
**VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: A RENAISSANCE OF BLACK PROPHETIC
PREACHING AND LEADERSHIP IN PROBLEMATIC TIMES**
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Abstract

As the nation and the world face numerous evils that dwarf problems of the past, religious communities are being called to action. Whiteness shrouded in religious language, centuries of slow responses to radical suffering, and the privileging of Evangelicalism in the Black Church have all silenced the prophetic impulses needed today. This essay offers an invitation to a renaissance of Black prophetic leadership, refusing relevance and survival within a system for whom the system was not constructed. The God of Exodus needs destabilizing so the God of Exile and Hagar may now invite and inspire constructive reform of church and society that does not prioritize the dominant gaze or whiteness. Prophetic Black preaching leads the way in renewing the biblical narrative, awakening to the power of language, the need for holistic embodiment, and representative educational leadership for curriculum revision leaning toward justice, human flourishing, and transformation.

We are now faced with national and global evils of epic proportions that call for religious communities to respond with a clarion call to action. The empire known as the United States of America currently has a Commander in Chief who invites a Tuskegee Airman and honors Rush Limbaugh simultaneously at the State of the Union with no sensitivity to how polarizing that is, particularly during Black History Month. The occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. should discern the optics, which clearly commodify Black bodies while simultaneously extolling the system of white supremacy that continues to marginalize and disinherit

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those bodies. This divisive and demoralizing behavior is made possible because a support base of religious folk is trafficking in a theo-logic that they look to enshrine in public policy to secure supremacy for themselves and their children for generations to come. The present administration and the religious supporters of this administration have worked tirelessly to manage the perception that people are only suffering what they deserve for being “illegal aliens,” from S-hole countries, who are dangerous criminals, bent on destroying our culture and taking our jobs. It is said that theology arises from the freedom and responsibility of the Christian community to inquire about its faith in God (Migliore 2014, 1). This is for me true, and yet I see the responsibility of theology to continually examine the proclamation of the church by continually critiquing and revising the language of the church (Cone 1997, 84).

Theological Foundation of ‘Our’ House of Dehumanization

To understand the religious history of a people is to know a lot about their politics, their social habits, their hopes and aspirations, their fears, their failures, and their understandings of who they are (Frazier 1974, 104). Puritanism, one of the historical strands from which this country arose, can be understood as a form of “religious creativity” that paved the way for historical evolutionary thinking, racial theories, and forms of color symbolism that made the economic and military conquest of various cultures and peoples justifiable and defensible as a part of the Enlightenment Canon (Long 1991). This religious conditioning of the American experiment has resulted in hundreds of years of moral malformation and the justification of radical dehumanization. The Puritan hermeneutic of conquest and suppression concealed behind a thin veil of noble religious motivations, for example, slave conversions, disallows accountability for interpretations that render Black bodies as radically “other.” The despised other being seen as so different from themselves that they are less than human is a category modeled by white supremacists (Edman 2016, 22). Radical otherness underlies all oppression, which seeks unjust use of authority or advantage. The multiplicity of religions, cultures, and nations gives depth

to human life, but when this natural plurality degenerates into competition, misunderstanding, and conflict, diversity becomes the occasion for suspicion and violence (Farley 1990, 32). The race discourse of white European Christian settlers named the other in such a way as to justify enslaving the other, excluding the other, and establishing white supremacy (Fletcher 2017, 47).

Whiteness shrouded in religious language imagines itself as an underdog while holding all the power; therefore, it fantasizes about cruelty in such a way that justifies any and all expressions of marginalization and dehumanization (Delay 2019, 106). Those who love truth and justice see clearly that we have leadership willing to enact radical suffering and repackage it in the name of law and order, all in an effort to maintain power and privilege. The historical danger of this blatant violation of all civility and human dignity is that ultimately it leads to the devastation of crusades, witch trials, McCarthyism, and holocausts. These are examples of the collective sin that results from slow responses to radical suffering. Sin is a complex phenomenon: It is communal as well as individual; it is bondage as well as guilt; it is the source of injustice and the lack of response to injustice (Farley 1990, 119). The unchecked misuse of power will always unfold into collective sin.

When speaking of whiteness in this work, it is not just a skin color, but the parameters of whiteness that change historically. Whiteness is the social construct of power and domination rooted in anti-Blackness, that serves to disinherit and marginalize those considered radically other. Race is not a concrete or static reality, but an imaginative construct created in particular times and places by specific influences and impacts (Fletcher 2017, 3). Blackness is then anything and anyone rendered socially other by those situated closest to power and privilege. Whiteness is the cultural obfuscation of what it means for Black people to reflect the image of God because it impairs both their ability to self-love and the love of others (Douglas 1999, 124). Racial exclusion was designed to protect the elite heteropatriarchy of native-born whites. In the racial logic of the nation-state, immigrants and other nonwhite bodies were racialized as the antithesis of heteropatriarchal ideals. Race as an American institution is an invitation to power and

privilege or excommunication and exclusion from that same power and privilege. The construct of race is built to identify proximity to power. As ethnicity and social construction were invented, racial exclusion and ethnic assimilation provided the genealogical context for sociology's inscriptions of race and sexuality as socially constructed (Henderson 2005, 55). The underbelly of this movement, Puritanism, is therefore tied to themes of climate denial, white supremacy, anti-intellectualism, theocratic control of embodiment, and populism that verges on fascism (Delay 2019, x). We cannot understand the danger of this moment without acknowledging the theological foundation upon which this house of dehumanization is built.

The Black Church was born out of response to the supremacist narrative of the dominant culture. Historically, one of the primary tasks of the Black Church has been to create space where Black people can be passionately human and express their innermost wants and desires (Walton 2009, 171). It has been the safe harbor where Black people transcend negative cultural identifications associated with race and/or class while having their inner desires and spiritual longings affirmed. The Black Church in all of her iterations is a repository of Black cultural identity. As the cultural womb of collective Black communities, the church has traditionally been the source of group identification.

Black Church, while not monolithic, is a church conceived in the American concept of race and birthed into a struggle for institutional identity and social space uncontrolled by the dominant gaze of white authority and perceived legitimacy (Fluker 2016, 23). The Black Church has provided a constant "clap-back" to the dehumanizing anti-Black images in the dominant society (Harris 1993, 25). It has been methodologically both priestly and prophetic. By serving as the place that nurtures the wounds of dehumanization through connection with the Divine and speaking truth to power on behalf of the marginalized, Black Church has been a radical witness of God's liberating work in the world. As a pilgrim church, marginalized from the American mainstream, its unique vocation is to stand over against the civic religion of white churches, challenging their tendency to conflate patriotism

and piety (Warnock 2014, 99). The Black Church has been the prophetic voice and moral pulse of America. Church has birthed a prophetic culture of resistance. This was a culture fostered by Black people to host their struggle for wholeness and that helped them resist those notions and practices that dismissed their humanity (Douglas 1999, 64). As a response to racism and theological hegemony in white churches, the Black Church was formed to provide a safe place for the formulation of resistance discourse. Resistance discourse denotes terms, phrases, figures of speech, concepts, poetry, and songs that are common to a particular group of subjugated persons, all of which are properly understood by members of that group as calling them to resist in some way the oppression to which they are subjected (Hendricks 2011, 7). The language of resistance discourse is the foundation of the prophetic.

Prophetic Critique and a Legacy of Threats

One definition of the prophet is a person who threatens a culture's power structure by holding up a mirror to its folly and showing where such folly leads (Pearce 2002, 167). However, showing where the folly of power leads is only the beginning of the task of the prophet. A cultural critic can do that work without prophetic impulse. Prophetic traditions aim to transform the world in God's name and see the authentic religious experience as a world-shaping force (Volf 2011, 7). Prophetic preaching seeks to paint a new world with the toolkit of oral performance, imagination, and keen intellectual investigation so that the hearer is left with a picture of a preferable future (Moss 2015, 12). The prophetic task of the Black preaching tradition is not merely to predict an outcome, but rather to identify concrete evils. To prophesy deliverance is not to call for some otherworldly paradise, but rather to generate enough faith, hope, and love to sustain the human possibility for more freedom (West 2002, 6).

True prophetic critique can be defined as principled public criticism of and opposition to systemic and/or personal injustice. The Black prophetic tradition follows the Biblical paradigm of Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah, whose mode of behavior modeled a bold public criticism of oppressive and exploitative

behaviors (Hendricks 2011, 21). At the heart of the Black and prophetic preaching tradition is a clear picture of the Gospel as God's presence in Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed, which led to His death on the cross. What is redemptive about the cross is that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair through the power of resurrection (Cone 2011, 150).

In many cases, the history of Puritanism and the extreme privileging of Evangelicalism in the Black Church have often drowned out the prophetic critique that enables the Black Church to be useful in dismantling imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal norms in society. Puritanism in America leaves the Black Church an inheritance of terror. The Black Church carries the unwritten negative symbolism of Puritanism, as can be seen in the sexism and homophobia that are prevalent today. The Black Church has been used to dispense puritanical proscriptions against Black bodies and rather than disseminate a picture of the realm of God, it has been guilty of reifying a spiritual plantation of subjugation. As Evangelicalism gained popularity in much of the Black Church in America, the historic anti-Blackness of the Evangelical church found its way into the Black pulpits. Historical amnesia swept through many pulpits as the preachers forgot that the Evangelical church supported the status quo. Pro-slavery, pro-segregation, and anti-interracial marriage have been the hallmarks of Evangelicalism in America and yet it is that same theo-logic that has been the root of much preaching and practice in many Black Church spaces.

Puritanism's legacy is a theological threat to safety in the way it positions the Black person to dread God and God's blazing Hell. It also poses a sociological/racial threat to safety for a Black person in a racist society informed by a theology of white superiority. It further presents a sexual threat to safety that stems from a sense of personal corruption and spirit/body duality. Finally, Puritanism is a gendered threat to safety for the damage done to both Black women and men by its extreme patriarchy (Kornegay 2013, 85). The relationship between the theological infrastructure of a faith community and its social manifestations is circular, each influencing the other (Warnock 2014, 114, 175). In much of what

passes for preaching, prophetic activism has been anesthetized by the controlling drama of possessive individualism and religious narcissism. The prophetic impulse of the Black Church tradition has been silenced in many spaces by the misguided assumption that theological assimilation will lead to uplift for the marginalized and disinherited.

The effects of imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy on Black spirituality in and out of the church can never be understated and appears to have led to a respectability politic in the church that strangles the church's liberation message. Embracing respectability means engaging a polite pursuit of bourgeois morals embodied in thrift, industry, self-control, piety, and other norms that on the surface seem virtuous, but when contextualized in a raced society, they often serve individual betterment at the expense of systemic social change (Fluker 2016, 37).

Of course, the Black Church, like the communities it represents, is not a monolith. Just as there are multiple ways of constructing Blackness, there are multiple ways of being the Black Church (Touré 2011, 5). Prophetic preaching and praxis exist in the Black Church, dancing with Evangelicalism, Prosperity Gospel, and other expressions of faith. Black churches have combined a fervent evangelical theology with a progressive political stance for more than one hundred years. At the same time, most theological liberals—who see themselves as politically liberal, including Black and Womanist theologians—are scornful and dismissive of evangelical Christianity, preferring to interpret the mission and message of Jesus solely in terms of the language and politics of inclusion (Sanders 1998). We must call the Black Church to move forward in the liberation tradition, working diligently to decolonize the minds of the people.

It would seem that whole segments of the Black Church are still wrestling with oppression sickness; that is, the internalized oppression that causes the oppressed to be infected by the sickness of the oppressor. Any time both the oppressed and the oppressor share the same view of the oppressed, liberation is impossible. Self-hating behavior is not uncommon in oppressed populations. Oppressed individuals often engage with systems that degrade

them. In fact, all oppressed people try hard in some stage of liberation to assimilate and prove to the oppressor that they are okay (Griffin 2010, 194). The effort to mimic the dominant Christian culture still has witness in the Black Church tradition with classism, sexism, hetero privilege, patriarchy, and ultimately closed doors (Flunder 2005, 5). There seems to be a failure to move beyond the normative mode of Puritanical discourse and the Calvinist underpinnings so common to the development of the Black Church (Kornegay 2013, 85).

Invitation Into a Renaissance of Black Prophetic Preaching and Leadership

The present sociopolitical climate of our global community invites the Church into a moment of opportunity. Given the Black Church's current acute state of crisis in identity and mission, signified by uncritical versions of Evangelicalism rooted in Puritanism and personal prosperity preaching, those committed to the liberating power of the Gospel must commit to creating space for a renaissance of prophetic preaching (Warnock 2014, 175). The prophetic witness of the Black Church is not now, nor has it ever been, a zero-sum game. The whole Church must move beyond the false binaries of either/or and enter into an understanding of God who is both/and beyond. The Black Church will be at its best when it leaves behind aspirations for respectability that are subject to white patriarchal norms. Respectability aspirations are at base anti-Black, for it is the anti-blackness of white theological thought that renders Black bodies lascivious, and Black sexuality and gender expressions—a priori—in need of conversion (Crawley 2017, 13).

The invitation to a renaissance of Black prophetic preaching invites us to see the task of ministry, particularly at this moment, as the refusal to interpret the tradition in order to make the tradition relevant for contemporary culture. We must be engaged primarily in being self-consciously constructive, willing to think differently than we have in the past (McFague 1987, 21). Those of us for whom the current system was not constructed were never meant to survive under the current system.

Black prophetic preaching invites us to divorce ourselves from the narratives we have heard, toward a fluent conversation of social transformation that will lead us to thrive. As we live through the destabilization of our institutions, the prophetic opportunity is easy to see. For example, the broken healthcare system in America is no longer debatable. The task of the prophetic voice of the church is now to point the way to a system based on the ethic of neighbor love that favors the vulnerable and provides for the least of these. Not just in our healthcare systems, but the truth is that in most of our institutions, existential democratic practices are perennially crucified only to be resurrected by truth speakers, once again to be betrayed by false prophets, demigods, plutocrats, oligarchs, and grand inquisitors (West 2002, 9). Our education system destabilized is an opportunity for voices from the margins to point to the reality that the dominant culture is centered in the academy in ways that damage and dehumanize marginalized people. The prophets are needed to call our institutions of higher learning to task on the imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy that dominates the narrative, but also to offer instruction on decolonization, crip theory, antiracist practice, and a host of other potentialities. Every institution that makes up our society is up for interrogation in this time of transition to see how it dehumanizes or leads to human flourishing. This interrogation includes the church, while the church must at the same time be the place from which this critique takes place.

The church must return to full engagement in a prophetic mode of being. As we navigate the present, we must move to become the epicenter of the progressive vanguard, calling forward the best of humanity. We who are theologians and ministers must become filled with the prophetic impulse. We will carry with us what we have learned and the values and practices that feel essential to the commons, and together we will unpack judgments and assumptions that often limit our ability to see new possibilities. Crisis calls forth prophets. A crisis strips away comforting delusions and sharpens our blurred perceptions (Howell 1996, 10). This is a moment that invites the ethic and work of liberation. An ethic of liberation arises out of a new sense of love, for ourselves and humanity (Williams

1993, 154). The voice of the liberator speaks to us of emergence from any form of bondage or exploitation (Heagle 2010, 4). The call at this juncture is to understand that the Black radical tradition is a Black religious tradition and even more seriously, a Black Christian radical tradition.

A Constructive Biblical Progressive Pentecostal Approach: Destabilizing the God of the Exodus Toward the God of Exile and Hagar

Exodus to Exile and Hagar

We must call on the dominant culture to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that marginalized people need or want (Baldwin 1993, 127). This is a difficult task because our society has been built on imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal norms that are designed to uphold the systems of domination that make up the social currency of our institutions and cultural structures. There is a way that even the most progressive and liberal of the dominant culture traffic in paternalism as though their opinion is necessary to validate the legitimacy or competency of minoritized voices. The supremacist narrative of America is the antichrist because it has killed and crippled tens of millions of Black bodies and minds in the modern world, not to mention the genocide of indigenous people. It is found in every aspect of American life; however, it is even more insidious when found in churches, seminaries, and religious teaching (Cone 2018, 54). We must work tirelessly to dismantle systems of domination and hold gatekeepers of the systems accountable, even when they present as allies.

Black prophetic preaching must call our attention to read the Biblical narrative in fresh ways with new insight. The destabilization of the God of Exodus and exposing the God of exile might make liberation and love possible for all Black bodies in the oppressed state of disappointment in a never-coming promised land (Kornegay 2013, 52). From slavery forward, Black people have used the Exodus account as a hermeneutical lens, particularly as we looked for and to leadership that would help

recast the narrative of Black experience in America. The woman called Moses, Nat Turner, Fredrick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Jesse Jackson, President Barak H. Obama—these people have all been leaders of the Moses archetype. Each one has been some form of a deliverer for oppressed and disinherited Black people living under imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchy. And not one has delivered Black people safely to the promised land. Exile is never a voluntary experience; it is always forced by circumstances outside of a person or a people's control. It is a forced dislocation into which one enters without any verifiable hope of either a return to the past or a specific new land (Spong 2001, 23). Black bodies know at the cellular level the experience of exile. Force in all its brutal expression has been the companion of Black bodies, dislocation has been the soundtrack of our sojourn, and verifiable hope the elusive ghost of our dreams. White intransigence in the form of privatized and state-sanctioned violence has molested every institution of Black life.

Exile then seems the perfect place for a people in need of #BlackLivesMatter as a movement to begin the task of constructing a new theological house. To be sure, theology requires a certain fluidity of thought that is initiated by the willingness to suspend our beliefs so that we may pursue God's truth for our lives (Lightsey 2015, 68). For the Black Church, which has been rooted in the evangelical tradition, an understanding flowing from Hagar's exile (Genesis 21) might provide a more authentic liberative lens to unmoor the church from the narrative of imperialist, heteropatriarchal norms that leave so many people in the pew out of the beloved community. The promise land and Exodus are exclusive, but Hagar and exile are inclusive. The intrinsic contradiction of the U.S. exportation of capitalism and democracy make our nation the perfect place for this new theological lens to develop. The strain of riding two horses in different directions has proven that this is not the promise land for marginalized people and demands that we look to a new narrative for the work of salvation. The dominant culture purports to believe in a democratic republic with liberty and justice for

all while simultaneously clinging to a demonic system of white supremacist capitalistic greed. The two streams of consciousness can never be reconciled and necessitate the need for a theology that provides a path to salvation and wholeness.

The Exodus motif brings its challenges for all people and with it the idea of a chosen people. This is problematic for Black people in America because that would mean one group is chosen over another. For white America, that means God leaves them for the Black slave community. The “chosen people” narrative has failed this nation miserably. The narrative sets up a false dichotomy and allows single-identity-makers to become the totality of the human experience. It is as though Blackness or whiteness could ever be the totality of one’s personhood. The chosen people motif in this way only serves to turn the oppressed into oppressors. Forced to limit the exploration of other parts of one’s identity, our current theological constructs respond in limited ways to our personhood because it forces us to enter the conversation in light of one particularity or another.

The Exile motif, on the other hand, promises a God who accompanies and gives Black people the freedom to claim and name God differently than the Eurocentric God, given during the ravages of slavery. God’s response to the Hagar story in the Hebrew Scriptures is not liberation. God participates in Hagar’s and her child’s survival (Williams 1993, 4). The Exile motif demands that the roles of the academy and the pulpit work together to frame a theology that accounts for the identity of all the Kingdom of God. The Hagar exile narrative allows people to enter the theological conversation in the same way that the female, slave, African, forced surrogate Hagar presents: as an entire person who can be seen in their fullness by the Divine.

Decolonizing Through Pentecost in the Prophetic Impulse: Exercising Voice and Promoting Representation

The opportunity for the Black Church is to further decolonize the ways in which the Black Church and society as a whole talk about God, the individual, and the community. The Black prophetic narrative is conversations about God that don’t privilege the authoritative universal voice found in Eurocentric theological

musings. This theology does not abide in an undifferentiated whole that obliterates individuality. The authoritative universal voice usually indicates white male subjectivity masquerading as nonracial, nongendered, objectivity (Crenshaw 1989). Instead, Eurocentric theology sees race as a linguistic tool that we use in myriad ways to ascribe meaning to ourselves and others. As it assigns difference and value to varying configurations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on, race becomes serviceable as a theological device (Fluker 2016, 69).

The prophetic tradition works on and against dominant theology simultaneously. It is a strategy that works to reform theology from within, without buckling under the weight of dominant gaze. From inside the conversation of theology in partnership with the tradition, it seeks to elevate the importance of particular struggles of resistance (Muñoz 1999).

A renaissance of Black prophetic preaching takes seriously the Acts 2 narrative of Pentecost. It invites the church to be the place where all people collectively hear the Good News in a language they can understand and receive. Because the areas of sex, race, and class are all factors in Pentecost, the powerful use of language as an instrument of freedom is a revolutionary message of good news. The dominant culture has used language to subordinate the majority, but Pentecost upends the norm, making language accessible to all. Pentecost is a strategy of exercising voice and promoting representation in such a way that it foretells movements like Black Power and #BlackLivesMatter. The prophetic empowers the life of the church by providing the potential for personal expressions and rich community life. It considers that all genders are filled with God's spirit and that ageism has no place in the beloved community. This is a theology that relishes differences and sees those differences as foundational to the work of the Spirit in the world. By understanding that the realm of God is present in unity, the underlying theo-logic is an intentional reversal of the moral failure of supremacist theology.

As a New Testament witness, the renaissance of Black prophetic preaching interrogates the biblical account of the Ethiopian eunuch whose body might or might not have been altered to produce a gender-nonconforming way of being in the world. The embodiment

of the eunuch might have been transgendered or intersex; how the eunuch was queered doesn't in any way alter or lessen the reality of their nonnormative body. The presumption that birth bodies are "how God made you" has negatively affected the day-to-day living of transpersons (Lightsey 2015, 69). The task of the church is to become the place where the disparate parts of our humanity are joined together, never to be separated again (Spong 1998, 168). When Philip was led by the Spirit to minister to the Ethiopian eunuch, he was not told to heal the man (Acts 8:26–39). Changing of embodiment was not essential to salvation. A truly liberative prophetic move that honors the *Imago Dei* boldly recognizes that gender expression does not always match genital configuration and that for many people, these identities do not reinforce one another as expected but rather, challenge the way they are scripted to be performed (Buechel 2015, 9). In a society that operates in a raced, gendered, sexed, classed hierarchy, a prophetic theology provides the spiritual and moral compass to dismantle the prevailing system, forecast, and implement a preferable future—a future where the entire scope of humanity flourishes in the fullness of their personhood.

The poor Jewish Jesus with his nonnormative body (particularly if one subscribes to the virgin birth or immaculate conception) shows up with an anti-imperialist message against the religious tradition of his time. It is Jesus who unhinges the relationship between the underprivileged and the privileged: born in a manger and becoming King of the Jews without amassing either wealth or military might. St. Irenaeus of Lyons lays a foundational building block for us in the second century when he postulates that Jesus Christ did through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself (Lyons 2010, 554). It is then impossible to separate the embodiment of Jesus and one's understanding of one's own embodied self. For those who seek and see justice in the Christian faith, the embodiment of Jesus is an inversion of the profane and a valorization of the stigmatized.

The person and work of Jesus are at the center of the prophetic impulse. The Christian Scripture gives full attention to the circumcision of Jesus in Luke 2:21 as placing Jesus in a complete

male body and a complete Jewish body. The combination of gender and ethnicity serves to culturally situate Jesus in the human experience. Jesus is the archetypal human (Hebrews 4:15), just like us, who showed us what the full human might look like if we fully live into it (Ephesians 4:12–16). Jesus came to show us how to be human—spiritual humans (Rohr 2019). The cultural situation of the human condition is a matter not to be dismissed theologically as it is centered in the story of Jesus from the beginning. Identity manifests itself in the flesh and, therefore, has social and political consequences for those who live in that flesh (Henderson 2005, 24). Jesus' circumcision brings to light the penis of Jesus, which serves in the text to both gender and sexuality as a lived reality. Jesus is gendered by the act of circumcision because it is culturally male and sexed by his genitalia. The myth of supremacy of the dominant culture is proven to be a falsehood in the embodied reality of Jesus.

If the Christian faith is to be truly Christian, there must be a renaissance of Black prophetic preaching that is unafraid to embrace a Biblical narrative that refutes a Puritanical read privileging spirituality separate from and above physical reality. The prophetic nature of the Christian faith is moored to God's self-disclosure in the person of Jesus. Christianity's break with Judaism is based on the acceptance of Jesus as God enfleshed. The Christological paradox characterizes Jesus as ontological and existential reality. Jesus in his lived reality is a practicing Jewish insurgent living in a territory controlled by Roman political, military, and economic forces. Insurgency is necessitated by the marginalization of the embodiment of Jesus. Jesus was and remains marked by sex, gender, and sexuality. Through preaching and practice, in living and behavior, Jesus performed masculinity in ways that opposed patriarchal expressions of maleness (Copeland 2010). The body of Jesus not fully vested in the performance of masculinity bows to wash the feet of disciples it will die for hours later. From the posture culturally assumed by women as foot washers, Jesus rises to become a spiritual midwife in a garden of prayer. Betrayal will lead this body to crucifixion, where the plea of theodicy will arise as a cry of lament. There the forsaken body of Jesus experiencing social alienation and estrangement for its resistance to a culture of

dominance will die a subjugated objectification of the projected fears of those in power. At the site of the crucifixion, God resides within the torture victim. Here on the cross, God is on the side of the disposed instead of those in power. Jesus' body at resurrection (Mark 16; Matt. 28; Luke 24; John 20–21) is not contained by space and time, and yet it does not remove itself from them. To proclaim Jesus is God incarnate—a perfect, embodied revelation of God—is the prophetic liberation of all embodied persons.

Interrogating the Narratives Toward Liberative Practice

The prescriptive invitation of this particular cultural moment is for the whole church to engage Black liberation theologians to interrogate the theological statements of the local assembly for places where anti-Blackness is inscribed in our theo-logic. We cannot be better as expressions of the Divine till we are willing to acknowledge where our God-talk betrays the Gospel narrative. Positions must be created at the local church and denomination level for theologians-in-residence who are there to help form an antiracist lens in the official statements of the church going forward. We should make greater effort to raise awareness of Black liberation and womanist theologies among all seminary students.

Black liberation theology considers the following question: What does it mean to be Black and Christian for a people situated in the midst of American racism and called by God to be full human beings? (Hopkins 1999, 4). This is not a question to be reasoned through only by the Black students of theology; it must constantly be held in conversation with all students and particularly students from the dominant culture, for it is in the relationship matrix that wholeness is birthed. Womanist theology asks Where is God in the lives of Black women and how do Black women name God? (Mitchem 2002). Together womanist and Black theology also recognize that God, through Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, works with the poor as they learn to love themselves enough to practice their total freedom and create their full humanity on earth as it is in Heaven (Hopkins 1999, 5). No real social justice work or training in that discipline can happen without engaging this aspect of Black liberation theology. If we do

an honest exegesis of our current cultural milieu, we must honestly consider moving this theological lens to the core curriculum in our institutions of ministerial training. We must begin to consider that the radical nature of particularity is the foundation of ethical theological formation.

Next, our schools of theology and seminaries must maintain well-balanced representation of the Black community in faculty positions. A lack of Black faculty communicates loudly and clearly to all students that hegemony is acceptable and that the standard of excellence in the church is white. Josiah Royce spoke of the beloved community as “a perfectly lived unity of individual men joined in one divine chorus.” However, it is clear in many seminaries across the nation that while Black people are allowed to sing in the chorus, they are unable to teach the music (Marsh 2005, 49). Black faculty bring the lived experiences of Blackness to teaching all subjects in the same ways that all faculty bring the particularities of their social location to the classroom. Students are enriched by a diversity of lived experiences, and we do a grave disservice to all students when ethnic diversity is not evident in the teaching staff of our religious institutions.

In an effort to make churches places of beloved community, we must be mindful to intentionally engage Black culture in the fabric of every institution. What I mean by culture is that which comprises any people’s social heritage, including language, ideas, habits, beliefs, customs, social organization and traditions, arts, and symbolism, crafts, and artifacts (Douglas 1999, 18). It is not enough for our churches to have guest lecturers come in and talk about the Black Church as some exotic and romanticized entity to be held up for curiosity. We must move to cultural inclusivity in every way from the décor of the school to the chosen hymnody in ecumenical worship experiences on various campuses. Celebrations and observances of holidays should not be limited to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. It is an insult to Dr. King’s memory to hold such observances while Kwanzaa is completely ignored or dismissed. The conversation about theodicy must include the Jewish holocaust and the Maafa. The text of our Sunday Schools

must include Howard Thurman with the same consistency as Reinhold Niebuhr. At all cost, we must work to dismantle the idea that privileged groups establish the norms.

The current state of sociopolitical realities facing our nation and our world call for a moral witness from the Church that is unfailing in its clarity. There is no room to pacify our failure to live the ethics of Jesus in how we respond to those on the margins. In no way can those at the center of power and privilege continue to believe that they are not actively complicit in the disenfranchisement and dehumanization of those considered to be socially other simply because they do not own slaves or don't seem themselves to be racist. The standard is active work toward antiracism at every turn. The standard is direct work against imperialist white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy from every church, seminary, and individual follower of the teachings of Jesus. As people on the margins begin to live fully into their self-understanding of being made in the image of the Divine, people of the dominant culture must begin to recognize that their power and privilege betray the Gospel. This is both the time and season for a renaissance of Black prophetic leadership and preaching.

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