

As Faithful as the Whirling Sea

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In the more enchanted realm of Black Folklore, faithfulness is modeled by the hurricane. Hurricanes do not simply result from the wind blowing over the warm waters of the Atlantic. Hurricanes are born of grief. The Ocean whirls in anguish as she remembers the millions who died during the Transatlantic slave trade. Her sobs stir up on the Western coast of Africa, blow through the Caribbean, and then storm the Southeastern United States.¹ Each hurricane season testifies to the Ocean's faithful memory of the dead. The implicit question is "How faithful are you?"

Stories like this one aim to instill faithfulness to the ancestors and impart an ethic that honors the full humanity of the living and the dead. For some Christian preachers, particularly within the Black Church, instilling such faithfulness to the ancestors is an essential part of the preaching task. After all, the Middle Passage was no small event. It was the African Holocaust or, in Kiswahili, the "Maafa," or "Great Disaster." The Maafa is not only foundational to African-American identity, but the watershed event that birthed the Black Church. As a result, the Maafa continues to make a claim on the Black Church, and members often feel emotionally indebted to their enslaved ancestors. How might preachers best demonstrate faithfulness to these souls?

This question is as critical for those who preach outside of the Black Church as it is for those who abide within it. We are all groomed to forget. And in forgetting such horrors, the corrupted Christianity that permitted them in the first place is fed and watered. Yet in the Black Church, where ancestors are more often deemed to have a continuing presence, the call to be faithful to their legacy is especially strong. In this context Christian faithfulness is not abstract; faithfulness is tied to particular bodies, life stories, and circumstances, some of which are found at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. I shudder to think about what these bodies on the ocean floor might *actually* ask of contemporary preachers, but I do think it is worth considering some of the ways black preachers demonstrate their faithfulness to the ancestors. What do these "faithful preachers" do well? How is faithfulness to the ancestors manifested in the pulpit?

Asking Faithful Questions

Faithful preachers ask questions that interrogate the culture and the church's role within it. Their questions do not always have an adversarial tone and may even be quite tender, but they tend to reveal a little chutzpah and grit. One might say the faithful preacher is one who has a contrarian bent and is therefore willing to ask the kind of questions that put human motives and actions in stark relief. The golden questions are those that live below the surface and silently shape listeners' spiritual and psychological landscapes. Often these questions are mired in fear as Henri Nouwen explains:

When we consider how much our educational, political, religious, and even social lives are geared to finding answers to questions born of fear, it

is not hard to understand why a message of love has little chance of being heard. Fearful questions never lead to love-filled answers; underneath every fearful question many other fearful questions are hidden. . . . If this is the case, the nature of the questions we raise is as important as the answer to our questions. Which questions guide our lives? Which questions do we make our own? Which questions deserve our undivided attention and full personal commitment? Finding the right questions is as crucial as finding the right answers.²

Lively questions, as Nouwen seems to suggest, have poetic depth. When the preacher stumbles upon them, they pulsate with life. In the words of the Jamaican poet Claude McKay, these questions are found “touching the surface and the depth of things;/Instinctively responsive unto both.”³

Ultimately, love and freedom drive the faithful preacher’s quest for questions. Alice Walker articulates this idea beautifully when she says, “A man who is free, whose life has been signed away several times already is a man I can listen to. What does such a man, unrepentant of his beliefs, have to say? And what places in the listener’s soul are fed by his words?”⁴ Walker longs for the voices of those “whose love outweighs their fear.”⁵ I see this love in James William Charles Pennington, a nineteenth-century African-American preacher who served Congregationalist and Presbyterian congregations. He boldly presses the question of whether the Bible endorses chattel slavery: “Is the word of God silent on this subject? I, for one, desire to know. My repentance, my faith, my hope, my love, and my perseverance all, all, I conceal it not, I repeat it, all turn upon this point. If I am deceived here—if the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, and another hope.”⁶

Pennington’s core question reveals an inner freedom and a fidelity to enslaved people. And more, his question raises ethical imperatives for the listeners: What kind of Christianity will they practice? What perversions of the faith will they denounce?

Attending to the Unseen World

Faithfulness to the ancestors also informs the preacher’s affinity for the spiritual world. If fidelity to the dead is to remain strong, there has to be some sense that the legacies of those who died continue to speak. Or, at the risk of sounding eerie, there has to be some contact with the spiritual world. This idea presents a burden for those who deny realities beyond the empirical world, but many in the Black Church have been cultured to clear this hurdle with relative ease. In these contexts, signs, dreams, voices, and uncanny coincidences are not merely tolerated, but sought for their spiritual insight. Cleophus J. LaRue says it best:

I am arguing for the open frontier of the world of spirit, where boundaries are crossed and recrossed every day in both directions. I am not arguing that blacks view that world in the same way as their African brothers and sisters. I am arguing, however, that the pared-down theology of the white Western academy that was cut and shaved to fit a small-scale universe was always a tight fit for the theological world of the black church.⁷

Engagement with the spiritual world also enriches preaching. “There is some deep preaching to be found in the crossing of those boundaries between the empirical world and the world of spirit,” LaRue explains, “Preachers cannot get all of their sermons from biblical commentaries or life experiences. Some parts of the sermon must come from those deep places of unseen reality.”⁸

Of course, this openness to the unseen requires humility. When elements of the sermon emerge from the spiritual world, the preacher can only accept them “as gift and grace,” not as the fruit of rational investigation.⁹ Gardner Taylor alludes to this idea when asked about his sermon preparation process. “I would want to think that a sermon idea has been decided for me, rather than I just decided it.”¹⁰ This more receptive stance can be taken to extremes if the preacher fails to prepare. Yet openness to the unseen world often proves to be pivotal. The Holy Spirit has a penchant for using the “intuitive channel of communication” when nourishing faith.¹¹

Relying on History

Embedding a history lesson in a sermon never hurts so long as the bit of history is juicy and the listeners have a stake in it. Faithful preachers understand both these rules and are able to open the history of the African Diaspora like a jewelry box. Week after week, a gem is lifted up and used to relate the scriptures to the contemporary moment. The fact that enslaved Africans were carried to Western shores on vessels with names like *Hope*, *Elisabeth*, *Madre de Deus* (“Mother of God”) and *Jesus of Lubëck* (affectionately, “The Good Ship Jesus”) has proven helpful for opening many a sermon on hypocrisy. Similarly, nuggets of African-American history are woven into sermons in ways that summon the voices, idioms, and cadences of those from past generations.¹² When the preacher treats these voices reverently, refusing to reduce them to caricature, the varied traditions that shape African-American identity emerge. It becomes all the more obvious that African-American identity is a composite identity, the result of the forced fusion of a range of very different African cultures and ethnic groups.

Integrating African-American history into the sermon also contributes to the holistic power of the sermon. Listeners experience the gospel in a way that allows them to encounter aspects of their history that are seldom told. The congregation gels around this shared history in ways comparable to the bonding that takes place around shared scriptures and the shared ritual of Eucharist. History, then, is a critical thread in the formation of Christian identity in the Black Church.

One might assume that attention to the Maafa or other specific instances of African-American history might lead to a melancholy sermon. While the stories are heavy and remembering can be painful, effective preachers rely on the Spirit’s aid in this regard. Remembering becomes a means of suturing that which has been ruptured. Remembering becomes a salve in itself, a means of offering shards of trauma up to God for healing. In the American cultural context, psychic wounds are inflicted by the fact that human atrocities are willfully forgotten and deliberately erased.¹³ As Toni Morrison has lamented, there is “no bench by the road” where one might “summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves.”¹⁴ This situation makes the preacher’s remembrance a gift and an affirmation of black humanity.

African-American history is not wholly tragic. Faithfulness to the ancestors is shown when preachers look back and find creative coping strategies, acts of self-

definition, and episodes of unity, ecstasy, and delight. Recounting these moments of agency is not only essential for accuracy but helpful in reframing the maligned aspects of African-American identity. Overall, history is introduced to propel listeners forward, to help them say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us," and step boldly into the future.¹⁵ When this happens, history becomes a path to awe, and listeners marvel at the mighty action of God.

Celebrating Personhood

There is nothing like experiencing a sermon that conveys the wonder of human life. Faithful preachers delve into this wonder and illumine the gift of being human, of having great ambitions and annoying limits, surprising capacities for tenderness and baffling propensities for carnality. They have a knack for distilling the grandeur of human life, and listeners are left with a high view of the human person. The gift of personhood might be stated explicitly but is more often implied as the preacher tells a story or explains an instance in which someone is being ground by the powers and principalities of this age. This approach, this method of attending to human worth, undergirds James Earl Massey's description of the sermon as "functional."¹⁶ Listeners need reminders of their intrinsic value in the universe, and the preacher aims to provide this affirmation.

By affirming human worth, the preacher demonstrates fidelity to the ancestors, particularly those African ancestors whose lives were routinely debased. A good portion of the sermon might be dedicated to asserting the belovedness of every human being. This air time rarely rings hollow or sentimental in the Black Church where many have experienced assaults on black life. Rather, the emphasis on the value of all people prompts praise. Ella Pearson Mitchell illustrates this idea in her sermon "All Flesh is Eligible!" based on Joel 2:28. Throughout the sermon, she uses vocal fluctuations to call the listeners' attention to the word *all*:

The more I think about it, the more I realize that the eligibility of *all* flesh has been in effect ever since the *fall* of humanity in the Garden of Eden. Scan three of the greatest biblical characters: Moses, David, and Paul. God's Spirit was poured out in abundance on *all* three, and yet *all* of them could be convicted of first degree murder, directly or by conspiracy. All of us are sinners. But *all* of them and us are still in that sweeping category called *all* flesh. And *all* flesh is eligible! (Emphasis in original).¹⁷

Mitchell challenges human hierarchies and makes it clear that all people are eligible for God's anointing. This expansive vision demonstrates fidelity to slave ancestors who were not treated as full persons.

Another part of the power of Mitchell's sermon stems from her engagement with human diversity and her refusal to rank people. At one point she says, "*All* includes everybody you can think of in every possible human category . . . genders and social classes . . . levels of education, and even ethnic groupings and *all* religious affiliations."¹⁸ Mitchell's sermon is consistent with a holistic vision of preaching in which the body is understood as the site of faith. Human worth is affirmed as the preacher dignifies human bodies in all their diversity. This stance might be expressed quite explicitly as in Mitchell's sermon. In many cases, however, this step takes place rather

early in the sermon preparation process as preachers ask themselves a few questions: What are human bodies doing in this passage of scripture or what is being done to them? What vision of the body's worth is being related in this text? How is God being made known through the body? These questions lay a critical foundation because faithfulness to the ancestors begins with respect for their bodies. Respect for the body is also, thankfully, a gospel imperative. No account of Christ's humble birth, tortured death, miraculous resurrection, or promised return makes sense without it.

A Faithfulness that Transcends Time

One of the great treasures in the Library of Congress is the Giant Bible of Mainz. It consists of 459 vellum skin leaves that were hand-lettered by a single monk. He begins the delicate task on April 4, 1452, and finishes about fifteen months later on July 9, 1453. Sealing his mission with anonymity, he simply signs the bible "a faithful pen." The signature is a homily in itself that testifies to his faithfulness to scripture and to God. More to the point, the signature also reveals faithfulness to those who would come after him. He senses the sacred bond shared by all who belong to the family of God and knows this bond is timeless. Faithfulness as a timeless virtue also undergirds the preaching of those in the Black Church who seek to be faithful to their enslaved ancestors. The expectation of a shared destiny fuels fidelity and compels preachers to distill a vision of Christianity that is distinguished by its great respect for human life. The approaches noted above, gripping questions, receptivity to the spiritual world, and reliance on history, all grow out of this grand view of the human person. I believe these approaches do justice to the kind of faithfulness envisioned in Galatians 5:22. In the least, they pass on a form of faithfulness that reaches into the depths of the sea.

Notes

1 Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body* (London and Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, University Press of New England, 2006), 78. This hurricane story has inspired the artwork of Deborah Jack. As Sasha Dees explains, "For Jack, the hurricanes of today describe the history of the slave trade. Hurricanes follow the Transatlantic Triangular Trade route: originating in Africa they make their way across the Caribbean, then come to a halt in America. Each storm traces a path of devastation, leaving physical and emotional trauma behind, long after its disappearance. The storms bring the voices of the lost and drowned slaves at sea. We still hear the screams of left-behind family members frantically trying to find their lost ones who were kidnapped from their daily lives and tasks on African soil." "Deborah Jack," Africanah.org., last modified May 7, 2014, accessed December 30, 2015, <http://africanah.org/deborah-jack/>.

2 Henri Nouwen, *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 6.

3 Claude McKay, "Like a Strong Tree" in *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, ed. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 494.

4 Alice Walker, foreword to *All Things Censored*, by Mumia Abu-Jamal (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), 16.

5 Ibid.

6 Cleophus J. LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 88.

7 Ibid., 51.

8 LaRue, 52.

9 Ibid., 55.

10 Ibid., 53.

11 Henry H. Mitchell, *Celebration & Experience in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 25.

12 Michael Gomez provides a rich historical analysis of African-American linguistics and identity formation in *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

13 Erasure of this sort is explored throughout Ken Gonzales-Day's *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

14 Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road," *World Magazine: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association* 3:1 (1989): 4-5, 37-41.

15 Gardner Taylor, *The Scarlett Thread: Nineteen Sermons* (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 1981), 58.

16 LaRue, 33.

17 Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds., *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), 765.

18 Ibid., 763.