



# The State of African American Preaching Today

*Follow the grain in your own wood.<sup>1</sup>*

—HOWARD THURMAN

**T**he spoken Word in America's Black pulpits has long been esteemed for its persistent calls for justice, church reform, moral and ethical responsibility, and spiritual redemption. These commitments have been central to the Black church's identity. More importantly, though, these commitments to the spoken Word provide a way to take up the more fundamental matter of how one may, for example, determine what relational continuities exist between the prophets, priests, and sages of Scripture and the basic character of the Black preacher's peculiar speech and communal obligations.

I set out working on this project with three primary audiences in mind—the student of homiletics,<sup>2</sup> the working preacher, and the teacher of preachers. These are the individuals I know best since I am a former seminarian, an ordained minister, and a teacher of preachers. But not only this, I have come to view this book as generating a productive friction of sorts among Black homiletical theorists. Though my work, in some respects, builds on earlier scholarship, this book takes the tack that claims that critical reflection on African American preaching is, on the one hand, relatively underdeveloped and, on the other, vying for more forward-thinking scholarly discussion.

A critical analysis of the state of twenty-first-century African American preaching can unfold in a number of ways depending on how one thinks the picture should be painted. It is important to begin our conversation about the state of African American preaching today from three frames of reference: (1) theological education and the intellectual tradition of contemporary African American homiletics; (2) the broad range of congregational and secular community concerns and expectations; and (3) the character and moral agency of the Black preacher. By focusing in this way, we are provided a wider lens to investigate what is at stake in contemporary preaching practices in African American churches and communities.

## Learning Habitats and the Preacher's Humanity

Contemporary homiletics has insufficiently attended to theological matters pertaining to incarnation and the historical conditioning of culture, and how these matters shape the message of the gospel in different contexts. A number of African American homiletical theorists echo this claim, having now sufficiently demonstrated in their scholarship that African Americans are subjects of their own histories rather than objects under someone else's principles of scrutiny.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, across the lines of race, ethnicity, and culture, homiletical proposals have in general uncritically accepted many Enlightenment presuppositions, tending toward foundationalist assumptions for preaching, specifically, the commitment to embracing claims to knowledge in some fundamental certitude. One-size-fits-all homiletical methods do not work because our thinking about preaching is ever evolving, always subject to challenge, and definitive interpretations are thus difficult to find.

Our current picture of theological education, namely the way clergy leaders are trained to preach, is an outflow of circumscribed ideals that follow theoretical principles and guidelines, techniques and approaches that are supposedly historically and culturally neutral.<sup>4</sup> Predictably, for both student and homiletics instructor, the classroom setting often does not become transformed space for authentic Christian praxis. Having attended a predominantly white seminary where Eurocentric theological points of view are privileged I quickly learned that doing well in preaching class carried with it the expectation that I would cope with and

conform to a particular set of homiletical norms without questioning the authority of them.

Participants bring their own conceptualizations, convictions, mores, and folkways—those emanating from local congregational life—to the classroom setting. The sensible homiletics instructor will take great care to help each student stave off the ensnaring trap of cultural abandonment and feelings of disconnection from their actual preaching habitats and context-determined ways to preach. Learning to preach involves one's conscious resistance to forces that strive to domesticate one's voice. That is why the role of the pedagogue is so important. Theological seminaries and divinity schools often become principal players in the domestication process. When I have taught courses in predominantly white settings the chief complaint of students of color is one that centers on the issue of cultural invasion. Cultural invasion is the act of the teacher—who becomes invader—imposing his or her own worldview upon students in ways that inhibit their creativity by dismissing, camouflaging, or curbing their expression.<sup>5</sup>

One inattentive to the vital role context plays in African American preaching, for example, will hardly notice the indigenous character of the “chanted sermon,” and may not perceive it as theo-rhetorical artistry and experienced Word. Despite the common portrayal of the Black folk preacher as comic figure, James Weldon Johnson has rightly expressed: “The old-time Negro preacher . . . was an important figure and at bottom a vital factor. It was through him that the people of diverse languages and customs who were brought here from diverse parts of Africa and thrown into slavery were given their first sense of unity and solidarity.”<sup>6</sup>

In recent years, even some African Americans have come to disdain this preaching style. I believe this is in part due to its misuse in the hands of charismatic charlatans. One might also point out the fact that preachers from many “high-brow,” “silk-stocking,” “demure” congregations consider some communities “low class” or “uncouth.” This may be less true in some historically Black denominations—Baptist, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), and African Methodist Episcopal (AME)—and more true in the so-called mainline denominations, for example, Episcopal and Lutheran. But more than that, contemporary homiletics, it seems, continues to privilege African American preaching modes that seem to cohere best to the nomenclature of white academicians. To be precise, when the African American “chanted sermon” is attempted or examined in

academic contexts without regard to the actual preaching habitats from which the “chanted sermon” arises, not only will context-determined ways of listening be overlooked, but also missed is the aesthetic genius of this preaching style’s interconnected dance of Scripture, culture, body, and voice. Like the Negro spiritual, there is a subtext, an internal logic, to the authentic “chanted sermon” that is only accessible when the hearer is helped by cultural history.

This known fact should inspire creative pedagogy as well as encourage greater sensitivity to what is fitting for hearers. “One of the tasks of theological education,” writes homiletician Richard Ward, “is to help more of the student’s story become available for reflection as a [learning] resource.”<sup>7</sup> This means, of course, that teaching methods must be constantly scrutinized to guard against self-serving acts of cultural invasion that consciously or unconsciously devalue the contributions of pupils who have much to share from their own socio-ecclesial habitats. Because cultural identity and religious formation are principal determiners of how a sermon will be preached and heard, one truly committed to the work of transforming churches and communities through the gospel of Jesus Christ will “pay attention” to the vital importance context plays in preaching. Our preaching contexts matter when our concern is the gospel. For this reason, to understand the Christian faith contextually “is really a theological imperative.”<sup>8</sup> There is no gospel “for us” that is not clothed in human culture and is not mediated through the sociocultural concerns of where we live, who we are, and what we value. Constructive pedagogy asks if our theologies of preaching are constructed with the local idioms of our students in view. In an age of suspicion hermeneutics, competing narratives, and reality redescription, without a revised understanding of what is at stake culturally and communally in contemporary preaching, our homiletical theorizing will be scantily useful.

## Black Homiletics Coming of Age: Two Leading Proposals

Since the release of Henry H. Mitchell’s *Black Preaching* in 1970, considerable attention has been devoted to carving out Black preaching’s nomenclature in academic reflection, and rightly so. But only a few proposals since then have furthered the discussion of Black preaching beyond contrasting it with Eurocentric preaching, most notably that of

homiletician Dale Andrews.<sup>9</sup> Given this impasse, the future direction of African American preaching remains indistinct. In order to provide some context for thinking about the intellectual tradition of African American homiletics, and to reiterate the importance of attending to matters of context in Christian preaching, I now draw our attention to the homiletic scholarship of Henry H. Mitchell and Cleophus J. LaRue.

### Henry H. Mitchell: Event and Experience

The consistent refrain in Henry Mitchell's landmark work *Black Preaching* and subsequent magnum opus *Celebration and Preaching* (1990), which emerged twenty years later, is that context matters and must never be overlooked if our concern is preaching. In 1970 Mitchell's intended readership had been mostly African American, but in his more recent reflections he anticipates both an African American and Anglo American readership. On the heels of the great civil rights social revolution, Mitchell's scholarship soared as it invited a multiethnic readership into a primarily oral religious tradition. In *Celebration and Preaching*, Mitchell states that preaching's goal is to reclaim "heart religion," that is, to counter the objective and detached preaching approaches that only appeal to the cognitive aspects of one's being. With this orientation, he works to synthesize elements of the "mainstream" Protestant pulpit tradition and Black church pulpit traditions. Identifying the rhetorical dynamics in both streams, the preacher finds right entry into what he labels "experiential encounter." He argues that the coalescence of rhetorical vehicles—guidelines of concrete images, familiar language, familiar details, timing of impact, and so forth—when understood and appropriated by the called preacher, promotes encounter and hence can reach people at the core of their belief.

For Mitchell, the authentication of Black preaching has all to do with human reception of the spoken Word. In the sermon event the congregation rouses the preacher to a celebratory high point characterized by chanting, humming, or moaning under the auspices of the Holy Spirit. This momentum-building sermon event forms the distinctive worship ethos where Black preaching is made visible. In other words, without congregational response, there can be no genuine Black sermon. By this paradigm, the sermon, as Mitchell defines it, is "reasonable and relevant sequences of biblical affirmation planted in or offered to the intuitive

consciousness of hearers, by way of what might be called homiletical coworkers with the Spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

In Mitchell’s theory of celebration, the intuitive consciousness and emotive consciousness are the locus points for faith formation. In the spoken Word, they are the listener’s pathway, sectors of one’s belief system and worldview.<sup>11</sup> Intuitive consciousness or emotive consciousness is faith forming. It honors, reflectively, one’s gathered life stories; it is the seat of one’s tastes as well as prejudices. Relative to faith insights gathered from intuitive consciousness is always this stream that defies rational examination. Because the intuitive realm is built upon gathered stories—“tapes,” if you will—the preacher’s principal concern is helping listeners “to improve these ‘tapes’ or habitual replays of response to particular circumstances.”<sup>12</sup> Still, the emotive consciousness grounds the celebratory dimension of his theory.

This biblically based, unanalytical phenomenon of celebration, as Mitchell claims, is an expression of joy in God. According to Mitchell, celebration has five central commitments: (1) it frees up the listener to experience the spontaneous workings of the Holy Spirit in worship; (2) it fosters a deep connection between the hearer and the sermon’s subject matter; (3) its contagion is infectious in the context of worshipers in fellowship; (4) it honors the fact that emotion is essential to the ecstatic enforcement of the Word for the people; and (5) it promotes identification when rhetorical details and imagery are placed before the hearer during the sermon.<sup>13</sup> Mitchell’s clear rejection of the old homiletic preaching models, first developed by early-eighteenth-century neoclassical rhetoricians, which equate the sermon with rational argumentation through propositional speech or logic, is clear. In fact, his emphasis on experiential encounter links him to the stylistic, performative tradition of the sixteenth-century elocutionists and, more evidently, to theorists of the New Homiletic.<sup>14</sup>

The New Homiletic movement began in the late 1960s and gained momentum following the proposals of several homiletical theorists, most notably Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, and Charles Rice. According to the New Homiletic school, effective preaching of the gospel is dialogical, imaginative, primarily narrative in form and inductive in movement, and shaped to the listener. These theorists prize preaching that unfolds inductively instead of through propositional logic. Hermeneutically, there are three major implications in relation to preaching from this perspective:

(1) the Word of God must be spoken; (2) preachers must see themselves as listeners; and (3) the fundamental nature of the spoken Word is a community-creating event. Put differently, the theological and hermeneutic trajectory of the New Homiletic perspective is that preaching is an *event and experience* concerned with “message bearing” and interpreting the Word of God freshly in the way of reality in the vernacular of the people.<sup>15</sup> Though theorists in this movement such as Mitchell view preaching as “creating experience,” it is not always clear what is actually being said about God that creates the experience.

Clear of the vestiges of old-school homiletics, Mitchell’s working hermeneutic seeks distinction in Black preaching through the matrix of language. In his view, Black preaching conforms to certain patterns of language indigenous to Black culture.<sup>16</sup> Despite his good insights concerning the relationship of African culture and its influences on Christianity in Black churches, one of the most contestable claims he makes is that Black preaching “requires the use of ‘Black language’—the rich rendition of English spoken in the ghetto.”<sup>17</sup> Few would consider this a hallmark since there is no consensus about what constitutes “Black language.” It is more accurate to say that Black preaching is always responsive to and mindful of the vernacular of the people. Clearly, rhetorical interests drive Mitchell’s preaching theory; so the “message-bearing” task of the preacher is what reveals the essence of Black preaching.

### Cleophus J. LaRue: Belief and Marginalization

Insofar as the term “Black preaching” describes a rich tradition of varying theological orientations and methods of sermon construction and delivery, Cleophus J. LaRue finds Mitchell’s theory lacking. Hence, LaRue provides a counterclaim. He argues that as important as oral formulas, emotion, and vivid images are, the problem with highlighting traits of Black preaching as foundational properties of what makes it distinctive is that this “is merely describing characteristics of a process already in motion.”<sup>18</sup> LaRue privileges an interpretive framework to identify what makes Black preaching distinctive. Whereas Mitchell’s programmatic goal is essentially performative-rhetorical, LaRue’s goal involves a formative biblical-hermeneutic plan to demonstrate the role and function of Scripture in sermons preached by Black clerics. The distinctiveness of Black preaching, maintains LaRue, lies in the way African Americans

conceive of God and hermeneutically appropriate Scripture to their lived experience. He maintains that there are three central dynamics at the heart of Black preaching: (1) belief in an all-powerful, sovereign God; (2) a Black sociocultural context of marginalization and oppression; and (3) the Black lived experience.<sup>19</sup> Black preaching, expresses LaRue, is formed, reflected upon, and organized through what he terms “domains of experience.” LaRue claims there are five domains that (1) provide a descriptive vehicle for categorizing broad areas of Black lived experiences, and (2) create a resource bank for ideas for the content of the Black sermon.<sup>20</sup>

The first domain is *personal piety*. Sermons emanating from this domain strongly cohere to the tenets of American evangelicalism (e.g., keeping devotion, practicing personal discipline, and good moral conduct). Sermons birthed in the *care of the soul* domain tend to focus on pastoral care matters—the health and wellness of individuals, encouragement to the bereaved families, and so forth—and are usually prescriptive in nature. The *social justice* domain is the realm where matters pertaining to local and national public policy, issues of race, classism, and gender equity are of central concern. Sermons originating in the *corporate concerns* domain raise concern about more specific crisis issues of the community such as violence in inner cities, wealth and educational disparity among Blacks and whites, Black incarceration and recidivism, and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Finally, the *maintenance of the institutional church* domain is characterized by an emphasis on the ecclesiastical or cultic life of congregations. Sermons growing out of this domain have principal concern with matters such as church growth and building projects, financial stewardship, religious education, and missions. “When the preacher speaks of life out of one of these domains,” asserts LaRue, “a bonding takes place between preacher and congregation because the listener senses that the preacher understands some meaningful aspect of his or her life.”<sup>21</sup> Both preacher and sermon play critical roles within the communal experience of African American Christians.

## Will It Preach, Still?

Scholarship written with sensitivity to the significant role that contextuality plays in Christian practices is of paramount importance. Satisfying descriptive proposals reflecting on African American Christian practices in the United States today are generally hard to find. This is true,

specifically when one considers the thin slate of academic texts used in seminary settings that reflect on historically marginalized communities. Theological educators usually separate these works out from the core; they are typically viewed as supplemental in nature. According to African American theologian Stephen Ray, this phenomenon by and large comes as a response to the fact that much of the work of African American theologians originates in critique of some normative male-Eurocentric theological view. Ray notices that the privileges and pitfalls of such texts as *Celebration and Experience* and *The Heart of Black Preaching* have to do with their highly contextualized nature. On the one hand, these texts imply that white normative voices may be seen as in need of correction, while still their own normativity is not called into question. On the other, what is communicated is that the genius of Black scholarship and focus on historically marginalized communities is found in criticism. This second consequence of these messages is perhaps the most unsettling; that is, that “this message is an agnosticism about the capacity of these originating communities to produce works that are generally constructive to the Christian tradition.”<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, both LaRue and Mitchell have established nomenclature to discuss African American preaching in terms of Black religious and social identity in light of gross oversights in Euro-American pre-postmodern homiletic proposals on contextual matters.<sup>23</sup> These African American theorists perceptively demonstrate that preaching which matters never forms in isolation from culture. They both note the particular influence of African culture and American evangelicalism on African American rhetorical traditions. But in highlighting the significance of the Black sociocultural context for preaching, neither discusses, in any sufficient depth, what Black preaching must now do to overcome its apparent irrelevance in today’s society. They place strong emphasis on positive stories worthy of celebration and views of what the Black experience is for Black people. But in their aim to describe the precise nature of African American preaching, mainly in ways exclusively tied to perceived harmonious question sets and experiences growing out of oppressive circumstances, both theorists, like their non-African American counterparts, hold too tightly to relatively fixed interpretations of “Blackness” and what constitutes a “Black sermon.”

Is it the case that a sermon may be disqualified as “Black” if an African American preacher preaches cross-culturally or in a faith community

where he or she is a racial/ethnic minority? Without much effort African American preachers tend to be carriers of culture wherever they preach. The most effective preachers happen to be those who keenly discern how to make certain adjustments in sermonic presentations based on the relational configuration of the preaching context. “Effective [preaching] is a transaction between [preacher] and [congregation] who comes to trust the [preacher] and thereby accepts the preacher’s message” because it reflects authenticity to one’s cultural self but also a sensitivity to the ways listeners from one context to another hear and process sermons.<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman, Katie Cannon, Peter Gomes, James Forbes, Barry Black, Violet Fisher, and Brad Braxton are a few examples of Black ministers who have preached in historically Black religious settings, but also have clearly breached the standing “Black sermon” criteria highlighted above. The vocational commitments of these ministers have time and again summoned them to leadership roles in predominantly white, interracial, and multiracial settings. Postmodernity has ushered in new and tremendous challenges to any definitive claims to knowledge. Postmodern suspicion stains virtually every pew of every church of every religious community today.

In fairness, more recently LaRue has taken care to nuance some of his essentialist claims. In a recent essay he notes that the postmodern social and ecclesial shifting of African American culture is currently under way. He acknowledges that traditional Black worshipers whose operating hermeneutic centers on a God who acts mightily against an oppressed people may in fact not apply to all who now populate the pews on Sundays in African American church contexts. Several upwardly mobile Black listeners, claims LaRue, might indeed challenge the notion that their life experiences are or have been in any way akin to those who are oppressed on the margins of American society.<sup>25</sup> This is true, but it is also true that one is also called to look beyond one’s own personal experience and look to larger communal concerns. Even the privileged should not live in a silo. As I am writing this, I, too, am well aware that some of my descriptive claims may be offset by future theorists who have inherited a different sociocultural homiletic landscape from my own.

Not only is an updated or revised description of “Blackness” needed to enrich our understanding of Black preaching in the twenty-first century, other proposals must now emerge in Black homiletics that, for example, focus on the character and moral agency of the Black preacher. If Aristotle is right when he maintains that the character or “ethos” of

the speaker is highly significant to a speech's persuasive appeal, then the ethical character and moral agency of African American preachers are subjects that need more theoretical attention in Black homiletic theory. While no preacher's life is without stain or blemish, personal integrity and ministerial ethics ought to matter.

It is deeply vexing to know that even some of the most respected clergy in African America regularly preach on matters of ethical or moral conduct, while not holding themselves or expecting their congregations to hold them to the same standard. What is more perplexing is that congregations will overlook the most egregious behavior in an effort to protect and defend what is perceived to be the community's last "authentic" hero. The private life of preachers was less scrutinized publicly in the pre-Internet era. However, in today's sound-bite, texting, voyeuristic, and highly litigious culture, little remains private. Sadly, these known facts will be of no consequence to some segments of the African American church. There will be church communities that will continue to tolerate the unscrupulous behavior of their ministers as long as the preacher is furnished with charisma and yearned-for preaching gifts.

One final inquiry is warranted. If strong biblical content, the socio-cultural experience, emotive appeal, and the awaiting congregation are requisite elements to the genuine Black sermon, then should not a clearer picture appear about what qualifies as prophetic preaching in the context of Black life in America? To date, few scholars have attempted to bring into focus the precise nature and function of prophetic Black preaching. Although, due to racism, the prophetic principle has been virtually institutionalized in Black churches since the independent Black church movement of the early nineteenth century, a satisfying description of the nature and function of prophetic preaching has ostensibly been unattainable.

Naming God and how God acts in the world is and has always been at the core of Black preaching; however, I would argue that still today higher esteem is given to *how* things are said (style) over *what* is actually being said (content). If this were not the case, there would be no point to my investigation. Preachers must rally the people around a vision of God that motivates those persons to act decisively in the process of transforming lives and systems in African American villages. A village made whole first requires that the preacher's character find congruence with her or his speaking. The messenger and the message spoken to the people must be scrutinized and held up in the light of God's good news in Jesus Christ.

Apostle Paul's announcement, "I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27) should be both a caution and a homiletical lesson for the preacher.

## Naming the Crises in the Village

Martin Luther King Jr. once preached that the answer to the blighting of hope is to confront one's shattered dreams and to ask oneself, "How may I transform this liability into an asset, transform this dungeon of shame into a haven of redemptive suffering?"<sup>26</sup> King's rejoinder was simply this: adhere to infinite hope. Adherence to infinite hope, proclaimed King, is not the bitter acceptance of fatalism nor is it palliative hope that renders individuals passive and incapable to speak out for change. Rather, adherence to infinite hope is to cling to realistic hope. Adherence to realistic hope, suggested King, is the only viable upshot to a community's death. Obviously hope becomes unavailable if the community's preachers are unwilling first to name the crises of our times as finite disappointment. For only then is adherence to infinite hope possible or, more contemporarily speaking, the audacity to hope possible.

Robert Michael Franklin's recent book *Crisis in the Village* focuses on the multiple crisis points within African American "villages," specifically, the local neighborhoods and communities with predominantly Black populations in the United States. He lists a range of urgent issues to be confronted and puts forward a series of strategies for healing the "village." Healing the village, says Franklin, entails determining and setting priorities and finding viable solutions that correspond with positive enduring values, community assets, and resources within African American communities. Thus, the place to begin the social transformation and needed restoration of hope is with the "anchor" or "mediating" institutions of the village—the Black family, Black churches, and Black schools.<sup>27</sup>

Franklin claims that Black congregations have become confused about the mission of Jesus Christ. The gospel of love, service, and justice, Franklin rightly states, has become supplanted by "personal greed, obsessive materialism, and unchecked narcissism."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Black congregations are far too uncritical about America's routine way of permitting and rewarding inequalities of wealth and power, and this, too, contributes to the prosperity gospel's encroachment within Black religious life. This problem is aggravated by the shameful silence of Black clergy on major

policy issues, those having specific implications for the Black community in particular, says Franklin. The community's job is to make clerics accountable for their actions and inaction. One way to do that is to make them craft and proclaim their vision for the community's social and religious transformation.<sup>29</sup>

The complex of problems that militate against the health of African American villages—high incarceration rates, father absenteeism, unwed and teenage pregnancy, domestic abuse and violence, high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, high foreclosure rates, homelessness, joblessness, job discrimination, unaffordable health care, unscrupulous pay-day lending practices targeting the Black working poor—is an albatross strangling the lifeblood out of America's African American communities. I am arguing that *trivocal* preaching has the capacity to stem the tide of death of the village and supply hope to persons who desperately need spiritual care and social justice when it adheres to and announces Jesus' norm-setting declaration in Luke's Gospel. The preacher's words matter when they speak justice and hope into being, when preachers act as servants to their communities, interceding on its behalf and mediating God's moral, spiritual, and ethical concern for Christian unity. When the preacher takes the position as sage, that is, the community's trusted guide and repository of the community's wisdom, future generations rise to make great contributions to the cause of Christ. In the next chapter I explore the historical journey and rise of the Black preacher in American society and the long legacy of trivocal preaching.