

# Introduction

*A threefold cord is not easily broken.*

—ECCLESIASTES 4:12B

I have listened to sermons all of my life. My paternal grandfather, the late Reverend Benjamin Franklin Gilbert, was a tenth-grade-educated preacher who served as pastor to two small country churches, alternating weeks between the two of them. Family legend has it that among the rural Black reverends in the central Texas region he was deemed the “Dean of the Country Preachers.” His unofficial homiletics course met around his home porch. My aunt LaRue, who eavesdropped on these sessions, tells me that he always had useful advice for the newly licensed ministers who would come sit and listen. That advice, she said, was usually a word or two about what homileticians today describe as the sermon’s focus and function, central idea, or relevant claim. According to my aunt, he would say to them, “If you are going to talk about a dog in the sermon, then talk about a dog, not a cat. But if you are going to talk about the cat, then don’t talk about the dog, talk about the cat.” He continued, “There is enough to say about a cat to make one good sermon.” According to Grandpa Benny, sermons that deviate from their topic inevitably fall flat. With that advice there was also a caution: “If you decide that it is the dog instead of the cat that you are going to talk about, remember, no one sermon can say all there is to say about the dog. Sermons that say more than they should are overwhelming to the listener’s patience.”

Beyond tips on sermon method and taking caution to remain sensitive to the listener, there remained a more significant counsel, some of which was passed on to my father. Taking a page from Grandpa Benny’s folk wisdom, my father, also a working preacher, would say to the

ministers-in-training that served our church: “Seventy-five percent of your sermon is the life you live.”

My father, now deceased, took up the clerical duties to those two rural congregations after his dad’s death. Though in many ways apprenticed by his father, my dad’s ministry would ultimately take its own unique path, for, unlike Grandpa Benny, he had the benefit of a formal education. Though not seminary trained, in 1967 my father earned the distinction of being Baylor University’s first African American graduate. After his graduation and upon concluding his services to those rural churches, he accepted a call to become pastor of the Carver Park Missionary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, shortly after my birth. An author, community organizer, elected school-board official, and director of Upward Bound, an educational program preparing youth for college, during his tenure at Carver Park my father became a leading voice from Waco’s African American community.

My father was deeply committed to the work of ministry. His commitments were less than modest. Despite the fact that for all of my life he was a severe arthritic who either got around on crutches or was carted about in a wheelchair by my brother JaJa or me, in his fifty years of life, through pain and joy, provision and lack, support and abandonment, he remained devoted to the biblical call to “preach in season and out of season.” For him, preaching was a sacred assignment and the primary vehicle for humanity’s spiritual and social liberation. As I reflect back on his dedication to the preaching ministry, I now realize what was at work in him and in his preaching. There were three dimensions to his preaching life. At times the voice of prophet raged in him; other times, in spite of and because of his afflictions, the priestly voice of compassion emerged; and still at other moments, the voice of sage spoke wisdom to those ministers who shadowed him. He was a minister of the gospel who preached *trivocally*—that is, his preaching ministry had the substance of the gospel in three-dimensional scope.

For most attendees, Sunday worship at Carver Park represented the end of a morally testing and spiritually hazardous week, a time to meet God at the well once again. Often enduring great physical pain, each Sunday, after taking a sip of water, my father would greet his awaiting congregation with the words, “Let the church say, ‘Amen.’” He would offer a prayer of illumination, then open his Bible and begin reading the Scripture for the day. Following this, he would twice announce the subject of the

sermon, the second time for effect, and gracefully move into exposition of the text. The sermon set-up was just as important as its close. Proceeding on, with embodied speech awakened to the Spirit's prompting, he would preach with all of his might. Three-quarters of the way through, in a low pitch, he would begin a rhythmic chanting. On most occasions this ritual would evoke "talk back" from the congregation. Nearing the sermon's close, he somehow found syncopation with the vibrating chords of the Hammond organ chiming underneath his voice. Putting measured speech to rhythmic verse, the chanting swelled into a full-throated cadence. By this point, he started moving the hearer into a captivating retelling of Jesus' Passion—his suffering death on Calvary's cross, his glorious resurrection and ascension and promised return. Dad excelled in the cathartic art of calling forth the *Amens* already present on the people's hearts, to use the words of Evans Crawford.

Having been firmly rooted in the singing-preacher tradition of many Texas preachers of his day, before offering his personal testimony he would round out his sermon with one of the time-honored songs in his repertoire such as "His Eye Is on the Sparrow" or "I've Learned How to Live Holy." As familiar as his testimonials were to me, they were not perfunctory. They were a thoughtful recapping of some life-altering event he had experienced or major obstacle he or another church member had overcome. Their purpose was to give the gospel "feet" into the listener's human situation. My dad's testimonials always spoke of God's love and power; they were confessions about miracles; they were his offering to the people to encourage their continued trust in the goodness of the Lord. Finally, the invitation to Christian discipleship, referred to as "opening the doors of the church," would be offered. For the repentant ones now welcomed home this was their opportunity to experience God's grace and a community's renewed support. To the unbeliever escorted down the aisle toward the altar, this was their opportunity to publicly receive the key of salvation.

This was the weekly ritual. Dad took it seriously. His preaching life was my orientation to the ministry of spoken Word and practiced Word. And, yes, my remembrances probably paint too romantic a picture. But the truth is, despite his many imperfections, errors in judgment, and the forgiveness he required from his family and community for his ministry-at-all-costs mind-set, he was truly a remarkable man. His life's grammar told a story about the preaching life as ministry of the Word, and the

remarkable poetry of the gospel he consistently proclaimed and sought to demonstrate was that, in preaching, the hope of God speaks, and the words spoken are always words about divine intentionality, what God desires and what God expects. Robert Lewis Gilbert bequeathed to me a hunger to participate in the recovery of the African American preacher's voice in our times. It is my job to offer ideas about how to do that.

## Recovering the Preacher's Voice

I believe in the providence of God. I was a political science major with a minor in religion at Baylor. Early on in my matriculation, following my father's death, I discerned a call to preach, but it took some "running and pleading" before I finally relented. I finished college with the intent to apply to law school, having spent two internships with my local congressman in his local office and one summer in Washington, D.C. However, divine interruptions did not support my intent. Instead, my acceptance of God's call to preach translated into a call to seminary preparation. I enrolled in Princeton Theological Seminary, during which I served congregations in Machakos, East Africa, and in Brooklyn, New York. Following my graduation and a brief tenure as an associate pastor in Brooklyn, I returned to Princeton, where some years later, I earned my PhD.

My father was this larger-than-life personality in Waco. After his death I struggled to find my way emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. I felt burdened by it all. But these pivotal moments are what led me to accepting God's call. Curiously, although I had obtained tremendous knowledge and wisdom from observing my father's ministry, it was my mother's quiet nudging that gave me license to discover my own path. Still today, consistent with her and my father's admonishments in my early childhood, I hear her voice saying to me, "You ought to answer when you are called." I have heard this echo, in evolving translations, throughout my ministry-life preparations. My dad's death gave me wings; my mother's blessing supported my flight.

Some have said to me, "I see that you are following in your grandfather's and father's footsteps." Honestly, I never know whether such a remark should be taken as a compliment, condolence, or condemnation. Whatever is intended, I have learned over the years that every minister called by God is uniquely assigned to a specific work to be carried out in specific contexts during a specific season of time. The legacy traits that

I own are manifestly that—traits. As I now journey on in life as both a teacher and practitioner of preaching I recognize that the needed clarity about one’s ministry purpose happens in the journeying process itself. My homiletics course meetings are not gatherings around Grandpa Benny’s front porch, nor are my ministry engagements the Sunday-to-Sunday ritual from my father’s wheelchair pulpit. I would like to think that my preparations have afforded me a movable pulpit—a much more versatile and reflective space to teach, preach, shepherd, and shape the minds of a new generation of ministers. If our calling means anything to us we should answer when God calls. But not only this; if we are to discover our authentic preaching voice we must answer the call with our own tongue.

I now teach homiletics at a historically Black, university-based theological institution in the nation’s capital. Each semester I give a tone-setting talk to students who file into my introductory preaching course. Though some come with modest concern for preaching, most of them come with “how-to” expectations, on the hunt for tips to cram into their homiletical toolboxes. Then there are those who have come to piece together or integrate knowledge obtained from their biblical studies and theology courses. Still others are present with hopes of conquering their fright of public speaking and simply to complete the course with a good grade to show for their efforts. Honestly, I never know who will strive on with me or drop the course.

For good or bad, accompanying the student is always the “stuff” of their lives—personal baggage, narrow theological views, and long-cherished assumptions about what makes for good preaching. At the outset, I know that I will have my work cut out for me and that I must quickly come to grips with the task at hand. Our time together is limited, always too short. Thus, my aims for the course are straightforward. I want my students to recognize what makes for sound and faithful preaching; to discover what their lives uniquely offer to the preaching moment; and to find or recover their authentic preaching voice. Each semester I seek a creative encounter with God in the teaching and learning environment, and I want my students to realize the manifold possibilities of finding new channels for hearing and sharing the gospel in our times.

After matters of housekeeping (checking attendance, introductions, review of the course syllabus), I give them their first assignment. I ask each student to write down the names of their top five preachers. I assume, perhaps presumptuously, that every person enrolled has at least one name

to put forward. But there is always reticence when this question is posed. Their quizzical stares communicate that I have made a deeply personal request—that I have asked them to put it all on the table, then and there, without the benefit of them first getting to know me. I make this request to plant a necessary seed toward helping each of them find his or her voice. Whether we are or are not conscious of it, whoever we regularly listen to, it is that person's voice that enters the pulpit with us, and that other's voice may at first be one we need, acting as guarantor of sorts or a necessary comfort. But more often than not that companioning human voice, which covertly is broadcast through our vocal channel, undermines our own voice—the voice that must speak in its own tongue. I repeat to them, “I want to know your top five preachers.” They must take the leap. I task them with taking a risk to name those whom they esteem. No preaching takes place without risks involved.

As providence would have it, I am not permitted to interlope without having to answer the question, “Professor, who are your top five preachers?” The temptation to call the roll of the pulpit masters is hard to resist. Martin Luther King Jr., Gardner Taylor, Prathia Hall, Samuel Proctor, Harry Wright, Caesar Clark, my father, and a number of other saints are those whose homiletical imprint I bear. But my response to them is rather simple: “The preachers I deem exemplary are those who have discovered along the way their authentic preaching voice.” There is something mysteriously powerful about the authentic clarion call. Somewhere along the way, preachers such as King, Hall, and Proctor found their preaching voices, and as a consequence have found enduring veneration in the culture, whether they have preached the gospel in the small local church or on the national or international stage.

I am convinced that the preacher begins to learn to preach when his or her words are exhausted and at the moment when his or her ears become open to the revelation of God. The first class ends with this confession: “I can't teach any of you how to preach. That's not my task. I am here to help you to find your own voice among the multiplicity of others that vie for your allegiance.” African American preachers today must find their voice in this presently inhabited world. That is, they must begin to think more radically about ways to address contemporary concerns by joining God in the radical work of dismantling the social order's program of *disvocalization*—the muting of the preacher's voice. The most important responsibility of African American preachers today is to find again

in their own speech a speaking God and to recognize that their voice as preacher is vitally determined only through the person and work of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For only a voice determined in this way, as late pastor and revivalist Manuel Lee Scott so aptly puts it, proves useful for the community's realization of hope in a society bent on unvoicing the preacher.<sup>1</sup>

## Jesus' Vision and a Vision for Preaching

African American preaching today is more threatened than one ever could have imagined, as are the churches and communities in which it is practiced (as I will explain in the next chapter). It must now overcome its own apparent irrelevance in an increasingly pluralistic, postmodern age of intense spiritual, social, and economic crisis. But make no mistake, preaching is the single most important task for staving off the death of African American churches and communities today. As Samuel Proctor writes, "No one in society has as much responsibility as the preacher for altering our perception of the world around us from that of a chemical-physical accident to the handiwork of a loving, caring God."<sup>2</sup>

The most fundamental task of the preacher is to interpret Scripture within human community, in service to Jesus Christ. As principal interpreter, the preacher who assists the worshiping community to negotiate faithful ways in moving toward the goal of the actualization and maintenance of the God-human relationship, as pastoral theologian Jacob Firt describes it, acts as that community's resident practical theologian.<sup>3</sup> This fundamental task shapes the preacher's functional identity and understanding of self. Never standing above the Word, the preacher who goes to Scripture as a sacred duty on the congregation's behalf is one entrusted by God and community to understand, nurture, and nourish the church's life in critical and constructive ways. The preacher's role as interpreter of the Word is critically important. But also important is the hearing community's function to become lead appraisers of the preacher's message and not merely passive receptors. Three factors are particularly challenging: (1) too many African American preachers only entertain rather than truly preach; (2) congregations are more passive, expecting to be entertained rather than challenged and encouraged to reenact the gospel in their daily lives in ways that are fresh and make sense for the current generation; and (3) some of the technological advances we are so fond of

in our culture encourage passivity: television, Internet, cell phones, social networking sites, and the like. The challenge is to use that technology but make it liturgically useful and practical, more personalized, relational to encourage and empower others to restore and make a difference in their communities.

*What is there in African American preaching today that keeps it from sliding into nothingness?* Inviolably, Jesus' inaugural vision described in Luke 4:16-21 is the basis for the preacher's discourse and what makes preaching essential for the restoration of African American villages.<sup>4</sup> The preacher is licensed and ordained to walk lock-step with this vision; otherwise hearers wither on the vine. But how should the African American preacher's understanding of the preaching ministry be defined? What should be derived from Scripture to inform the preacher's understanding of self? Are the preachers who have captured the sacred imagination of the contemporary Black religious public faithful adherents to Jesus' norm-setting vision for Christian proclamation, where in Luke 4 the principal requirements are clearly outlined?

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Often this passage is narrowly interpreted. Its sociopolitical character is explicit. But this passage beckons us to see more. Jesus is not only announcing himself here but, in his reading the scroll, he also is rallying the community to reclaim their religious obligations to serve God by expressing concern for the community's well-being. A communal-care agenda first set in Isaiah 61 is to be acknowledged by the cultural gatekeepers of tradition.



This points out for them that this fact—community wellness—is a divine concern. Their hope for a messiah reiterates the fact that life in Galilee is less than perfect. The oracle calls into question social arrangements that exploit the poor and religious rituals that baptize the status quo. But also captured in this self-referential prophecy is Jesus extending an invitation to discipleship. To declare his mission to the world is to invite a response to the God of Scripture. Jesus proclaims fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy with the declaration, “Today the scripture has been fulfilled,” but a brief glance at our postmodern world in relation to the text’s original auditors makes apparent the fact that the work to be accomplished is far from completion. Jesus declares to this Galilean community that he is the one they have been anticipating. Put another way, the embodiment of God’s concern for a society that is broken has finally arrived.

Not all of the Galilean citizenry were hopeful and expectant. Why would hope be an option for the blind and the poor in this setting when the communal predicament for the marginalized undoubtedly has been generationally enduring? Naturally those present in the synagogue that day were keepers of hope for a coming messiah to appear at some time in history, but it is not plausible that those on the margins of society had anything for which to be hopeful. The astonishing revelation for me as I consider what the text seems to say is that the messianic promise finds fulfillment indeed, but those who react to the reading are ostensibly not the ones who would most obviously benefit from its message. Nonetheless, Jesus’ recitation makes an obvious claim on the entire community, for those present and absent, because implied in what Jesus gives witness to and is anointed to perform is grounded in grace and mercy that is offered to all. An entire community receives an opportunity to experience new life at God’s expense, but this opportunity I believe is unbeknownst to some segment of that society. Messianic hope becomes incarnational reality for this community. Spiritual and physical salvation has come in the person of Christ. An alternative to social decay is proposed and those who gather at this public forum are first to receive the news. The spirit and message of the gospel captured in Jesus’ words, “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . . recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,” are instructive for any preacher who would dare to preach in the Jesus tradition.

New Testament scholar Brian Blount suggests that the “meaning potential” of a text such as this one should not be restricted to the classical

canons of textual and ideational biblical interpretation alone where “meaning is understood to reside within the formal boundaries of a particular text’s language.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, what should be explored and examined is the meaning potential of texts in relation to the interpreter’s interpersonal interactions with texts—namely, attending to the contextual elements in the society wherein such texts are situated. Interpreters always come to texts with their questions, preunderstandings, and concerns. Thus, since no interpretation of a text is prejudice-free, according to Blount, interpreters are themselves a part of the interpretative results. Therefore, to give one’s exclusive focus to textual and ideational concerns of this Lukan text in disregard of the interpersonal is to miss the Scripture’s offer of another revelatory channel. One major implication, then, is that an interpreter’s failure to consider the interpersonal dimension is to leave oppressed voices, like those to whom the text refers, on the margins and out of the interpretative process.<sup>6</sup> What does this mean for Black preachers? It means that the spoken Word from Black pulpits must demonstrate how a text functions and has meaning in the lived experiences of Black people.

This Scripture lesson in Luke’s Gospel continues to matter, to speak, and it speaks a vision not yet fully realized as it still invites our participation. Therefore, if the African American village’s state of health is to be recovered in our times, then out of the vocal waterway of the African American preacher must come Jesus’ vision and message. Only then can African American preaching reclaim its proper identity, its catalytic function of nurturing and nourishing the prophetic, priestly, and sagely dimensions of the preaching ministry, and be profitable for our times. Though blurred today, Jesus’ vision summons our participation in the radical work of bringing good news to the disinherited ones; lighting the way for those who sit in darkness, guiding their shadowy existence, and liberating the multitudes whose dignity-robbing wounds of spiritual and physical despair require more than band-aid dressing. Knotted up in Jesus’ life-world and message, as recorded in Luke 4:16-21, is the self-portrait of the gospel in threefold scope.

## African American Preaching as Trivocal Preaching

African American preaching<sup>7</sup> is more than an artistic expression; it is foremost an act of worship. It is ministry of spoken and embodied Word in service to the gospel of Jesus Christ for the community. In other words, it

is proclamation of good news that *does* something—it names, provokes, encourages, teaches, and inspires faith—on God’s behalf. Indeed, African American preaching uses the power of language and art to interpret the gospel in the context of Black misery and Christian hope. What is intriguing about African American preaching as an act of worship and ministry practice is that it is truly catalytic, holistic, and most completely actualized only when marked by three constitutive orientations—the scriptural voices of *prophet*, *priest*, and *sage*, which, theologically, follow a trinitarian pattern. Together, when these voices function in a mutually influential relationship and are synthesized and appropriated in one’s preaching life, they become what I describe as *trivocal preaching*.

When I use the term “African American preaching,” I am referring primarily to this three-dimensional dynamic at work within the tradition and brought into its proper focus (although, in many veiled or unfocused ways, a particular dimension or voice is often privileged over or used in disregard of the other). Thus, my working definition of African American preaching—or what I call trivocal preaching—is:

African American preaching is a ministry of Christian proclamation—a theo-rhetorical discourse about God’s good will toward community with regard to divine intentionality, communal care, and the active practice of hope—that finds resources internal to Black life in the North American context.

Given the broad range of complex congregational and secular community concerns and expectations, only the voice of the African American preacher, which reclaims for Black preaching its catalytic function of nurturing and nourishing the prophetic, priestly, and sagely (wisdom) dimensions of the preaching ministry, can hope to be profitable in a violent, fragmented, postmodern, and increasingly pluralistic world. My argument is very simple: *African American preaching, at all times, absconds its character and charge to the church and the public unless it recovers its elemental prophetic, priestly, and sagely voice*. Through this threefold cord the preacher finds her or his voice—a voice that speaks words of justice, recovery, and hope, telling again the church about its present situation and where it must now go.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to clarify the nature of the three voices of trivocal preaching that are used repeatedly in this book. I use the scriptural images of prophet, priest, and sage to distinguish the

dimensions of the threefold voices sought in contemporary preaching practices in African American churches and communities, noting that each image shares a common structure for homiletical interpretation.

### The Prophetic Voice

The prophetic voice is a mediating voice of God's activity to transform church and society in a present-future sense based on the principle of justice. The prophetic voice speaks of divine intentionality—what God demands and expects of God's own human creation. The basic biblical feature of this discourse is that it 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 and against established power. Last, the prophetic Word is a word of relentless hope.<sup>8</sup> Still, beyond this formal theological place, the prophetic voice of the African American preacher has traditionally had a certain disposition toward rhetoric and poetic imagination that is brought to bear in the American context in which Blacks find themselves.

There is a creative element here. First, there is a pedagogical dimension of the prophetic voice of Black preaching that accents the importance of enabling the congregation to understand its situation in light of God's justice and what God intends. Second, there is an aesthetic dimension that reveals the tremendous creativity and deeply rooted rhetorical imagination and expression of Black preaching. The tragedy to be overcome by way of this voice is the African American preacher and church's disregard of the past and scriptural tradition and also the endless insecurities that paralyze faithful action in the present. Though beginning in slavery, Black churches virtually institutionalized the prophetic principle in many distinctive ways—recognizing injustice far and wide—yet it does appear that the prophetic principle has been cloaked or abandoned in many African American church contexts today.

### The Priestly Voice

The priestly voice is a sacramental mediating voice of Christian spiritual formation that encourages listeners to enhance themselves morally

and ethically by integrating elements of personal piety, that is, keeping to devotional practices like daily prayer and Bible study, and striving after holiness through abstention from cardinal sins. Bequeathed from the Revival period (see chapter 2), the priestly voice of most Black Christian pastors, in rural and urban settings, places greater emphasis on moralistic concerns. It has given primacy to the individual's spiritual well-being and God's evaluation of the believer's life upon Christ's return over temporal, social justice-centered concerns.

The priestly voice of Black preaching emphasizes the importance of congregational worship and being justified, redeemed, and sanctified by Jesus Christ's atoning works. Furthermore, it focuses on the preservation of the cultic apparatus—the gathering place for worship—making church administration, financial stewardship, and church attendance safeguards of the institutional life of the church. Most important, the priestly voice calls the gathered community to prayer, which means that the role of preacher carries with it the functional obligation for the work of intercessory prayer within and for the community at large. In other words, faithful execution of preaching as priest is to recognize that there are no substitutes for the “ministry of presence.”

Like the prophetic voice, the priestly voice interprets and mediates the requirements of covenantal obligation to God and to God's people, reminding them of God's faithfulness and promise keeping. Slave preachers often acted as mediators or priests between the slaves and the slaveholders, speaking and petitioning God on the community's behalf concerning the actual conditions of slave life; but, for risk of life, they seldom challenged the oppressive slave system publicly. While the biblical prophets are portrayed as oracles who spoke as God's mouthpiece, the priest's message more explicitly carried a stronger interpretative function of God's activity in the world. The second principal part of the priestly voice is its stress on matters of congregational care, specifically in the aftermath of natural disaster or oppressive life situations. Often through priestly Black preaching the preacher guides individuals into a religious encounter or experience with God. Thus, the preacher's active presence and human speech becomes a psychic, physical, and spiritual healing resource. Despite this, many would claim that the priestly voice is primarily the voice of religious and communal socialization, which focuses almost entirely on parishioner needs while having little impact on the wider society.

## The Sagely Voice

The sagely voice is a conferring and peculiarly communal voice of biblical wisdom and realistic hope for future generations that daringly speaks within the context of radical social and ecclesial change for the purpose of keeping vital the congregation's vision and mission. The sagely voice is a wisdom-focused, dialectical, communal voice of both preacher and hearer. Sages interpret the common life of a particular community of worshipers. The sagely voice carries an eldering function; it strongly corresponds with the voice and activity of the African *jaili*. In West African lore, the *jaili* (poet) used praise singing and storytelling and functioned as the repository of the community's oral tradition. Of the three voices, the sagely voice is the most overlooked, primarily due to Black religious practices that are preoccupied with the ethos of contemporary culture, which ascribes greater worth to present-future preaching interests.

The sagely voice interprets the congregation's historical and cultural legacy, namely, its archival materials, and seeks to decode the complex signs, symbols, and texts of a congregation's worship life. Through the sagely voice, ideally, the preacher preaches God's Word in authentic partnership with the community. For example, in some African American churches, on special occasions such as a church anniversary, there is a tacit assumption that the preacher knows the history of the church and will faithfully interpret it and inspire those to honor it in their continued witness of their own participation in the historic journeying as a congregation trusting in God. Or, in some denominations the high participation of preaching by lay leaders gives some description about the nature and function of the sagely voice.

Ostensibly, with such a communally shared witness in many African American congregations, one could consider, at least conceptually, that the sagely voice is most clearly evident in the call-and-response ritual. As Evans Crawford rightly expresses it, the [sagely] preacher has to have "a good ear, a homiletical ear to work with folk idioms, an ear attuned to the people."<sup>9</sup> That is why, in this paradigm, "the true 'resident theologian' is deemed to be the congregation itself . . . [and this] affirms the corporate nature of the preaching event, and highlights the significant role the congregation can and should play in the shaping of theology for proclamation."<sup>10</sup> Nowhere has this voice been so materially expressed than in the social justice movements of the 1950s and '60s, when, under Martin

Luther King Jr.'s clarion call, African Americans boycotted and marched in pursuit of human dignity. It is the sagely voice that is little consulted by younger Black preachers in the postmodern era; as a result, the signs of a community's sacred historical and cultural legacy are increasingly disappearing.

If African American preaching is to overcome its apparent irrelevance in today's society, preachers must find again their voice in Jesus' vision for Christian proclamation. The preacher who goes to Scripture on the community's behalf must be the lead investigator in the search to understand the complex needs of people of African descent in this country in particular, and the human community across the globe in general. African American preaching can only be relevant and useful in an increasingly pluralistic and fragmented world when it is an expression of God's good and perfect will for wellness in African American churches and community. More than passionate and persuasive speech, at its core, preaching of this kind is Spirit-guided, three-dimensional, anointed discourse that speaks of divine intentionality, communal care, and the active practice of hope.

## African American Preaching as Practical Theology

The need for contemporary African American preachers to reconceive vigorously the prophetic, priestly, and sagely<sup>11</sup> voices of the preaching ministry is vitally important, because these voices, in religious practice, have become indiscernible or isolated from one another. These voices of Christian faith practice are complementary in both nature and function. I will even make the bold claim that to ascribe any static or fixed label like "prophetic preacher" to the Christian preacher is biblically and theologically shortsighted. No preacher is always prophetic if he or she proclaims the Word in the Jesus tradition and is faithful to preaching the whole counsel of Scripture. Furthermore, some Black preachers are sufficiently radical but insufficiently self-critical. Under the guise of being prophetic, preachers who take delight in detailing the mortal and venial sins of their listeners or, for that matter, bringing criticisms to oppressive world systems that dehumanize persons on a regular basis "without tears in their [own] eyes" are preachers who have lost sight of the grace of God in their own life.<sup>12</sup> Preachers of this sort abuse and wound the people of God.

A holistic view of African American preaching does not rest easy with carving out distinctions that ignore the interrelatedness and interplay of

the prophetic, priestly, and sagely voices. For preaching to matter today within African American churches and communities demands that preachers refocus their ways of representing themselves as ministers, so that they might more clearly signal an understanding about the complex needs, circumstances, and aspirations of a particular community. The particular and dynamic matrix of self-understanding I am proposing in this book involves African American preachers becoming more self-aware about why today they must more explicitly convey in their sermons, and in their actions that stem from them, a preaching life that is earnest and authentically Christian. Only when African American preaching reclaims its catalytic function of nurturing and nourishing the prophetic, priestly, and sagely dimensions of the preaching ministry as a Christian practice is it instructive in and profitable for our times.

My perspective for this work is twofold. Doing theology from the sacred desk is unavoidably particular, and an apt description of the precise nature and function of African American preaching is only obtainable when its historic journey, aesthetic genius, and trajectory are thrown into the light of critical interdisciplinary reflection. This involves a careful analysis of the biblical, theological, historical, and sociocultural elements appearing in African American preaching. One way to delve deeply into the reservoir of African American preaching's seemingly unconnected dance of Scripture, culture, body, and voice is to enter the conversation from the vantage of practical theological reflection. I define practical theology as the theological, empirically oriented, interdisciplinary field that reflects on the critical and constructive theory and concrete praxis relationship dynamics that relate to Christian religious practice.

Few contemporary proposals in homiletics are intentionally interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary reflection is not unique to practical theology but in recent years it has increasingly become a gold standard in many of the theological disciplines. As it has once been claimed, "All roads lead to Rome," a similar age-old adage rings true: "All theological roads lead to preaching." While much of my cross-disciplinary reflections are undergirded by sociological and historical perspectives on African American churches and communities, theology is taken seriously in this work. To interpret homiletically through the lens of practical theology is to think in terms of interconnections, relationships, and systems, giving attention to the interactive dynamics of the spoken Word, circumstances, and contexts from which and to which words are spoken.<sup>13</sup> My creative aim is to



reclaim a more robust homiletical theology for African American preachers, which reflects, in many ways, my own understandings, faith commitments, and normative views of the Christian faith. In other words, I do not write as a disinterested interpreter.

This book is methodologically significant because I bring together a reflective framework that deliberately follows the logic of the four tasks consensus model of practical theology, outlined in Richard Osmer's recent work *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (2008). I organize this book around the four core tasks (descriptive-empirical, interpretive, norms of practice, and pragmatic) of practical theological interpretation that give us a helpful framework for addressing the following questions. The descriptive-empirical task asks the question, "What is going on in African American preaching today?" The interpretive question asked is, "Why is African American preaching more threatened than ever imagined?" The norms-of-practice task asks, "What ought to be going on in African American preaching today?" And finally, derived from a careful consideration of the previous "how-to" informed by the "why-to" questions: "How might African American preaching be shaped to embody more fully the normative purposes of the Christian faith?" These four tasks often interpenetrate one another and relate to one another in spiraling or circular fashion, which means they invariably circle back to a task that may have previously been explored.<sup>14</sup>

Chapters 1 and 2 describe why trivocal preaching is the single most important task for staving off the death of African American communities today and trace the historical origins of African American preaching in North America. Chapter 3 demonstrates how the use of the scriptural images of prophet, priest, and sage and the basic tenets of three models of interdisciplinary work in practical theology reveal a great deal about our theological understanding of African American preaching. Chapter 4 offers a practical plan for developing the sermon as a form of theological reflection. Also, to illustrate how trivocal preaching might come to expression as a form of holistic Christian proclamation through the mutually enriching prophetic, priestly, and sagely voices, I lend my own sermonic voice to the conversation. In chapter 5 I show how the trivocal dynamic works in sermons preached by Martin Luther King Jr., Prathia Hall, and Gardner Taylor, and round out the conversation by illustrating how other contemporary preachers draw on these voices in the ministry of preaching. Finally, in chapter 6 I have designed a typology of seven

personas or functional roles taken on by contemporary African American preachers, to help readers think more deeply about the intricate life-world of the Black preacher. Here I call African American preachers and their congregations to a deeper awareness of and commitment to *trivocal preaching* in the multiple contexts of African American life, naming, in concrete terms, what is at stake for the village if “we preach not the gospel” in our times.

As you read this book, I hope you will begin to understand better the vital role preaching plays in the health recovery of African American churches and communities, and that as a result of your encounter with these thoughts you, too, will participate in significant ways in the transformation of congregations and communities in African America and beyond its increasingly permeable walls.