

Making the Unseen Seen: Pedagogy and Aesthetics in African American Prophetic Preaching¹

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Abstract: *This essay investigates the idea of African American prophetic preaching as a derivative of the message and agenda of the Hebrew prophet.² The essay demonstrates how critical consideration of the relationships between basic criteria of biblical prophetic speech, pedagogy (communal praxis), and cultural aesthetics (artistic beauty and power of Black oral expression), reveals a composite picture of the nature and function of African American prophetic preaching, and makes evident the need for a roadmap to rehabilitate the prophetic voice in America's Black pulpits. The fundamental premise is that African American preaching can become more communally constructive and consequential for our times when the African American preacher reclaims in spoken Word the voice of the prophet that speaks justice, divine intentionality and hope.*

To say all that might be said about African American prophetic preaching is not the intent of this essay. However, serious treatment must be given to this important subject if preachers are to become better informed and equipped to preach justice and hope. It is also important for homileticians to better understand the complexities within the African American preaching

¹ I am cognizant of the obvious heterogeneity within Black religious life in America. However, there persists a historically constructed African American community in the U.S.—a critical mass of people of African descent, especially in heavily populated urban areas—whose shared history, cultural memory and distinctive socio-cultural interests are self-evident. Readers will note that the use of the following terms *Black* and *African American* and *African American prophetic preaching* and *prophetic Black preaching* are descriptive labels used interchangeably in this essay. The interchangeable use of these terms is standard parlance today in Black studies, African American studies, and increasingly in Black homiletics. Also, my decision to capitalize the term *Black* is in recognition of the fact that recent scholarship is moving away from the term *black* in lowercase, which primarily suggests an ontological description of identity formation solely based on race. The capitalization of the term *Black* and not *white* is a way to signal “a rhetorical disruption of domination and white supremacy” and to honor, in a broader fashion, the particular historical and cultural legacy of people of African descent in this country. Frequently used as an alternate expression to the term *African American*, my decision to capitalize the term *Black* also comes from respect for the politics of its fluid and intergenerational usage in the vernacular of persons in communities of African descent. (Cf. Ronald Walters and Robert C. Smith. *African American Leadership* (NY: SUNY Press, 1999, 21); Nancy Lynn Westfield, ed. *Being Black, Teaching Black*, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008, xvi-ii).

² Though it seems obvious that the prophetic principle is virtually institutionalized in African American churches due to racism, all Black preaching is not prophetic. Viewing African American preaching traditions through the scriptural images *prophet, priest and sage*, I think, provides a more useful conceptual framework for describing the tri-dimensional ministerial character of African American preaching. Essentially, the *prophetic voice* mediates God’s activity to transform church and society in a present-future sense based on the principle of justice. The mediating voice of Christian spiritual formation that encourages listeners to contemplate their personal relationship with their Creator and to enhance themselves morally and ethically by integrating elements of personal piety, spiritual discipline and church stewardship, characterizes the *priestly voice*. Finally, the *sagely voice* carries an eldering function. It is distinguished by its focus on wisdom, biblical faith, and realistic hope for future generations (For a more extensive treatment on this subject matter, see my forthcoming publication *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching: The Threefold Cord*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).

tradition in general, and the distinctive nature, character and function of prophetic Black preaching specifically. Few scholars have examined African American prophetic preaching, and fewer still have attempted to define its principle characteristics. In this essay, I draw attention to two conceptual features of this discourse, *conscientization* and *aesthetics*, in order to open up a way for us to think about African American prophetic preaching.

For our purposes, the basic features of prophetic speech outlined by Walter Brueggemann in his widely influential volume *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001) and his brief essay on prophetic speech in ancient Israel, “The Prophetic Word of God and History,”³ provide us an important starting place. In his short essay “The Prophetic Word of God and History,” Brueggemann identifies *five* discrete characteristic themes of prophetic speech. This speech opposes idolatry, particularly self-serving and self-deceiving ideologies. It refuses the temptation to absolutize the present; it drives toward a new unsettling, unsettled future. It is a word that speaks to the predicament of human suffering from the perspective of God’s justice. This speech at all times assumes a critical posture over against established power. Lastly, the prophetic Word is a word of relentless hope.⁴

Identifying these constitutive biblical marks of prophetic speech provides us a way to take up the more fundamental matter of how one may make determinations about the rhetorical character of African American prophetic preaching. While Brueggemann’s scholarship on prophetic speech furnishes us with initial insight into the nature and function of prophetic Black preaching, there are important shortcomings to notice concerning its practical theological usefulness when translating Old Testament critical insight into the particular storied communities of American life. Brueggemann has not specifically tied his scholarship to a concrete people or era; he is principally concerned about the biblical prophet’s social world. We cannot understand the composite nature of prophetic Black preaching from only this vantage point. Brueggemann’s scholarship on the prophets needs to be set within a larger framework of specific religious histories to test his more universal claims. While Brueggemann’s characteristics are generative for analytic purposes, devoid of serious attention to “the rhetorical situation,”⁵ his scholarship can only convey a partial picture of African American prophetic preaching.

Another major limitation must be acknowledged. Despite using liberation hermeneutics alongside the stated declaration that prophecy tends to emerge in sub-communities, Brueggemann’s principal audience in *The Prophetic Imagination* appears to be white Protestant mainline church communities.⁶ His work only makes a formal theological place to demonstrate

³ Walter Brueggemann, “The Prophetic Word of God and History” in *Texts that Linger, Words that Explode: Listening to Prophetic Voices* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 35-44.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann illustrates his line of reasoning through an expository analysis of the conversation of Abraham, Sarah, and the three messengers in Gen 18:1-15. Brueggemann, “The Prophetic Word of God and History,” 39-41.

⁵ Lloyd F. Bitzer defines this term as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential *exigence* (an imperfection marked by urgency; a problem, something waiting to be done) which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision and action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. In the way that audience, speaker, subject, occasion, and speech are standard constitutive elements of rhetorical discourse, the situation, maintains Bitzer, is likewise indispensable since it seeks to know the nature of those contexts in which speakers create discourse. “The Rhetorical Situation” in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1-14, reprinted in John Louis Lucasites, Celeste Michelle Condit, Sally Caudill, eds. *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader* (New York: The Guilford, 1999), 217, 220.

⁶ In his postscript on practice in *The Prophetic Imagination*, he only cites examples representative of churches and organizations to which he has had some affiliation.

the relationship between the speech of the biblical prophet and the prophetic sermons of Black clerics in various periods of American religious history. Because his contemporary examples almost completely overlook the distinctive role and character of African American religion, and how scripture and culture have been central to naming and interpreting existential events of ultimate significance in the African American experience, his work leaves open a new avenue of possibilities for scholarship regarding prophetic preaching.

Notwithstanding these limitations, drawing on Brueggemann's general understanding of biblical prophetic speech can become a heuristic device that allows me to relate specific discourse characteristics of the ancients to the prophetic preaching that took place in the early part of the twentieth-century, during the social justice movements of the nineteen-fifties and sixties, and, in rare instances, is taking place today. By focusing in this way, it becomes clear how a distinctive prophetic discourse arose out of specific situations, echoing an outlook of divine intentionality to numerous exigencies in poetic fashion.

The African American prophet has traditionally had a certain disposition toward rhetoric and poetic imagination in the American context. There is a creative element here. Beginning in slavery Black churches have institutionalized the prophetic principle in many distinctive ways, recognizing injustice far and wide. Brueggemann's five prophetic speech characteristics are manifest in prophetic Black preaching. These characteristic themes of the prophetic Word establish basic criteria for drawing ancient and contemporary parallels. Nonetheless, it does appear that the prophetic principle has been masked in much of African American preaching today. This is where the work of Paulo Freire illuminates Brueggemann, turning our attention to the pedagogical dimension of prophetic speech. Freire's stronger emphasis on context and praxis brings lucidity and strengthens Brueggemann's claim that prophetic speech is always "concrete talk in particular circumstances where the larger purposes of God for the human enterprise come down to the particulars of hurt and healing, of despair and hope."⁷

Naming Reality

Freire says it is extremely important for oppressed people to find their own voice in order to name their own reality. Otherwise they may name the oppressor's reality as their own, and therefore contribute to their own oppression. Specific to this concern is Freire's principle of *conscientization*—from the Portuguese term *conscientizacao*, which refers to the process in which people develop a deepening awareness (consciousness) of the contradictions of the sociocultural reality shaping their lives and their capacity to transform that reality.⁸ *Conscientization* points to the significance of dialogue and critical reflection on concrete historical reality.⁹ Freire's pedagogical theory originates from his own experience as a political exile from his native Brazil living in Chile, during a military coup in 1964. In his major work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970, he advances a critique of education born out of his concern for poor illiterate migrant workers. Freire's relevance to our subject matter, however, lies not in the formal tenets he proposes in his educational philosophy, but rather in his

⁷ Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Word of God and History," 44.

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 17-18. Daniel S. Schipani, *Conscientization and Creativity: Paulo Freire and Christian Education* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 10.

⁹ Ibid.

theorizing about “critical dialogical reflection on concrete historical realities and action for humanization.”¹⁰

Theologies reflecting on African American contexts share themes with Latin American philosophies and theologies of liberation. Both are concerned with justice issues pertaining to oppression and liberation. Yet, these contexts have different sociohistorical questions and concerns. African Americans, for example, have remained particularly conscious of the long history of slavery in this country and its repercussive effects.¹¹ In spite of differences, Freire is useful here because he connects speech with prophetic actions as concrete praxis. Praxis, defined as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” is a dialogical activity.¹² In the process of *conscientization*, praxis opens up possibilities for oppressed people to combat their own “cultures of silence” (dehumanization). According to Richard Schall, such praxis “is set in thoroughly historical context, which is carried on in the midst of struggle to create a new social order.”¹³ To the disheartened migrant masses flooding into northern cities in the first half of the twentieth century the prophetic preaching that took place in northern Black congregations literally spoke into existence a new way of being in the world.

According to Freire, dialogue acts as an essential prerequisite to the creation of a new social order. Dialogue can only make a difference in the world if (1) love is its foundation; (2) it is an act of humility; (3) it possesses intense faith in humankind to become more fully human; (4) it takes place in a context where hope is present; and, (5) it promotes critical thinking – thinking that is at once inseparable from action and constantly immersed in temporality without fear of risks.¹⁴ The upshot of this critical dialogical reflection is that it not only affirms dialogue as an existential necessity, but also implies from the standpoint of praxis that, in order for people “to exist humanly,” they must be free to participate in naming reality so that they can change it. The freedom to speak “is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone.”¹⁵ Through dialogical action, Freire rightly observes that the dehumanized can begin to commit themselves socioculturally to the work of conscientization, “by means of which the people, through praxis, leave behind the status of *objects* to assume the status of historical *Subjects*.”¹⁶

The praxis of naming reality in order to transform it is what prophetic Black preaching carries out in the Great Migration and during the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen-fifties and sixties. For the interwar period, a few Black preachers named the power of God to overcome dehumanizing political, economic, and social forces in their prophetic sermons. These preachers were guided by a vital hermeneutic of God’s good intention for creation and the resolute conviction that listeners in their northern Black congregations needed a way to articulate their misery and be freed from America’s making of “cultures of silence.” A few representative Black preachers such as Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., Reverdy C. Ransom and Florence S. Randolph, rose up to name the dehumanizing political and socioeconomic realities (e.g., substandard housing, racial and gender discrimination, unstable employment) stirred by the Great Migration, and simultaneously offered a word of hope which possessed the power to topple despair. Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prophetic message, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” delivered before a gathering of Memphis sanitation workers and supporters,

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 67.

¹¹ Donald McKim, *The Bible in Theology and Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985), 150.

¹² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 33.

¹³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68-73.

¹⁵ Quoted by Freire, *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

named the power of God's justice in a southern city because of unjust social arrangements which circumscribed poor and working-class Blacks to menial wages. In specific terms, King took a critical stance against Memphis' powerbrokers. Criticizing the city's unfair hiring practices, King urged Blacks to commit themselves to putting pressure on the city establishment through economic withdrawal from Memphis' banks, merchants, and retailers on the one hand. On the other, he insisted that Blacks take measures to pool their resources in the quest for economic salvation. King reminded his audience to embrace the fact that they are God's people, and that the God of Scripture stands against injustice and struggles alongside those in pursuit of human dignity.

Naming one's own reality to transform it happens when speech-acts are linked with prophetic actions as concrete praxis to open up possibilities for voiceless oppressed people. When oppressed people do not find their own voice to name their own reality, they may instead name the oppressor's reality as their own and therefore contribute to and redouble their own oppression. Although Freire sculpted his pedagogy in Brazil, a similar pedagogy issued forth in the prophetic voice of the African American preacher in the United States, who, in the prophetic proclamation of the Word, dared to connect that Word to the concrete social conditions of the listener. In the way that slaves sang spirituals in the cotton fields or exhorted the courageous in the "invisible church" to evoke an alternative reality in order to keep hope alive, hope was rooted in an eschatological vision that linked song and spoken Word to circumstance. This is what a few African American preachers during the Migration and Civil Rights Movement were doing in their prophetic sermons.

Great Migration preacher Florence Spearing Randolph preached a sermon entitled "If I Were White" on Race Relations Sunday before her Wallace Chapel AME Zion congregation. Based on Matthew 7:3-5 and 1 John 4:20, she interrogates the promises of American democracy, the deceptive ideology of black inferiority, and other chronic injustices on the eve of US entry into World War II. Randolph reminds her listeners of their self-worth, and reminded America's whites, claiming to be defending democracy, about their obligation to all American citizens. In the sermon, she disputes the offhanded idolatrous notion that God has created whites superior to blacks. The refusal of whites to act justly toward blacks, domestically and abroad, Randolph contends, is not only to embrace sin rather than Christ, but it is also to grasp a realistic picture of the suffering present. Her christocentric focus is obvious. "If I were white," she says, and acted justly "I would be conscience free before him with whom I have to do." And yet more revealing are her next few lines:

I slept, I dreamed, I seemed to climb a hard, ascending track, and just behind me labored one whose face was black. I pitied him, but hour by hour he gained upon my path. He stood beside me, stood upright, and then I turned in wrath. Go back, I cried, what right have you to stand beside me here? I paused, struck dumb with fear. For lo, the black man was not there, but Christ stood in his place. And Oh! The pain, the pain, that looked from that dear face.¹⁷

At this place in the sermon, when Randolph calls attention to the plight of Black human suffering, she does so only after her careful theological reflection on God's activity in the person of Jesus Christ, one who himself was degraded and misunderstood in the ancient world. There is,

¹⁷ Florence S. Randolph, "If I Were White," in Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 216.

then, a push for her Black listeners, and overhearing whites, to see a patent connection in the life of Jesus and that of Black human suffering in America.

Accordingly, her hermeneutic of suspicion inquires: “Are whites adequately conceiving who Jesus really is?” Christ stands in the place of the rejected ones. Finally, in “If I Were White,” Randolph makes a bold and vitalizing hermeneutical step to tell her congregation what to say on Race Relations Sunday reciting the captivating verse of scripture found in Matthew 7:3-5. “And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, and considereth not the beam that is in thy own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and behold, a beam is in mine own? First, cast out the beam out of thine own eye and then thou shalt see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.”

It is this determination to transcend oppression in thought and imagination, as the biblical prophets had done in the past that exemplifies prophetic Black preaching. In Freire, a key characteristic trait of African American prophetic preaching is discovered. *Prophetic Black preaching connects the speech act with prophetic actions as concrete praxis to help people freely participate in naming their reality*

The Will to Adorn

Brueggemann’s 1989 publication *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* focuses on the poetic character of prophetic speech. Not only does he reiterate the notion that prophetic speech evokes an alternative world or perception of reality, he also claims that the practice of preaching itself must be “subversive fiction”— a poetic construal of a world beyond the one taken for granted. This poetic speech is not about romantic caressing, moral instruction or problem solving, but the intense, unsettling proposal that the real world in which God dwells, and where God invites us to, is not the one overcome by worldly powers.¹⁸

Brueggemann invokes biblical authority for this aesthetic dimension of prophetic preaching, and one would not expect him to ground his discussion of this dimension in an awareness of the particular issues of social and ecclesial injustices in African American contexts. For this reason, I turn to Zora Neale Hurston’s observation of the aesthetics of Black Church worship as a way of talking about the poetic side of prophetic Black preaching.

The aesthetic quality of African American prophetic preaching is often perceived through contrasting lenses, in which both “the awesomely beautiful and the tragically ugly”¹⁹ are held together. The homiletic upshot to this union is that hope and promise bear its fruit, and from this a new order for the people is established by God. Cultural aesthetics is the basis of the imaginative genius and furtive power of the prophetic preaching of legendary preachers such as Samuel Proctor, Prathia Hall, and J. Alfred Smith, who take scripture and cull out a hope-filled discourse about God’s will to transform church and society, and, for the individual, “make a way out of no way.”

African American prophetic preaching is not only concrete and particular speech but is also daringly poetic. At the heart of prophetic sermons is the African American preachers’ ability to draw on cultural-aesthetic principles to communicate the gospel. These preachers are creative poets who possess the “will to adorn.” This aesthetic impulse runs counter to preaching cultivated by contemplative, inner pietistic styles of worship. The aesthetic impulse is what

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 4.

¹⁹ John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice*, reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003 reprinted), 171.

furnishes the preacher's imagination and speech with subversive power, which is a valuable asset to the preacher because it allows the preacher to make lateral leaps linguistically where linear, flattened prose cannot.²⁰

The speech-act inclination to adorn speech is well illustrated by African American novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston in her essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," written ca. 1930, and published in *The Sanctified Church*. With metaphor and simile, double descriptive words, and verbal nouns, Hurston says, "the American Negro has done wonders to the English language. But it is equally true that he has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has his revision accepted by the ruling class."²¹ The great use of metaphoric language in Hurston's portrayal seems more notable among the rare company of Black preachers afforded the opportunity of a formal education. Hurston is rightly convinced that to seek beauty is to realize that human beings have different standards of art, having different interests in art. Most are thus incapable to pass judgment on the art concepts of others.²² The aesthetic impulse to create is always at work in the African American speech-act.

The stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun, hence the adornment. It arises out of the same impulse as the wearing of jewelry and the making of sculpture—the urge to adorn.²³

Fundamentally, what Hurston shows is that the will to adorn in the speech-act is "a desire for beauty."²⁴ Insofar as prophetic Black preaching makes use of language and culture and carries this impulse for beauty, aesthetics holds potential as a way of talking about this tendency in the rare soundings of prophetic preaching in African America. Hurston enables us to see the evocative power of language and rhetoric, and how particular cultural-aesthetic principles that convey artistic beauty emerge as a result of the intermingling between African and American culture. Hurston accurately picks up on the power and beauty of Black oral expression; she sees that through symbolism, the use of "extended metaphors," and verbal nouns, Blacks creatively adorned their speech in attempts to recreate their lives. In prophetic Black preaching "language becomes a vehicle for transforming meaning, for translating behavior into words and converting every-day life drama into written texts which are also performances."²⁵ Instead of singular reliance on expository prose, the preacher-poet communicates in signs and symbols that "extend the spatial and temporal boundaries of prose" to multiply the dimensions through which a listener may encounter God in the preached Word.²⁶

King's aesthetic impulse is consistently evident throughout his homiletical corpus. King's sermon "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution" exemplifies prophetic hope. King envisions a world where poverty is eradicated. Using mental pictures he finds a pathway into listener consciousness. One segment of his sermon reflects on poverty in India. From his

²⁰ Cf. Paul Scott Wilson, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988), 32-39; Wilson, "Imagination" in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 266-67.

²¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island, 1983), 51.

²² Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 54.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Linda Marion Hill, *Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston* (Washington, DC: Howard University, 1996), 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

critical attention to poverty in India he closes the gap by juxtaposing poverty there with the perplexing forces of poverty in United States. King questions why a nation of such extreme wealth and power fails to sufficiently address the issue of poverty, and by implication, human suffering. His adorned speech, noticed throughout the sermon, is clearly speech in search of an alternative to the present reality. We can get a sense of King's impulse for the beauty of speech in his creative use language and cultural symbols in the following:

“dwarf distance and place time in chains”

“Like a monstrous octopus, poverty spreads its nagging, reprehensible tentacles into hamlets and villages all over the world.”

“I know where we can store food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of millions of God's children all over the world who go to bed hungry at night.”

The sermon reader or textual literalist insensitive to the ways Scripture and experience/situation must be read dialectically in preaching will miss the beauty and power of Black oral expression. The prophetic Word comes to public expression through the creative impulse, often through the subversive and the ironic idiom. What one finds in King is an aggregate portrait of the Black preacher-poet – one situated in a once venerable but now vanishing part of the Black preaching traditions.

Like King, Gardner C. Taylor's use of language, culture, and imagination is an example of preaching displaying this same poetic impulse. In his 1964 message as president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. in Washington, DC, Taylor liberates, in voice, the evocative power and beauty of prophetic preaching. Urging his convention toward a new and unsettled future, Taylor, with metaphoric expression and eschatological imagery, points Black listeners to a hopeful reality in an unjust and collapsing American society.

There is much that is wrong, distorted, disfigured, crippled about us [Blacks] but there are gifts and powers in the very limp which is our history here. There is a quality of rapture among [B]lack people which is authentically Christian. There is a sense of optimism which sees the threatening clouds of life but sees them shot through with the light of God. “Over my head I see trouble in the air, there must be a God somewhere. Black people have been forced to be three-world people, inhabitants of white America, inhabitants of [B]lack America, inhabitants of their strange land of the amalgam of their racial dreams and what was beheld in the haunting report: ‘Looked over Jordan, and what did I see? A band of angels coming after me.’ There is a gift and power of [B]lack people as members of the disestablishment to see the society in its splendor and in its shame.²⁷

Inspired by Hurston's idea about poetic language carrying an impulse for beauty, we discover in Gardner Taylor's adorned speech a creative impulse to light the way for hearers to see anew their lives in the light of a God who affirms their authentic Christian witness in a broken society. *Prophetic Black preaching carries an impulse for beauty in its use of language and culture.*

²⁷ Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor: V. 4, Special Occasion and Expository Sermons*, comp. Edward L. Taylor (Valley Forge: Judson, 2001), 21-22.

I have given consideration to two new constitutive characteristics of prophetic Black preaching. It may now be helpful to gather together the many strands that together establish a paradigmatic model of prophetic Black preaching that is both biblical and contextual.

Representing this paradigm, prophetic Black preaching:

- (1) opposes idolatry, particularly self-serving and self-deceiving ideologies;
- (2) drives toward a new and unsettling future in its refusal to absolutize the present;
- (3) speaks to the predicament of human suffering from the perspective of God's justice;
- (4) assumes a critical stance over against established power;
- (5) refuses to relinquish hope when confronted by collective misery and despair;²⁸
- (6) connects speech-act with prophetic actions as concrete praxis to help people freely participate in naming their reality;²⁹ and
- (7) carries an impulse for beauty in its use of language and culture.³⁰

A Message to Today's Black Preacher

Since Reconstruction, a call has gone out for prophetic preaching in the African American *village*.³¹ The once typically asset-rich Black pulpit is in deep crisis because it has become confused about its mission to the African American community. Black preachers and their congregations are dangerously distracted by the prosperity gospel movement.³² Obviously, there are myriad issues having negative impact on Black life in America. But the prosperity movement seems to be the ideological root cause of many of the distorted views about health and material success, which have long been a preoccupation of historically-disenfranchised Black people. The prosperity gospel often veils itself as priestly in nature, i.e., it speaks concern about spiritual renewal. While emptying the cross of its meaning, prosperity preachers use the language of "prophecy" to motivate people in support of materialistic agendas that little serve the faithful.

According to the prosperity message the "blessed life" is the divine right of every Christian, the believer's reward for her or his unshakable faith and positive thinking.³³ While it is obvious that the economic recession experienced nationwide has affected nearly all Americans, it has dealt a more devastating blow to Black communities (e.g. high foreclosure rates, credit card debt, rising crime rates). By promoting the world view that gave us this economic crisis, prosperity theologians are partly to blame. Preaching centered on obtaining wealth based on one's positive confession and faith has had great appeal to Blacks of every social class. But it is this message of false hope that continues to lead many astray. Prophetic preaching is diametrically opposed to the prosperity message; the prophetic message's agenda is

²⁸ Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Word of God in History," 39-41.

²⁹ Cf. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 69; Brueggemann, "The Prophetic Word of God and History," 36.

³⁰ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 6; Alkebulan, "The Spiritual Essence of African American Rhetoric," 34-35; Zora Neale Hurston., *The Sanctified Church*, 53.

³¹ This metaphor is another way of characterizing local neighborhoods and community where persons of African descent are predominant.

³² Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 112.

³³ Milmon Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 8.

not manipulation. Instead, prophetic preaching names God at work in God's created world, and it names self-serving, self-deceiving ideological practices sin.

Facing the Hour

Religious scholars have begun to raise serious questions about the efficacy of the Black pulpit. They surmise that the general stream of Black preaching today does not address the multiple contradictions afflicting Black life in America, but rather extols the prosperity god, with focus almost entirely on interior or spiritual concerns. Unlike the slave preachers who transformed "themselves into teachers and moral guides with a responsibility to keep the people together with faith in themselves,"³⁴ several Black preachers today may be rightly branded double-dealing politicians, whose tamed voices are unable to speak out for justice-bearing change. African American prophetic preaching is fundamentally theo-rhetorical discourse that is grounded in hope and responsive to injustice.

Tavis Smiley's edited volume *The Covenant with Black America* (2005), reports a range of distressing statistics of exigent issues within African American communities in the United States:

- African Americans are 13 percent of the nation's population and account for 56 percent annually of new HIV infections. A quarter of these new infections are among people under 25 years of age.³⁵
- Nearly one-third—32 percent—of African Americans do not have a regular doctor. By contrast, only 20 percent of white Americans do not have a regular doctor.³⁶
- One of every three black males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime.³⁷
- Forty-nine percent of the nation's homeless population is African American.³⁸

These statistics provide a glimpse at only a few important concerns that militate against the health of African American villages. Who will speak legitimately on behalf of the village's weak and most vulnerable citizens if not the leaders within Black churches? These findings confirm the reality that African American communities are in crisis.

So, what, then, is the answer? What must be the contemporary Black preacher's rejoinder on the community's behalf? The answer, I think, lies in bringing these issues to the local and national community's level of consciousness where they can be dealt with. We must, as Martin Luther King once advised those fighting for freedom and justice during the Civil Rights era, name these crisis issues as finite disappointment even as we adhere to infinite hope. King once preached that the answer to the blighting of hope is to confront one's shattered dreams

³⁴ Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. (New York: Vintage, 1976), 272-73.

³⁵ K. Wright, "Time Is Now! The State of AIDS in Black America," Black AIDS Institute, Los Angeles, CA, February 2005, pp. 5, 8, quoted in Tavis Smiley, ed. *The Covenant with Black America* (Chicago: Third World, 2006), 9.

³⁶ "2001 Health Care Quality Survey," The Commonwealth Fund, New York, NY, November 2001, chart 37, quoted in Tavis Smiley, ed. *The Covenant with Black America*, 9.

³⁷ Marc Mauer and Ryan Scott King, "Schools and Prisons: 50 Years After Brown vs. Board of Education," <http://www.sentencingproject.org/pdfs/brownboard.pdf>, The Sentencing Project, quoted in Tavis Smiley, ed. *The Covenant with Black America*, 53.

³⁸ U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Census 2000," available at <http://www.census.gov/Press>, quoted in Tavis Smiley, ed. *The Covenant with Black America*, 105.

and to ask oneself: “How may I transform this liability into an asset... transform this dungeon of shame into a haven of redemptive suffering?”³⁹

What is the Black preacher’s message about God’s self-disclosure in scripture and concern for transforming human action for today’s Black Church contexts? Regrettably, it is not always clear what the role of the Black Church is today, especially given our society’s growing pluralism and the world-shaping historical phenomena of racial, economic and cultural diversity. Perhaps the most constructive counsel for contemporary Black preachers is to urge the development of empathetic listening and dialogue with the culture, especially the voiceless and victimized residents of the village who cry out for an alternative voice, new beginnings – hope.

A Hopeful Sign

A new generation of African American preachers is emerging and making important strides to overcome the blighting of hope in Black churches and communities today. To name a few, Ray A. Owens, Leslie Callahan, and Raphael Warnock lead congregations in Tulsa, Philadelphia, and Atlanta, respectively, and have earned Ph.D.’s in the areas of Christian social ethics, religion, and theology. Alongside their obvious commitment to the agenda of African American community restoration are bold and thoughtful sermons that reveal their prophetic consciousness. Patrick Clayborn’s doctoral dissertation situates the theologian and mystic Howard Thurman’s preaching within the prophetic Black rhetorical tradition. Clayborn awakens the field to a reconsideration of Thurman’s homiletical dexterity and poetic vision relative to his uncommon commitment to bridge the racial divide.

Emma Jordan-Simpson and Eboni Marshall stand in historic urban pulpits in New York City – churches with longstanding commitments to the work of social justice and community renewal. They proclaim the justice of God in spoken Word, and seek to call their listeners to pragmatic tasks in the *village*. The strident voice of Toby Sanders is one seldom noticed and appreciated. Sanders pastors the “Beloved Community Church” in Trenton, New Jersey, where his preaching seeks alignment with the teachings of Jesus in the spirit of Martin L. King’s love ethic. Although these emerging clerics are less known to the general public, they are at the forefront, shaping the discourse for future generations, speaking truth to power, to provide new insights about what it means to preach prophetically in postmodern African America.

With new insights, current preaching trends, and supposed worship enhancing technology, come numerous challenges. Because the aforementioned clerics are adept readers of worship and culture trends, they have not lost appreciation for the heritage and multiple dimensions of African American preaching, especially with the recent Black preaching trend to present didactic sermons in disregard of other preaching approaches. Owens, Callahan, Warnock, et.al might rightly be called technologists. That is to say, they are theologically astute and information-age savvy twenty-first century clerics. In their use of technology and media they well understand the times. More importantly, they know that they must not only use technology in for worship purposes; but they also must be technology critics,⁴⁰ when technology stifles the listener’s reception of the Word.

The Preacher’s Authorization

³⁹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 91.

⁴⁰ Quentin J. Schultze, “Technology” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008), 334-35.

There is, of course, an important caveat for preachers who would proclaim a prophetic witness and speak truth on behalf of the village. Authorization to preach prophetically is reliant upon at least *three holy effects*: (1) access to God for revelation through prayer and scripture; (2) ability to hear God's voice distinct from one's own; and (3) conviction to speak about the dignity of persons as people of God.⁴¹ The prophetic sermon is always a summoned word. Therefore, the place to begin prophetic proclamation is inquiry after God. The genesis and terminus of proclamation is God; and preaching as proclamation is theologically authorized speech (rhetoric) having concern about what is fitting to its receptor's context.⁴² The messages heard across many African American pulpits are wholly suspect when they seem to say to adherents that if they do not receive God's material and spiritual blessings the problem falls under the strict province of that individual's faith, while the community of faith bears no responsibility. Consequently, the preacher must have a prophetic Word that not only takes a critical stance against the social ills of the community, but also offers rebuke to the false religion of the church.⁴³

Consistent with the most basic task of the prophets of old who first retrieved God's instruction and then disseminated that instruction in the context of human affairs, the preacher who hopes to sound a prophetic note mediates for a lost people a way back to identity recognition. That is to say, the prophetic Word reminds people about who they are as people of God. Only in standing under the Word and community is the preacher truly able to discover the community's state of health and, correspondingly, is able to help that community claim its true identity.⁴⁴ God and the people have a significant role in testing the authority of the preacher. Although it does appear that the prophetic voice in African American church contexts today has been cloaked, the preacher can realize an opportunity to reclaim prophetic authority amid the complex social and ecclesial problems that dehumanize persons.

Beyond the African American Village

What might a context-specific proposal of the sort I have made here mean for preachers in other racial/ethnic communities? Part of the goal of this essay was to make clear the fact that the prophetic Word cannot be frozen into static categories or limited to any one justice-seeking, hopeful community. Prophetic preaching arises in response to rhetorical situations that need and invite it. African Americans do not have a monopoly on matters concerning community distress, human suffering, and other forms of injustice and oppression. Despite racial/ethnic classification the same abiding commitments to Christ's church in the will for justice and peace, I believe, apply to all who seek God's self-disclosure in their lived experiences.

Thus one is hardly prophetic in one's own context if indifferent to how the prophetic witness is actualized in other faith communities. Accordingly, the clothes of culture always shape meaning in the task of prophetic preaching. If naming one's own historical reality is significant in preaching a prophetic Word, then we are never permitted to say that we understand the meaning of preaching of this kind without becoming part of the arrived at meaning itself. Whether first, second, or third generation Irish, Italian, German, or Latin American, all must do the arduous work of naming their own storied reality, assessing their community's rhetorical

⁴¹ Jeremiah 23: 21-22, 28, 32.

⁴² James F. Kay, "Reorientation: Homiletics as Theologically Authorized Rhetoric," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, Number 1, 33.

⁴³ Russell Moldovan, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: An Oral History*, 1999, 15.

⁴⁴ D. Stephen Long, "Prophetic Preaching" in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 388.

situations, and addressing that community after hearing from God. If a particular community's concern is the gospel, this can only mean that that community must bear the responsibility of uncovering their own particular identity as journeying people in a strange new land.