form
> Sit down in a storm."[25]

These represent the sermonic dance steps for African American preaching. The African American preacher progressively executes the following dance steps in the preaching event.

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[25] Cited by Edgar DeWitt Jones, *The Royalty of the Pulpit* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951) 183.

Step One: Identification – "Start Low"

A good pre-choreographic practice when dancing is always to warm up. This could be the introduction of the sermon or the preparation for the sermon. This is what gets the body, mind and spirit together so that injury is avoided. One must meditatively stretch. I challenge my students to read their preaching passage fifty times before they begin to research its implications for the hearers. In this way, they expose all of their senses to the text, and the encounter of the senses with the text will be felt and seen through a delivery that is imbued with authority and humility. Preaching that dances starts low and begins where the people are.

Ezekiel spent seven days sitting with the Jewish exiles without opening his mouth (Ezekiel 3:15). After receiving a message he went to speak to the captives (Ezekiel 11:13). Jesus sat by a well in Sychar and met the Samaritan woman where she was. Upon the completion of his talk to her, she became a missionary to the men of her city. Jesus used the same approach in speaking his parables. The effective African American preacher often starts in the world of the Bible and brings its message up to the modern world. God meets us where we are and takes us where He wants us to go.

Step Two: Clarification – "Go Slow"

If the praise dancer starts out too rapidly, the accelerated pace is harder to sustain and the message will be truncated. The listener will tend to give up on the message. As

the listener becomes more comfortable, the preacher can increase the intensity. Jesus taught the twelve disciples in a period of three years. He said, "Many things I have to tell you but you are not ready."[26] Fred Craddock, celebrated homiletician, advises the student preacher to write the conclusion of the sermon before the introduction is written, because one cannot introduce what one does not have. When African American preachers have carefully and artfully constructed their sermons so that nothing is superfluous within the sermon, they are able to be deliberate in their delivery, because they go forth knowing where they are going.

Step Three: Intensification – "Rise"

Biblical preaching rises to the occasion because it is Spirit-directed and not **human-centered**. It slowly rises toward a crescendo, handling the text in the power of the Spirit. The sermon must have movement. It must press its way toward a goal – exalting God through Christ, aware of Christ's promise, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself."[27] Like an airplane, the sermon must leave the runway and get into orbit. African American preachers do not fear the heights of emotion stirred by what is absorbed. There is always a "higher ground" to be gained in the preaching moment.

Step Four: Application – "Strike Fire"

[26] John 16:12
[27] John 12:32

This is the place of energy, culmination and power. The African American preacher wants the people to experience the meaning, the purpose, and the message. No text should ever be used to mean today what it never meant when it was written. Two of the weaknesses in preaching are in the areas of meaning and application. Relevant preaching involves both when the written revelation is not ignored or misapplied. Jeremiah had the process correctly. The Word of God was in his heart like fire shut up in his bones.[28] The fire of his passion ignited his preaching.

Step Five: Recapitulation – "Retire"

In retiring is the "coming-down step" – the African American preacher is trusting God to affect the hearer. Retiring is concluding or summing up the message. The jazz musician said, "I'm like a minister giving his sermon. He will state his theme; he'll improvise variations on that theme; take it to a high point; and then he'll make his closing statement. I'm doing the same thing at the piano." [29]

Step Six: Motivation – "Sit Down in a Storm"

There is a "cool down" period after the dance in which the African American preacher eventually sits down in a storm. People are emotionally "still up" when the preacher "sits down". The message has been given and the people are worshipping. The people take the message home and live with it. They take home that "aha" moment

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[28] Jeremiah 20:9
[29] Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 35-36.

where they understand something in their own lives because of what the preacher has said. So when the preacher sits down, the people should be getting up! They have to get up and do the work of the ministry. They have to pick up the dance. If the preacher has taught them the dance, then they must get up and dance and tell the story to someone else.

Peter Taylor Forsyth defines preaching as “the organized Hallelujah of an ordered community.”[30] He means that preachers preach so that the congregation will preach. The preacher dances so that the congregation will dance. The preachers should want their preaching to dance so that the hearers will dance in response. When the preacher finishes the sermon, the preacher should let it be. The Spirit is using the sermon before and after the benediction. Let it be and let it live. It has its own life.

Lionel Hampton demonstrates the step of “sitting down in a storm” in the following experience: Hampton flays away first in the vibes, then on piano, using just two fingers like vibraphone mallets, then switches to a frantic, stick-tossing session on drums, and then climaxes the whole affair by jumping up onto a tom-tom and dancing wildly on top of it. Lionel must go down in history as one of the most inspiring and the most perspiring jazz musicians of all time.

So, a sermon starts like music with conflict and then it gets worse through complication – things get worse before they get better. There is a decisive turn around, a

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[30] Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1901), 64.

liberating moment through the preaching of the gospel. Like the big band sound, the preacher wraps it up and comes to a big crescendo. The people want an encore! The preacher sits down while the congregation thirsts for more.

Perpetuity with Improvisation in Jazz

When you improvise, you are not locked into the notes exactly as they are written on the page. The word "improvisation" comes from two Latin words: "im" and "provisus," which means "unforeseen." Kirk Byron Jones articulately describes improvisation in this manner: "To play improvisational is to play with trusting openness, to go wherever the music wants to go in the moment." [31] Improvisation is spontaneity infused by preparation.

In her book, *A Spiritual Biography*, Jana Steed reported that Will Marion Cook, a black classical violinist who became Duke's informal tutor in music theory and composition, advised him to "find the logical way to develop a melody or voice a chord, then go around it and let his 'inner self' break through." [32] Kirk Byron Jones pointed out that Duke Ellington told his band members to play the notes as written, but "to keep some dirt in there somewhere." [33] By "dirt," he meant improvisation: spontaneous things that you did not plan to do. The Holy Spirit deals in the "dirt area" and provides the preacher with "editing ecstasy." The Holy Spirit robs us of routineness and predictability. The "Duke" leaves room for some dirt while Lawrence Welk plays every note according to the musical score. When one leaves room for "dirt," the jazz musician no longer plays

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[31] Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2004), 80.
[32] Steed, 48. (See full biographical references in *Doctrine that Dances*).
[33] Jones, 84. (See full biographical references in *Doctrine that Dances*).

the notes, the “dirty notes” play the musician. The preacher’s responsibility is to take people places they have never been before by being willing to go there themselves. However, this dirt is given license by being first committed to playing the musical score for the basic music. I challenge my students to write every word of the manuscript and then to let the Holy Spirit turn the ink of the manuscript into the blood of spiritual passion.

I remember reading an article in an African American magazine about how the popular singing artist, Barry White, had rebounded from a career that was at a standstill. He attributed his comeback to learning how to shift his mind without losing his soul.[34] He no longer went into the studio with individual players and their instruments. All he took was a computer that housed the instruments. Barry White learned to improvise. The great Charles Bix, Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Dizzie Gillespie and Lionel Hampton knew that when you play jazz, you don’t know exactly what is going to happen. That is why they couldn’t play the same chord exactly the same way during a jazz improvisation performance. They didn’t feel the same way twice.

On Saturday evening, June 25, 2005, I was sitting in a hotel restaurant in Alexander, Virginia, eating a meal, when a physically challenged African American man struggled to get to the piano stool and started taking people’s requests. One guest requested “New York, New York,” and he played it. Another requested a Ray Charles number. Before playing each of these songs, he looked into his large black binder and

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[34] Kevin Chappell, “Barry White: comeback of the decade”, *Ebony* Magazine, May 1995. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_n7_v50/ai_16878130 17 May 2007.

played it according to the music score. He had already informed the dinner guests that if the song was in the binder then he could play it. I requested the song, "Yellow Bird" by the Mills Brothers. He played it also. However, the thought occurred to me that he promised only to play the songs that were in the book. He played by the eye and not by the ear. There was no improvisation, even in his note playing. Preaching must have both an eye and an ear, and there must be freedom to catch the eye of God and to listen in the ear of God during a moment of pregnant silence.

Jazz as a Collaborative Community

Jazz is communal music. The musicians are made to be in relationship with the audience. Camaraderie is the meat of jazz. The jazz musicians have fun. It is like they are on a battlefield together, struggling through the same notes. There is beauty on the battlefield, because those who are beside each other are part of the same music. A musician learns much more; it is a laboratory and concert experience simultaneously. The jazz musicians learn from each other rather than just playing a piece of sheet music. The jazz band is like the Body of Christ: the instruments are incomplete without each other. The drums cannot support the melody of the trumpet if there is no trumpet and, likewise, the trumpet would have no rhythm and beat to follow if there were no drums. So then, jazz is a collection of individual artists producing a collective sound at a conventional moment with a spontaneous spirit. This is truly the image and definition of the Kingdom of God. Jazz can influence preaching for the better by creating a dialogical atmosphere. Just as the instruments answer each other, the dancers and crowd respond to the music. For the African American preacher, this dynamic has the potential for producing musicological ministry.

The audience in the jazz concert encourages the jazz musicians, and this brings out more in them. The jazz musician sees the lighted up faces in the audience, and this changes the way he or she plays. This is "call and response" musically. ABC analyst, Michelle Tafoya, interviewed Manu Ginobili after the San Antonio Spurs won the NBA championship in June 2005. Ginoboli had had quite a year: he got married, won a gold medal for Argentina, and now had won an NBA championship. Michelle said, "I have never seen you so animated. Why did you motion to the crowd to get with you?" He responded, "Because we needed the power they gave us." Parishioners and proclaimers belong together. Preachers preach so that the church might preach the pastor's message throughout the week in the barber shop, beauty shop, and beyond.

Excerpted from *Doctrine that Dances: Bringing Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life,* Robert Smith, Jr. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008) 40 – 44, 151 – 154, 157 – 158.

The "call and response" dynamic is strange to some religious traditions and unfamiliar to others. However, in the African American religious tradition the strange is familiar. German theologian-preacher Helmut Thielicke recalled preaching to a black congregation in Chicago. He remarked: "The congregation responded enthusiastically, kept on interrupting me with loud cries as 'Yes Lord!', 'Hallelujah', 'Amen!' and many other acclamations. That stimulated me so much that I was carried away as if on a crest of

a wave."[35] This dialogical interaction between the preacher and the congregation, though characteristic of this tradition, is not unique to the African American religious experience. The Welsh folk preacher like the African American preacher was not a "helpless soloist" or a "liturgical dictator." Rather, the Welsh folk preacher affirmed and authenticated the hearers as valued partners in the preaching process by dialogically participating with the elders in the "amen corner" and extemporaneously singing or chanting their declarations during various intervals of their delivery. However, preachers who have this penchant are intentional about providing "sacred space" for the congregation to ponder and respond with "sacred sound." This militates against congregational disengagement.

The roots of "call and response" are deeply planted in the soil of West African music and later transplanted to the plantations of North America in the American slavery experience. Encountering European church music, the slaves recycled the handed-down religious music through a technique called "lining out." The slave preacher would sing the first line of the hymn and the black worshippers would sing the same line. This technique provided the basic structure for improvisation which found its ultimate expression in the preaching event. Therefore, "call and response" was the reaction of the slaves to the worship experience of the white church whose preachers cranially engaged the worshippers from the "neck up" without cardiologically encountering them from the "neck down". An atmosphere was engendered for worshippers to have a "feel back" experience as a prelude to a "talk back" expression. Very similarly, for Duke Ellington, Jazz was the freedom of expression found in letting the inner-self break through. Congregational pathos was significant in Augustine's preaching. He admitted, "I did not

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[35] Helmut Thielicke, *Notes from a Wayfarer*, trans. David R. Law (St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 1995) 360.

consider I had achieved anything when I heard them applauding me, but only when I saw them weeping. Their applause only showed they were being instructed and delighted, while their tears indicated that they were being swayed."[36]

In his book, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, Cleophus LaRue contends that the heart, essence and irreducible core of African American preaching is not to be found in its homiletical style, but rather in its hermeneutical measurement. The "call and response" dynamic may be influenced by variations in style and delivery: conversational, lecture, intonation or the whoop. However, the one common note in the symphony of the African American sermon is the use of scripture. Where there is no scriptural substance, the sermonic style is inconsequential and the "call and response" dynamic is a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

Excerpted from "Call and Response," *The New Interpreter's Bible Handbook on Preaching,* Paul Scott Wilson, general editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

I. The Inductive Sermon:
   a. Discovery vs. mastery (Fred B. Craddock)
   b. Movements vs. points (David Buttrick)
   c. Pictures vs. propositions (Henry H. Mitchell)
   d. Art vs. argument (Henry H. Mitchell)

The Sermon Title: "Another Done Somebody Wrong Song"
The Sermon Text: II Samuel 16:23 and selected texts from the narrative of Ahithophel (to be read at the closing of the introduction)
Proposition: To be announced near the end of the sermon

[36] St. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) 234.

II. The Sermon Flow / Movement

a. Partuclarity – Lived Experience:
   i. Unforgiveness: Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding
   ii. Forgiveness: Amish killings; Lynn Smith, a BDS graduate

b. Moves toward the General Conclusion:
   i. Have you ever heard of these characters in the Bible? (From the obvious to the obscure)
   ii. Ahithophel
      1. Wise counselor (2 Samuel 16:23)
      2. Honored father (2 Samuel 23:34)
      3. Proud grandfather (2 Samuel 11:3)
      4. Broken-hearted father and grandfather (2 Samuel 11:1 – 6, 14 – 17)
      5. Seeker of revenge (2 Samuel 15:31, 16:20 – 23)
      6. Intention to terminate enemy (2 Samuel 17:1 – 4)
      7. Suicide victim (2 Samuel 17:23)

c. Reading the Narrative of Ahithophel backwards (2 Samuel 17:23)

d. What would lead Ahithophel, the wise counselor, to commit the foolish act of suicide?
   i. James A Sanders: "Biblical characters do not primarily serve us as models for morality, rather as mirrors for ***identity***." What would you do in the Ahithophel situation?
   ii. What is the text saying (interpretation)? What is the text doing (imagination, not fantasty)?
   iii. What did Joseph do? (Genesis 45:1,4,15,16, 50:15 – 21)
   iv. What did Job do? (Job 42:10)
   v. What did Jesus do? (Luke 23:34)
   vi. What are we to do? (FCF and application)

e. Proposition
   i. "The rope of unforgiveness which apparently strangled Ahithophel the wise counselor can only be transformed into cords of love (Hosea 11:4) by Him who is wonderful counselor (Isaiah 9:6)."

f. Conclusion
   i. Sermonic Eschatonics: From Wisdom to Washing

1. **Wisdom** – Revelation 7:11, 12 – "All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and *wisdom* and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'"
2. **Washing** – Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes – who are they, and where did they come from? I answered, 'Sir, you know.' And he said, these are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have *washed* their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.