



Dry Bones

Death as the Context of Preaching

*. . . it was full of bones . . . there were very many lying in the valley,
and they were very dry.*

—EZEK. 37:1-2

Death is gwineter lay his cold icy hands on me.

—TRADITIONAL

Throughout the United States, many church buildings are surrounded by cemeteries like the Princeton Cemetery, suggesting that the church engages in a ministry of life and death. Entertaining self-help sermons or purely prosperity-gospel proclamations are insufficient when dealing with such weighty matters. One needs sermons fueled and powered by the Holy Spirit to create life and destroy death. Moreover, that image of congregations in the midst of cemeteries reveals that the preaching of the gospel occurs among the dead, in the midst of death. In many ways, Death surrounds the church, attempting to intimidate it.

Death may be successful at times, causing sermons to die before they even reach the ears and hearts of the listeners due to the fear of preachers. However, reimagining preaching through the lens of Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones may help preachers face death with more courage, just like those musical sermons, the African American spirituals.¹

Ezekiel and the Domain of Death

Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones as the operating metaphor in this work reveals the pervasiveness of death in the preaching vocation. The historical backdrop of Ezekiel 37 is a situation of crisis for the “whole house of Israel” (v. 11). It is a collective crisis and death. Israel was already struggling in its relationship with God by defiling the temple and ignoring the holy nature of God’s sanctuary, causing God to call them a “whore” (Ezek. 9). It is clear that “there was no honeymoon period” between God and Israel.² Eventually, the glory of God is removed from Jerusalem (Ezek. 10), indicating the correlation between the death of Israel, which is pronounced in this passage, and the absence of God. This gives God good reason to command Ezekiel to utter a diatribe and denounce the actions of Israel (Ezek. 1–24). If this is not enough despair, we hear from a Jewish fugitive that the city of Jerusalem has fallen (Ezek. 33:21), pointing to the historical fact that in 587 BCE, the city of Jerusalem, the cultural, religious, and economic center of Jewish life, fell to King Nebuchadnezzar. Israel is in a multifaceted exile and thus it is no surprise that they say “our hope is lost” (37:11). Their dreams are “dashed by Babylonian brutality.”³

Yet, Ezekiel is called upon to “prophesy to these bones” (Ezek. 37:4), to proclaim a life-giving word to this community. It is important to realize that Ezekiel 37:1-14 is a part of the restoration discourses in this book, which reveal that “trouble don’t last always” for the people of Israel. In fact, this passage points to the full-blown restoration of Israel’s relationship with God in chapters 40–48 where there is a new temple and polity, and the diasporan Jews return to their land while the divine presence returns to the inner sanctuary of the temple. Indeed, the Jewish “clan, king, and cult would one day be revived.”⁴ This suggests an eventual holistic revival of Israel’s cultural and familial relationships, political and institutional structures, and religious systems. But this future hope is not the starting point of this vision.

This is Ezekiel’s third vision because “the hand of the LORD came upon” him (37:1), as it does with his other vision reports. The lifelessness

and hopelessness of Israel is described with stark imagery. “The spirit of the LORD” (37:1) brings him to the valley of bones though it was believed that one could be contaminated by coming into contact with the dead (Num. 19:16-18; 2 Kgs. 23:14, 16; Ezek. 39:15-16). The spirit of the Lord brings him to the domain of death to preach. The spirit of the Lord did not give him a bigger car, bigger house, fancier jewelry, top-notch technological gadgets, more Facebook friends, or a better whoop than the winsome preacher down the block. The spirit of the Lord leads him to a “preach-off” with Death. Tom Long notes that there is “the other preacher at a funeral: Death.”⁵ But one does not have to go to a funeral to face death. Death is a part of life. Death is snooping around looking for its next victim, looking for ways to contaminate our existence with “little deaths.” Thus every time one enters the pulpit, the preacher squares off against death, surrounded by death. Even a quick reading of this text reveals that the most prominent image is the bones, which express physical and spiritual debility (Isa. 66:14; Job 21:24). The bones are described as “very many” and “dry” (v. 2), suggesting the vast experience of death by this entire “slain” people (v. 9). “The valley of dry bones is the quintessential vision of human disaster . . .”⁶ Israel is indeed dried up and dead, which is why the “graves” image is used to depict their situation when the vision is explained (vv. 12, 13). If preachers are honest, our ministries take place at ecclesial graveyards because many of us are preaching in a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel demonstrates that to preach in the Spirit means to preach in the middle of death where there are very many dry bones.

Spirituals as Musical Sermons

Creation of the Spirituals

The social context of the spirituals confirms Ezekiel’s vision, but before investigating the specifics of that context, it is important to establish the spirituals as musical sermons, as preaching in their own right. Early accounts of the creation of the spirituals unveil their origin within the preaching event. One ex-slave says:

Us ole heads used ter make them on the spurn of de moment, after we wressle with the Spirit and come thoo. But the tunes was brung from Africa by our granddaddies. Dey was jis ’miliar song . . . they calls ’em spirituals, case de Holy Spirit done revealed ’em to ’em. Some say Moss Jesus taught ’em, and I’s seed ’em start in meeting. We’d all be

at the prayer house de Lord's Day, and de white preacher he'd splain the word and read whar Ezekiel done say—Dry bones gwine ter lib again. And honey, de Lord would come a-shining thoo them pages and revive dis ole nigger's heart, and I'd jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pat, and dey would all cotch de words . . . and dey's all take it up and keep at it, and keep a-adding to it and den it would be a spiritual.⁷

In this case, the preacher's presentation of a biblical text provokes the individual's initial musical creation that the community then takes up as they "keep at it, and keep a-adding to it," leading to the spiritual. In his study on the chanted sermon, Jon Michael Spencer affirms this:

A perspicuous correlation exists between black preaching and the antebellum spiritual, for it is most probable that a substantial quantum of spirituals evolved via the preaching event of black worship. Although it is likely that, apart from worship, slave preachers worked at composing pleasing combinations of tune and text to later teach their spirituals to their congregations, it is probable that the more frequent development was from extemporaneous sermonizing which crescendoed *poco a poco* to intoned utterance. This melodious declamation, delineated into quasi-metrical phrases with formulaic cadence, was customarily enhanced by intervening tonal response from the congregation. Responsorial iteration of catchy words, phrases, and sentences resulted in the burgeoning of song, to which new verses could be contemporaneously adjoined. Spirituals created in such a manner were sometimes evanescent, while favorable creations were remembered and perpetuated through oral transmission.⁸

The creation of the spirituals through the extemporaneous musical sermonic delivery of preachers in conjunction with the congregational responses was apparently a common feature. Through the call and response of preacher and congregation, a song arose that I would argue is itself sermonic; musicologist Eileen Southern names this class of spirituals "the homiletic spirituals."⁹ Other accounts suggest that the spiritual originated when a song leader was so moved by a preacher's sermon that he or she interrupted the sermon by answering him with a song.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the spiritual was rooted in the preaching moment.

Many scholars take it a step further by even asserting, as Spencer does above, that slave preachers were probably the main creators and teachers of the spirituals. At least there is a "strong suspicion" that this is so.¹¹ James

Weldon Johnson, an early interpreter of the spirituals, refers respectfully to the creator of the spirituals as the “black and unknown bards” and does not equate the creators with preachers per se. Rather, he claims that the makers and leaders of song were a “recognized order of bards” who possessed “a gift of melody, a talent for poetry, a strong voice, and a good memory.”¹² Despite this difference of opinion on the creator and teacher of these songs, there is agreement on the connection between the creation of the spirituals and preaching, though spirituals were also created apart from communal worship. Moreover, in his collection of poetry written in the manner of old-time folk sermons, *God’s Trombones*, Johnson reveals the natural overlap of preaching and spirituals when he describes his work and declares, “I have, naturally, felt the influence of the Spirituals,”¹³ though it was impossible to create the actual atmosphere that he experienced. He says that his sermonic poems would be best intoned because “the undertone of singing was often soft accompaniment to parts of the sermon.”¹⁴ John Work calls this musical accompaniment the “moan.”¹⁵

Others go beyond viewing the spirituals as mere accompaniment to the sermon. E. Franklin Frazier notes that slave “preaching consisted of singing sacred songs which have come to be known as the Spirituals.”¹⁶ Thus the spirituals were not only created in the preaching moment sparked by preachers’ musicality and congregational “talk back” or sung to “add momentum to the gospel”¹⁷ in its accompaniment, but the very nature of preaching “consisted of” singing these songs. Singing the spirituals was a part of what it meant to preach; thus even singing the spirituals counted as preaching. The spirituals were the word set to music and their composition by a preacher during a sermon has led some to call these types “preaching spirituals.”¹⁸ John Lovell asserts that “Many spirituals could qualify as sermons.”¹⁹ These songs were indeed “prayers, praises, and sermons.”²⁰ All of this suggests a convergence between the singing of spirituals and preaching. The most profound sign of their union is the musicality of both.

Musical Nature

One of the key traits of the spirituals as sermons is their musical essence. African American sermons have historically been known to be musical because music and speech are inseparable as African traditions treat songs like speech and speech like songs. Henry Mitchell reminds us that the “languages of Africa are manifestly tonal.”²¹ There is a “proneness to sing” revealing “[their] natural self, which is a musical self.”²² This musical self is

poignantly revealed in what is known as the chanted sermon. According to Bruce Rosenberg, “the chanted folk sermon is never far from the spiritual”; he views the chanted sermon as a “conflation of the prose sermon and the spiritual.”²³ Their historical roots come out of the same soil. In fact, chanting preachers know themselves to be “spiritual” preachers as opposed to “manuscript” preachers.²⁴ This has to do with whether one uses a manuscript or not to assist in preaching, but it also suggests the equation of “spiritual” with a musical type of preaching, known as chanting, intoning, or whooping. The climax of a sermon that shifts to chanting is described in a 1932 essay: “With the coming of the spirit . . . the speaker’s entire demeanor changes. . . . His voice, changed in pitch, takes on a mournful, singing quality, and words flow from his lips in such a manner as to make an understanding of them almost impossible.”²⁵ This “singing quality” of the sermon is known as “giving gravey.”²⁶ It is a *spiritual* way of preaching that is tonal and “sonorous,” making a sermon melodious.²⁷ Thus the sermon sings and this is “spiritual” preaching. The chanted portion of a sermon is the most obvious convergence of song and speech, revealing that “preaching is musical.”²⁸ In addition, though the most popular opinion is that the spirituals originated from the preaching moment, Rosenberg writes, “One is inclined to approach the origin of the chanted sermon by the circuitous route of the spiritual for several reasons. The sermons are repetitious in the same ways the spirituals are. And an extraordinary number of sermon lines come directly from spirituals.”²⁹ From his perspective, the chanted sermon stems from the spirituals, which may be another reason for calling it “spiritual” preaching.

Regardless of the debates on the origins of the sermon and spirituals, there is a symbiosis between singing and preaching, particularly the singing of the spirituals and the intonation of sermons. This symbiotic relationship is demonstrated in numerous ways, including, but not limited to, performative dimensions, such as the “African call-and-response song style,”³⁰ which is present in both singing and preaching. This convergence prompts Valentino Lassiter to assert, “The slave preacher . . . worked much in the same mode as the singer of spirituals.”³¹ The cultural tradition of overlap between singing and preaching, song and speech, continues today. The “musical voice” of old-time black preachers, the voice of a trombone, permeates various contemporary African American preaching traditions.³² Preachers may quote hymns or spirituals in their sermons, but they will also sing. Singers will also preach. Queen of gospel music and pastor Shirley Caesar captures in her own ministry the fusion of singing

and preaching in an interview when she says, “I sing my sermons and I preach my songs.”³³ Singing and preaching are different sides of the same homiletical coin.

Contemporary theorists of preaching affirm that singing is preaching and preaching is singing. One of the key homileticians to highlight the musicality of black preaching is William C. Turner. He writes poetically that during the climactic surplus of the sermon, the preacher becomes “an instrument—a flute through which divine air is blown, a harp whose strings are plucked by God.”³⁴ This description is rightly musical as the preacher uses music to do the ministry of proclamation. Elsewhere, he calls the music of preaching “singing in the spirit.”³⁵ In *The Jazz of Preaching*, Kirk Byron Jones also affirms the marriage between music and preaching when he writes, “Musicians play notes; preachers play words. Sometimes they even sing them.”³⁶ In his eulogy for pastor Sandy Ray, Gardner Taylor noted that it was difficult to determine whether in Ray’s preaching one “heard music half-spoken or speech half-sung.”³⁷ This rich interplay of sung speech and spoken song has deep roots in the historical relationship between the spirituals and preaching. It is a continuous trend in many black homiletical traditions because music in many ways has been as natural as breathing. As noted earlier, for those culturally rooted in Africa, the musical self is the natural self, thus sermons that sing and songs that preach are religiously natural. Musicality as a common characteristic of black preaching fuses the spirituals to preaching and helps one begin to recognize the spirituals as sermons, too, sermons that can teach us about preaching today. However, the emerging parallels between singing the spirituals and preaching do not only consist of the obvious musical nature but the ways in which biblical texts are linked to contextual realities.

(Con)Textual Nature

Another reason to claim the spirituals as sermons and as a helpful resource is the way they appropriate the Bible in a manner that speaks to concrete realities in life, conversing with both text and context. The strong parallels between the sermon and the spiritual include the following: “narrative technique, the picturesqueness and the concreteness, the emphasis on personal characteristics, the familiarity with the deity . . .”³⁸ A part of the narrative technique is how the preacher tells the story of God to the people of God. Telling the story has been critical in African American preaching; Henry Louis Gates even claims “only black music-making was

as important to the culture of African-Americans as has been the fine art of storytelling.”³⁹ Gates puts music on par with story and W. E. B. Du Bois asserts them as the same gift, a “gift of story and song.”⁴⁰ A song tells a story, too, just like preaching. The spirituals are “story theology.”⁴¹ They proclaim a story of how black people came over a way that had been drenched by tears and blood. They reveal how those under harsh existential circumstances “got over.” The spiritual “You May Have All Dis World, But Give Me Jesus” represented the “narcotic doctrine” that the folk preacher instilled in those suffering under Pharaoh’s hand in slavery.⁴² The narrative messages, the stories, of the preacher and the spirituals were the same. They worked hand in hand as companions. The spirituals even “helped to shape and to tenor the message of the slave preacher.”⁴³ The message was the same as singer and preacher told the story. Their hermeneutical lenses were similar, especially as they interpreted the Bible to help tell the story.

An important aspect of preaching is engaging the Bible as an aid to proclaiming the gospel. “Exegesis of the text” is critical for proclamation.⁴⁴ The spirituals are no different in that they engage the Bible to help tell their story while they preach. Howard Thurman names the Bible as a key source for the spirituals. He says, “The Christian Bible furnished much of the imagery and ideas with which the slave singers fashioned their melodies.”⁴⁵ A brief survey of spiritual titles reveals the importance of Scripture in the spirituals: “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” “Go Down, Moses,” “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?,” “Mary Had a Baby, Yes, Lord,” “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” or “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” Singing and preaching were significant means for conveying the story of the Bible. “Through the sermon, as well as spirituals and gospel songs, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures entered and shaped the imaginative world of African-Americans.”⁴⁶

The spirituals, like hymns, function as midrashim. According to Tom Troeger, hymns are midrashic because “hymn writers combine the spirit and concerns of their culture with the resonance and depth of the ancient text.”⁴⁷ The spirituals operate in the same way as they merge the concerns of the enslaved with the biblical story. For example, the spiritual, “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel?,” says, “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel, Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, an’ why not-a every man.” They needed deliverance and this story spoke to their situation of oppression. Especially when it comes to the story of Jesus, the spirituals fuse into his story “their very own pathos.”⁴⁸

Dey crucified my Lord, an' he never said a mumblin' word.
 Dey crucified my Lord, an' he never said a mumblin' word,
 Not a word—not a word—not a word.

Dey nailed Him to de tree, an' he never said a mumblin' word.
 Dey nailed Him to de tree, an' he never said a mumblin' word.
 Not a word—not a word—not a word.

The piercing, blood flowing, and the eventual dying of Jesus in the Bible are their story. The spirituals reveal the Bible as a mirror of our existence to help tell the story, the good news in our concrete situation. However, if the spirituals only engaged the Bible, a text, they would not be sermons because preaching is not a mere reiteration of the text or pure exposition of a biblical text. Preaching as exemplified in the spirituals must also speak to particular contextual realities. Sermons should relate the Bible to life, interpreting Scripture in light of one's *Sitz im Leben* (life situation). In other words, preachers should also do an "exegesis of the situation."⁴⁹ The spirituals do this by relating the text, the Bible in this case, to context.

One man tells how these songs were created in light of particular experiences of the slave. He says, "I'll tell you; it's dis way. My master call me up and order me a short peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in, work it in, you know; till dey get it right; and dat's de way."⁵⁰ In this case, the spirituals created relate to the happenings of the day. They speak to the local experience of slaves as an attempt to minister to the surrounding needs of the community. The needs of a community should shape the sermon. Thurman says the slaves had "deep needs"⁵¹ and the spirituals were a sermonic attempt to meet those needs, regardless of the situation. These songs were sung at work and leisure, to children, over the sick and dead, at praise meetings, and in other situations. "The very heart beats of life" were expressed through these songs.⁵² These songs transferred from location to location and generation to generation, causing changes to songs and even sometimes to their interpretation based on the setting, dialect, and occasion. These songs were flexibly suited to the life in which they were sung as the soul of a people was expressed in the language of the people, the "mother tongue of the Spirit."⁵³ The vernacular articulation of the word is important for contextually sensitive preaching. The spirituals as folk songs, the sermons of a collective group, are the "painted picture

of a soul” in the “colors of music.”⁵⁴ This soul-full music, this *spiritual* preaching, like typical sermons, is focused on the survival of a people, thus they pay close attention to the needs of the community. The soul that is voiced is communal, which suggests another key trait of the spirituals as musical sermons.

Communal Nature

The spirituals, just like preaching, are not the sole property of one individual but represent the collective voice of a people. Preaching is a communal word. The preacher goes “to the pulpit from the pew,”⁵⁵ revealing that the preacher is part of a larger community. The same is true for the spirituals. Dale Andrews notes, “The community participation common to black preaching has also produced similar worship traditions in black spirituals.”⁵⁶ In both, there is a rich sense of communal participation or what Evans Crawford calls “participant proclamation.”⁵⁷ Most obvious in this cultural tradition is the performance of the call and response between leader and community, as noted earlier. For instance, in the spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” as a leader sings, “Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,” the community responds, “Let my people go.” The call and response continues until everyone joins in on the refrain,

Go down, Moses,
 ‘Way down in Egypt land,
 Tell ole Pharaoh,
 Let my people go.

Furthermore, what accentuates the communal nature of the spirituals as sermons is their unknown character, in terms of authorship and time and place of origin. In his poem to honor the creator of the spirituals, “O Black and Unknown Bards,” Johnson stresses that the bards are “forgot, unfamed, . . . untaught, unknown, unnamed . . .”⁵⁸ There are no specifics about who specifically created the spirituals. This suggests that these musical sermons belong to the community and not any one individual. They are “unnamed” because the community trumps the individual in this case. The unknown character of these songs implies that they are communal musical sermons. Even if most spirituals were created by talented individuals, as some scholars suggest,⁵⁹ the community provides the dominant themes as these songs are passed along and altered from one generation to the

next via oral transmission. Also, the spirituals were “originally intended only for group singing” because “Negro spirituals are not solo or quartette material.”⁶⁰ These spirituals are “owned” by the entire community.

These are trademarks of folk music. As these songs travel across time, they reveal a type of consensus within a community regarding beliefs, patterns of behavior, and so forth. Lovell notes that “in folk music, the individual invents; the community selects. The racial character of a song, therefore, is due to communal choice, not communal invention.” Folk songs, just like folk sermons, “grow straight out of the needs of the people.”⁶¹ The folks matter in preaching and, particularly with a musical sense of preaching, music in African culture is about “the bond of fellowship” between humanity.⁶² People sing or preach with each other and not for one another. The spirituals, like preaching, are “folk art” and the preacher is a “folk artist” or a “recondite folksinger” who engages in “folk work.”⁶³ The “folk” focus means that the spirituals as sermons are in tune with the local community and its needs to such an extent that these sermons are collective property. Musical sermons arise out of the communal heart. This collective heart was under attack in the particular context out of which the spirituals arose, revealing how death is a context of preaching.

Social Context of the Spirituals

The spirituals, musical sermons, were forged in the flame of slavery, where the stench of death permeated life. These songs were literally a matter of life and death. James Cone reminds us that “No theological interpretation of the black spirituals can be valid that ignores the cultural environment that created them. The black experience in America is a history of servitude and resistance, of survival *in the land of death*. It is the story of black life in chains and of what that meant for the souls and bodies of black people.”⁶⁴ This death-dealing environment is the root of black preaching and singing. It is the foundation of African American religiosity, “a path through the blood of the slaughtered.”⁶⁵ Africans were stolen from their motherland to take “a treacherous, transatlantic journey of terror”⁶⁶ called the Middle Passage to the mainland of the Americas, a supposed land of the free. But “Before the ships sailed, many leaped overboard and drowned rather than be enslaved. African women, heavy with child, plunged sharpened bamboo sticks into their bellies to kill the unborn rather than have it be born a slave. Many refused to eat or drink and sank into melancholia so deep they died on board. We never did like being slaves!”⁶⁷ This is why

the spiritual rang out, “Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom all over me, an’ before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave, an’ go home to ma Lawd an’ be free.” This context of suffering was “the fires of purgatory.”⁶⁸ Some were even literally burned and tortured to death on lynching trees as if they were not even human. The enslaved had every right to sing, “Nobody knows the trouble I see, nobody knows but Jesus . . .”

The sorrow and grief were overwhelming due to the existential reality of brutality. Yet, Johnson insightfully declares, “It is strange!” that from these people enduring such harsh realities this “noble music sprang.” He attempts to paint a fuller picture of the sinful situation when he writes, “they were, suddenly cut off from the moorings of their native culture, scattered without regard to their old tribal relations, having to adjust themselves to a completely alien civilization, having to learn a strange language, and, moreover, held under an increasingly harsh system of slavery.”⁶⁹ In other words, the spirituals rose out of a situation not only of physical death but of “social death.”⁷⁰ Separated from what was familiar, even family, the spiritual “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” was created. Thurman says:

For the slave, freedom was not on the horizon; there stretched ahead the long road down which there marched in interminable lines only the rows of cotton, the sizzling heat, the riding overseer with his rawhide whip, the auction block where families were torn asunder, the barking of the bloodhounds—all this, but not freedom.

Human slavery has been greatly romanticized by the illusion of distance, the mint julep, the long Southern twilight, and the lazy sweetness of blooming magnolias. But it must be intimately remembered that slavery was a dirty, sordid, inhuman business. When the slaves were taken from their homeland, the primary social unit was destroyed, and all immediate tribal and family ties were ruthlessly broken. This meant the severing of the link that gave the individual African a sense of *persona*. There is no more hapless victim than one who is cut off from family, from language, from one’s roots.⁷¹

The slave’s *persona* was under attack not only through severed relational ties but by the “all-out assault on the black body.”⁷² Oppression seeks to destroy one’s humanity, yet these musical sermons were proclaimed by those whose humanity was under attack. A context of death could not mute this life-giving music, even a death perpetuated by fellow Christians who practiced Christianity in a cruel manner.

Despite the failings of the church to act Christian, the enslaved continued to sing and proclaim, “I’m a rollin’, I’m a rollin’, I’m a rollin’ through an unfriendly worl’ . . .” The world was unfriendly but so was the church, yet blacks kept rolling along and pushing forward in life despite the vast experiences of death, the very many dry bones in their valley. Though they were snatched from Africa, they did not lose their song. They sang in a strange land, in exile, because their music was portable. In fact, the context of death, like Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones, provided a distinct texture for these sermons. “Slavery . . . gave color to [their] music. Slavery was the starting point and Heaven was the goal of [their] life.”⁷³ As with these songs, black preaching begins in suffering, pain, and death. It is the starting point for the vital preaching of Christian hope. This is not to celebrate death and slavery but it is to acknowledge it as the social setting of the spirituals, musical sermons that have much to teach contemporary preachers. As in our day, there was then the “tragedy of great need.”⁷⁴ Human need is no respecter of persons as many face “little deaths” on a daily basis. But what these spirituals also reveal is a profound way to respond to one’s situation of death.

Spirituals as a Response to Death

A Singing Soul

The spirituals as musical sermons reveal that preaching is a critical response to a domain of death. Ezekiel, when in the domain of death, was called to “prophesy to the bones,” to say a word. He could have been asked to do a wide variety of things in response to pervasive death, yet God called Ezekiel to preach as a response to death. Words have power and melodious words perhaps even more. To sing a sermon in order to counter death was natural for those whose “soul is a song” and whose life “a life of song.”⁷⁵ Music was not just the soul of the civil rights movement in the United States, it was and is the soul of black folks. Du Bois presents this notion implicitly by using epigraphic musical refrains of the spirituals at the beginning of each chapter in *The Soul of Black Folks*.⁷⁶ The heart of the soul of black folks is a song, the spiritual specifically.

The black soul sang through death and until death. They possessed a “gift of story and song” in an “ill-harmonized and unmelodious land.”⁷⁷ They brought sweet melodies to a land that attempted to kill their song because their soul was a singer. They endured great suffering but not

without a song, which is why James Cone has declared, “*Black history is a spiritual!*”⁷⁸ The spiritual was their soul and it represented what it meant to be human, even as they were dehumanized. These particular songs of the soul have become not solely black songs but are human songs that are a “multipurposed anthem of the human spirit.”⁷⁹ Those who were deemed subhuman were teachers of humanity through the spirituals as they sang in response to their harsh situation. As long as they sang, there was still hope. The words of the poet Paul Dunbar ring true for the enslaved: “I sing my song and all is well.”⁸⁰ All is well because the spirituals were not just songs of the soul; they were life itself.

Song as Life

To sing was to live. The setting of death could not mute the life-giving spirituals. Singing was a vital response to death because by doing so the enslaved were countering death with life. The spirituals might have been considered “sorrow songs”⁸¹ by some, but they were still songs that meant life continued to pulse in their oppressed veins. Some scholars say, “Without songs to sing, life would be diminished.”⁸² For the slave, however, without a song, life would be destroyed by death because through the spiritual, a musical sermon, the enslaved “chants new life.”⁸³ This is the heart of preaching—chanting new life in the midst of death. The “urge to sing” the spirituals was just as indispensable to living as breath flowing through the body.⁸⁴ “The balm in Gilead was the spiritual itself.”⁸⁵ The actual phenomenon of singing was life giving and a means of survival.

Musical preaching via the spirituals was essential for survival in the valley of the dry bones of slavery. To imagine black religiosity without them is impossible because they are the soul of a people fighting to survive. These musical sermons enabled survival because they “cut a path through the wilderness of despair.”⁸⁶ Melodies paved a path toward freedom. Bernice Johnson Reagon, civil-rights singer and activist, argues that the “Spirituals were songs created as leverage, as salve, as voice, as a bridge over troubles one could not endure without the flight of song and singing.”⁸⁷ Without these spiritual melodies from heaven, many African Americans would not have survived. If they wanted to live, they had to sing, they had to preach musically.

These songs provided strength to the singing preachers. Former slave Vinnie Brunson said that singing “wuz des de way [the slave] ‘spressed his feelin’s an hit made him relieved.”⁸⁸ It helped them endure the hardships of

life. But this is not surprising because “whenever human beings are caught in oppressive suffering, songs emerge.”⁸⁹ Musical sermons give strength to the weak and weary, battered and bruised. They are not a laughing matter. These songs are nothing short of a “miracle.”⁹⁰ Many chose to sing and not sulk. This “is one of those psychic phenomena which show the inscrutable workings of the Creator.”⁹¹ Even today, signs of the Creator are present through songs in the domain of death. During the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, there was a lot of singing even while there was much crying, screaming, moaning, and groaning. Singing is not the expected response to catastrophe. In one case, Ena Zizi, a seventy-year-old woman, had been buried for a week in earthquake rubble that was at least three stories high from the ground. When she was pulled out of the rubble, she was seriously dehydrated and had a broken leg and a dislocated hip. But that did not stop her; rather, Ena began to sing. Her body was worn and her throat was weary but life was singing.⁹² Her song in the rubble, as with the spirituals, was “a complete and final refusal to be stopped.”⁹³ That song was a sound of the “glad defiance”⁹⁴ of life bubbling up. But she was not alone as others sang on the streets day and night. The songs that rose from the rubble of this catastrophe were deeply communal for the life of a people.

Singing in Community (Secretly)

As blacks responded to the context of death with musical sermons historically, the soul singing of life had a collective heartbeat. An entire community responded to death head-on with musical courage. In terms of music making, it is rare for the African to play for another; rather, he or she plays or sings *with* someone else. “The great lesson of African music is human brotherhood.”⁹⁵ It is a bond in which anyone can sing. The “unknown” quality of the spirituals suggests that they are “the spirit of the people struggling to be free.”⁹⁶ What is voiced is the communal voice, a community hymn sing that fights for life, the life of a community. Riggins Earl writes, “The singing act itself symbolized the socially objectified consciousness of the oppressed.”⁹⁷ These songs created a sense of community, a social body that coalesced for the cause of liberation. Singing reaffirmed a common bond and reduced social alienation and feelings of a social death. The children of Israel struggled to sing a song in a strange land, but African Americans had to sing because “their *being* depended upon a song.”⁹⁸ Singing solidified the community even if they had to sing in secret.

Many of the musical sermons were preached in what is called the “invisible institution.” Eugene Genovese writes, “The slaves’ religious meetings would be held in secret when their masters forbade all such; or when their masters forbade all except Sunday meetings; or when rumors of rebellion or disaffection led even indulgent masters to forbid them so as to protect the people from trigger-happy patrollers; or when the slaves wanted to make sure that no white would hear them.”⁹⁹ These secret sessions gave a sense of communal autonomy and strength. This gathering empowered the enslaved to endure and even resist their unjust oppression. This “institution” and other independent places of worship developed by the old-time preachers are important to highlight because “except for these separate places of worship there never would have been any Spirituals.”¹⁰⁰ This strong statement reveals that the spiritual implies a community, one that celebrates and laments in the face of death. This kind of community that performs a musical sermonic “collective exorcism”¹⁰¹ of the demonic powers of slavery is an obvious threat to those in power.

Singing as Resistance

Fear of Insurrection. The presence of a singing, preaching, and worshiping community can be viewed as a threat to those in power. The spirituals sung in community spread fear among the oppressors, especially after numerous rebellions. Genovese notes,

Although blacks preached with some ease during the eighteenth century, they were severely curbed during the nineteenth. Each insurrectionary scare from Gabriel’s to Vesey’s to Nat Turner’s led to a wave of repression. Especially after 1831, laws forbade free Negroes to preach to slaves or sought to register and control them or required whites to be present when any black man preached. But the preachers, free and slave, carried on.¹⁰²

Those in power saw the gathered community as an impetus toward insurrection. Singing and preaching, especially in the secret “hush harbors,” were viewed as “a threat to the social order”¹⁰³ and potential cover for insurrection plotting. To preach, sing, or pray, even at home, was hazardous to the slave. If found engaging in these activities, they could be beaten or flogged or, worse, killed. There are numerous accounts of this lockdown on worship. One report declares, “My Bos didn’ ’low us to go to church,

er to pray er sing. Iffen he ketched us prayin 'er singin' he whupped us."¹⁰⁴ Despite the forces of death literally beating down on them, the slaves "carried on" with their practices many times. Faith and courage could not be whipped out of them. One slave said, "When I was a slave my master would sometimes whip me *awful*, specially when he knew I was praying. He was determined to whip the Spirit out of me, but he could never do it, for de more he whip the more the Spirit make me *content* to be whipt."¹⁰⁵ The fear of whites was so overwhelming that they were even skeptical of slave funerals. Singing and preaching in any venue were a threat to the powers of death because "you cannot sing a song and not change your condition."¹⁰⁶ These practices were a form of resistance to death, both blatant and subtle.

Blatant Opposition. Much scholarship has given attention to the more subtle resistance of the spirituals through their double coded meanings, which I discuss below; however, there are open signs of resistance to deathly circumstances in many of the spirituals. In his narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass says this about the spirituals: "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."¹⁰⁷ The spirituals were "fatal words of confrontation and conflict."¹⁰⁸ Those that claim docility was the entire story miss the explicit resistance to slavery and white oppression. For instance, the following spiritual is forthright about its resistance with the repetition of "no more":

No more auction block for me, No more, No more, No more auction
block for me, many thousand gone. No more peck o'corn for me, No
more, no more, No more peck o'corn for me, many thousand gone.
No more driver's lash for me. . . . No more pint o'salt for me. . . . No
more hundred lash for me. . . . No more mistress' call for me. . .

The enslaved wanted "no more" death from anyone. They wanted freedom so much that death was sometimes more preferable than life. One must remember that "Black resistance has roots stretching back to the slave ships, the auction blocks, and the plantation regime. It began when the first black person decided that death would be preferable to slavery."¹⁰⁹ The enslaved sang about it, too. "Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave an' go home to my Lawd an' be free." Yearning for death was a form of resistance against the life they endured and they knew that "Everybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere."

Subtle Opposition. However, their musical forms of opposition were not always blatant. It was subtle, too. The enslaved performed a “pantomime of survival—smiling when they wanted to weep, laughing when they boiled with anger, feigning ignorance when they brimmed with intelligence.”¹¹⁰ One of the masterful components of the spirituals is their double or coded meaning or what has been called a “mask,” a prominent characteristic in African music. According to Lovell, “the mask was for protection against whites; the secrecy was for binding the slaves together through messages of assurance.”¹¹¹ The use of mask and symbol, double entendre, was a form of lyrical resistance to the context of death. It is a secret protest against pain, thus many spirituals should not be read literally. Wearing the mask requires figurative interpretation. The singing of spirituals is covert communication in a theo-musical, theo-poetic manner. For instance, one can read the spiritual “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in-a My Heart” as a critique of the “surface operator” slave-master Christian type: the slave desires true religion “in-a my heart” as opposed to the surface external expression of Christianity they see their oppressors demonstrating.¹¹² One may assume it is just an expression of piety, but understanding the coded nature of these songs suggests that it can also be a protest of the kind of Christian witness they observe. “Go Down, Moses,” quoted above, is another example of the mask. On the surface, one may hear its refrain as only a reiteration of the Bible story about the children of Israel enslaved in Egypt. But if one understands the mask worn by these musical sermons, one can hear the subtextual parallel of the slaves’ yearning for a Moses to be sent into their Egyptian land of slavery in order to deliver them from the pharaohs of slaveocracy and declare, “Let my people go.” The enslaved were Israel; Egypt was the bondage of earthly slavery; Pharaoh was the oppressors.

Spirituals such as these were secret modes of communication that only the black community understood. They were musical indictments against their oppression. They signified resistance. Other spirituals like “Steal Away,” “There’s a Great Camp Meeting,” “Walk Together Children Don’t Get Weary,” and “Wade in the Water” were hidden ways of announcing events, like a local news report that is only understood by those who speak the same language. Douglass is explicit about the double meaning in the spirituals:

A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of
‘O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,’

something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the north—and the north was our Canaan.

In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.¹¹³

These songs were not mere melodies of heaven but tunes of earth.

Whether the language was the “kingdom,” “heaven,” “Canaan land,” the “promised land” or “over Jordan,” there could be a dual meaning in light of the “mask” ideal. Revisionist history argues that the notion of heaven in these musical sermons is “a principle of social criticism well camouflaged in the prominent Christian language of the day. Most important, this revised interpretation claims that the African slaves discerned the symbol heaven as an implicit criticism of everything in the society that maintained slavery and racial oppression.”¹¹⁴ “Heaven” and related terms were not an otherworldly haven but this-worldly linguistic modes of resistance to death. John Blassingame asserts, “As other-worldly as they often appear, the spirituals served as much more than opiates and escapist fantasies. They affirmed the slave’s personal autonomy and recognized the reality of his earthly suffering. While looking beyond the dismal present to a brighter future, the spiritual enabled blacks to transcend degradation and to find the emotional security to endure pain.”¹¹⁵ These songs resisted dehumanization and demonization and grabbed ahold of hope and the future in the face of opposition.

The spirituals were a part of “an insistent cultural antiphony”¹¹⁶ to the way white oppressors operated in the world. The antiphonal response represented by the double coded spirituals continued the “tradition of indirection”¹¹⁷ among preachers. The lyrics were not the sole dimension of the mask because melodies masked what was really happening in the subtextual world of defiance and resistance. The subtle form of resistance was also present in the performance of the spiritual, particularly the use of the body.

Gags were placed on slave preachers as a means to silence¹¹⁸ but gags could not prevent the body from talking, rhythmically resisting oppression. Some say, “The chief vehicle for the *performance* of the Negro spiritual was the human voice,”¹¹⁹ yet singing is sound moving through one’s body. A cultural “somatic sensibility” converges with music especially.¹²⁰

The historical performance of the spiritual involves the swaying of the body. Johnson describes it when he writes,

In all authentic American Negro music the rhythms may be divided roughly into two classes—rhythms based on the swinging of head and body and rhythms based on the patting of hands and feet. Again speaking roughly, the rhythms of the Spirituals fall in the first class. . . . The ‘swing’ of the Spirituals is an altogether subtle and elusive thing. It is subtle and elusive because it is in perfect union with the religious ecstasy that manifests itself in the swaying bodies of a whole congregation, swaying as if responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor. So it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sing these songs sitting or standing coldly still, and at the same time capture the spontaneous ‘swing’ which is of their very essence.¹²¹

The subtle “swing” was present in the clandestine gatherings even as people had to sing with a “hush” because of the restrictive laws against gathering. Melva Costen says that even the “‘silent songs’” [were] expressed in kinesthetic movements and rhythms . . .¹²² The body sang as it moved, swaying even in sorrow. The ring shout is a classic example of the embodied nature of singing spirituals.¹²³

The musical sermon is incomplete without some sort of body movement—dancing, swaying, rocking, tapping, clapping. The “swing” suggests another form of resistance to death. In slavery, the oppressors attempted to control the black body. But in slave religion, “the slaves would take their bodies back.”¹²⁴ The sway or swing of the black bodies in the performance of the spirituals was resistance to “Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze” on lynching trees.¹²⁵ Their sway as they sang was a counterswing to the swaying of death in their environment. This bodily swing was a way of taking control of one’s space, voice, body, and life. They could swing in the face of death to resist it. They could affirm that God was present with them in their bodies. The swing of the spiritual was an affirmation of divine presence and human dignity to such an extent that bruised and beaten black bodies “became an icon of God.”¹²⁶ These musical sermons revealed that they were somebody when others treated them like nobody. Their literal bodies swayed in the wind of the Spirit(ual) to counteract the bodies in the southern breeze. By doing so, they showed that they were a collective body rhythmically “swinging to the movement of life.”¹²⁷ This *spiritual* hunger for life in the face of death is something

to be remembered, especially for those ministering in a valley with very many dry bones.

Importance of Cultural Memory for Preaching

There is a proverb that says, “Don’t forget the bridge that brought you over.” The musical bridge that is the spirituals brought black peoples over troubled waters in the past and present. To forget them is to forget how many preachers arrived where they are today by standing on the shoulders of the unknown black bards. Their melodies, biblical insight, contextual sensitivity, performance practices, and sheer will to live shape the nature of preaching today. To forget them is to lose the deep *spiritual* roots of preaching. Remembering the past sheds light on the present. The past possesses rich pedagogical wisdom. The hymn declares, “We’ve come this far by faith,” but we still have much further to go in our preaching because “every shut eye ain’t sleep, every good-bye ain’t gone.” The door of the past cannot be closed and in the case of the spirituals, it should not be because there is further development and growth needed in our preaching. We need to keep the history of the spirituals open for contemporary knowledge, but that history, as described above, is partly brutal and inhumane.

Some want to forget slavery because “Slavery is the site of black victimage and thus of tradition’s intended erasure.”¹²⁸ Some are ashamed of singing the spirituals because of their connection to slavery. They are considered unsophisticated musical ditties that weaken African Americans. Those who support erasure of past slavery from historical memory will also cry that slavery was not the totality of the black experience in the past, but that there was also dignity. This is true, but the dignity was held in the midst of slavery, death. “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.”¹²⁹ To forget that wet path of tears would be a sign of disrespect to the ancestors, the “many thousand gone.” To remember is to honor them.

Furthermore, I would argue that to forget slavery is actually impossible because, just like Lazarus’s body, death “stinketh” (John 11:39, κJV), and the stench of death from slavery lingers in today’s atmosphere. Death cannot be avoided and the spirituals demonstrate how death can be encountered courageously. This is tremendously empowering toward reimagining what preaching is because, as Toni Morrison reminds us, “the act of imagination is bound up with memory.”¹³⁰ As one remembers, one reimagines, even re-members, the essence of preaching. This reimagining leads us to the place of death and contamination, the valley of dry bones.

If one does not sever ties with the human history of the spirituals, one will not only learn lessons of life, but gain homiletical wisdom that shapes a distinct perspective on the task of preaching. Remembering the spirituals provides numerous lessons for understanding preaching.

Remembering Human Tragedy

The first lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that human tragedy, death, pain, and suffering are a part of human life, thus a critical component of the context for preaching. To remember the spirituals, one must remember that death and suffering are pervasive. No human being escapes “de troubles of the world.” Thurman declares that “suffering stalks [humanity], never losing the scent, and soon or late seizes upon him [or her] to wreak its devastation.”¹³¹ Black preaching expressions are historically rooted in death-wielding devastation unless someone suffers from cultural amnesia and forgets this. The history of pain is part of the power of African American preaching. This is not to celebrate death and pain but to acknowledge it as part of human reality. To remember the spirituals for thinking about preaching means that one remembers a deadly, bloody, and tear-filled past in human history. As noted, “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered. We have come treading a path through the blood of the slaughtered.” Tears, blood, and death, not health, wealth, and prosperity, have been the heart of the existential journey of black people in the world. “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of faith,”¹³² says Raboteau, and for my homiletical purpose, the blood of the martyrs fertilizes the soil of our preaching. Black preachers stand in their blood to preach. Their blood cries out from the pulpit every time we stand to preach because they have paved the path of proclamation.

From the waters of the Middle Passage to the blood spilled in the “land of the free,” from slavery to the Jim Crow era to the current burdens of today, these martyrs teach us “that suffering must be lived through; it can’t be avoided by any of the spurious means of escape that people use to distract one another from real life. Life is bittersweet, joyful sadness.”¹³³ This is what the “haunting echo”¹³⁴ of the spirituals teaches preachers. Tragedy and death are aspects of the gospel. Preaching is supposed to be a truth-telling enterprise and have a “truth orientation”¹³⁵ about it. If preaching does not acknowledge the truth of death and suffering in the world, it is a doxological lie that perpetuates homiletical dishonesty. But the honest truth is that, for many, life is bitter and sweet is sour. The historical path of human existence

has been paved with the innocent blood of people, the blood of our ancestors. African diasporan cultural memory is moist with bitter blood.

The spilling of innocent human blood reveals the vast human need in the world. These human atrocities then and now provide a ministry opportunity for preachers. Preaching is a ministry to serve the needs of those in its hearing. Tragedy provides a context for the human need and challenges preaching to reclaim its function as ministry, service, to those who are suffering in varied ways. Preaching is not just an event or a practice or an art. It is *ministry* to those who are dying in our midst. Many people in the pews are in an exilic experience, not knowing whether they will be delivered. Exile is no respecter of persons; however, African Americans are in a particular predicament in the United States. Houston Baker asserts that privileged middle-class blacks “are being told paradoxically that if we are to be liked *as blacks*, we must not only forget the majority of those in the United States who are, in fact, black, but also relinquish all thoughts of an American past where the reality for the entire majority of sons and fathers of blackness was slavery, convict lease labor, menial employment, second-class citizenship, social death, and immobilizing poverty.”¹³⁶ Forgetting would betray human suffering and the reality of racism. Yet, one cannot forget the past because pain is still present.

Sometimes we still feel like motherless children due to loneliness or isolation. Little deaths with huge ramifications still pervade life—drive-by shootings, contraction of AIDS, war, genocide, famine, cancer, family dysfunction, abuse, suffering from those who have just lost a child or those who want children but cannot have any. One does not even need a gun to kill someone anymore; just imprison another “minority” or traffic another child for sex or perpetuate institutional racism. No one, regardless of race, gender, or class, is immune from suffering or the little deaths of life. The reality of death and suffering stares humanity in the face everyday but some sectors of the church attempt to erase or ignore this fact of life to such an extent that death is segregated from theological and ecclesial discourse and action. Life-giving ministry cannot happen without dealing with death and preaching is a ministry to those who are dying little deaths.

Just as St. Augustine’s tears flowed so freely that they formed a pillow for his heart,¹³⁷ I am suggesting that death, literally and figuratively, is the pillow, the foundation, for Christian proclamation. A denial of death is not only a denial of the spirituals, but a denial of human history. But preaching to the needs of those dealing with death, pain, grief, and loss will have “deep resonances” with the hearers because the sermon will touch their

human experience as it should.¹³⁸ Suffering is a part of the valley of the shadow of death, the valley of dry bones, thus preaching in a valley of dry bones requires that one remembers human tragedy while preaching. *Spiritual* preaching is not sorry for the sorrows of humanity because this is the way life is. As the spirituals did, pain is lamented, thus preaching laments the sorrows without forgetting the joys. The spirituals remind us that death must be dealt with in our preaching and not ignored. Our lives depend on it because, as Shawn Copeland says, “to pass over these sorrows imperils humanity as well as theology.”¹³⁹ Even Christian theological memory includes a God who suffers.

Remembering God’s Story

The second lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that pain is even a part of God’s story. To remember the spirituals reminds us of a God-in-the-flesh, Jesus Christ, who “never said a-mumblin word” as he suffered, bled, and died on a cross. The spirituals intone “Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, surely he died on Calvary.” When one sings the spirituals, one has to deal with the reality of a God who dies because death is no respecter of persons. Even the Christ dies. “Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they nailed him to the tree? Were you there when they pierced him in the side? Were you there when the sun refused to shine? Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?” The mantra of “Were you there?” brings you there, to the place of suffering and pain. It cannot be avoided even when one follows Jesus “lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget thee,”¹⁴⁰ including the memory of suffering and blood.

Our theological memory is washed in the blood of the Lamb. Preaching is not spoiled by tears for at the heart of the proclamation of the Christian church is a bloody death. As I noted earlier, eating the bread and drinking the cup of communion is a proclamation of the Lord’s death. The eucharistic table is a table of death about a “lynched word,” a “lynched black body.”¹⁴¹ Jesus died “gangsta-style,” like all of the crucified peoples of the world. If the cross is our homiletical lens, then catastrophe and tragedy are at the heart of gospel preaching. He was terribly tortured, pierced in his side, nailed in his hands, and had a crown of thorns crushed on his head. He was bruised and broken, hung out to dry and die on an old rugged cross on a hill far away. With this theological lens, preaching has drops of blood all over it as preachers proclaim “a Lamb standing as if it had been

slaughtered” (Rev. 5:6). The wounds of the crucifixion are not erased by the resurrection just as the wounds of centuries of brutality throughout the African diaspora are still present in psychological scars, mental slavery.

The presence of death is everywhere, even on the body of Christ, the lame Lamb. This perspective is not popular with the prosperity-gospel gurus nor with those who want to bleach the blood of Christ squeaky clean from hymnals. Through the spirituals, there is a convergence between slain ancestors and a slain Lamb that illuminates the weighty nature of preaching. This will be problematic to those who desire to praise without acknowledging pain. But the spirituals, musical sermons, affirm that pain is a part of preaching, humanly and divinely speaking. The intersection of cultural and theological memory is blood and death. Without the embrace of death in preaching, sermons are cheap. Preaching is costly because it is a matter of life and death. Death keeps Christianity real and connected to the way *spiritual* life really is. There are no resurrections without crucifixions.

This divine and human suffering, which is an aspect of God’s story, is critical because it is the context of preaching. God enters the world and takes on its suffering, “not just regular suffering of all creatures that grow old and die, but the suffering of the innocent persecuted by the unjust, the suffering of abandonment and seeming failure, the suffering of love offered and refused, the suffering of evil apparently triumphant over good.”¹⁴² To avoid this kind of suffering is to ignore what it means to be human and what it means to serve an incarnate God. If memory is taken seriously for preaching, in the broken black bodies of the bards, one will discern the broken body of God on the cross, the heart of preaching. Christ’s bones were crushed in his Golgotha valley of death and if the heart of preaching is the cross of Christ, the homiletical heart is a broken and bloody body. I can say, like Copeland, “These broken black bodies lie beside the body of the crucified Jesus on the altar of my heart.”¹⁴³ Preachers should have an empathic heart toward death and suffering because of human and divine history; yet, this conversation about preaching and death does not mean that preachers need to bore people to death with their dried-up-like-a-raisin sermons or kill parishioners with judgmental ones. It does mean, however, that in preaching, we remember death and its reality honestly.

Remembering God’s story via the spirituals also points us in more hopeful directions, as later chapters will emphasize. For now it suffices to note that the biblical literacy of the spirituals also suggests a God who

delivers for the purpose of life. The spiritual “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel, Why Not Every Man?” remembers God’s past action to empower individuals in the present. If God did it for Daniel, why not us? The spirituals were a way of affirming God’s present action through affirmation of his past action. Through remembrance, one received a word of promise. In remembering Daniel, in this case, hope is discovered, intertwining memory and hope. Preaching that remembers the spirituals will find this hope in the past for the present, too. As the spiritual notes, “God is a God! God don’t never change! God is a God an’ he always will be God!” What God did in the past, God does in the present because God “don’t never change.” “He’s jus de same today, Jus’ de same today, an’ de God dat lived in Daniel’s time is jus de same today.” This latter spiritual also replaces Daniel with Moses in one of the verses, which points to what has been called the “paradigmatic memory” for preaching—the exodus.¹⁴⁴

Foremost (or at least close to the passion memory) in remembering the spirituals is the memory of the exodus. Indeed, this memory points to the pain of slavery and bondage in Egypt but it also gestures toward the liberatory actions of God who tells Moses to “go down” and tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go.” Thus remembering the spirituals is not solely about death but also life, the life given to us by God. Yet, in our contemporary context, life is not on intravenous medicine because “life” is stressed at least in theory. It is death that is ignored and death is the starting place for preaching hope. Furthermore, appropriating the story of the exodus as their story allows African Americans to view themselves as God’s people, the children of Israel. This memory provides a common history of death and hope. African Americans are a people who possess a collective identity even as revealed through the spirituals. The spirituals show that the experience of death (and life) is a communal embodied experience.

Remembering the Collective Body

The third lesson that the spirituals teach preachers is that tragedy, pain, struggle, and death are felt in the body of Christ, the *entire* community. *Spiritual* preaching includes everyone in the joys and sorrows. The fragrance in the valley of the “very many” dry bones is of an entire “slain” people (Ezek 37:9). Ezekiel paints the picture of a collective death and resurrection. If one suffers, all suffer. If one rejoices, all rejoice. A *people* endured much shame, sorrow, and death in the valley of oppression. Some suffer from cultural amnesia but an antidote to this amnesia is

remembering the spirituals, the musical sermons that represent a miraculous response to the unjust setting of enslavement. Remembering slavery highlights that a group of people, individuals within a community, endured pain, which is why Allen Callahan can say, “Much of slave culture would be the keloids of collective consciousness.”¹⁴⁵ A collective memory of the spirituals reminds preachers that all experience suffering on some level. The scars of the past remain in the present for a people as memories are passed down from one generation to the next. As humans we belong to “communities with histories,”¹⁴⁶ thus so-called individual experience is really a part of a larger communal narrative. The performance of call and response in the spirituals reveals the communal essence of African American communities, that when one suffers, all suffer. All engage in the pain because of what Paul Gilroy calls the “ethics of antiphony” that permeates the black Atlantic.¹⁴⁷

Moreover, in this collective recollection, what is most important is the inclusive nature of community. These old songs carry a community’s hope for freedom and justice. Preaching should occur out of the womb of a community’s ideals. The community, the body of Christ, is the starting and ending point of a sermon so artfully depicted by Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved*, when she writes, “Saying no more, [Baby Suggs] stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while others opened their mouths and gave her the music.”¹⁴⁸ Others provided the ending sermon music for the preacher, Baby Suggs, who herself was a member of this ailing community. In this case, the wounded community finishes the sermon, preaches despite its pain, through its pain and agony. There is a rich intersubjective dynamic in a preaching community that goes beyond the performative dimensions.

As mentioned already, Johnson’s “O Black and Unknown Bards” implies a communal creation of the spirituals with its unknown authors and origins. There are no specifics about the composer or lyricist because they are the community’s sermons. Inherent in these songs is an opposition to an overly individualized contemporary culture that is more concerned with individual prosperity than community uplift and justice in society. The growth and health of a community is more significant than one’s own maximization. The common good is more important than selfish individualism, which is why the unknown ones matter. The black bards created and led songs that were for the common good and not the glorification of the self. They themselves, according to Johnson, were “forgot.” The fifth stanza of “O Black and Unknown Bards” reads:

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
 That from degraded rest and service toil
 The fiery spirit of the seer should call
 These simple children of the sun and soil.
 O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
 You—you alone, of all the long, long line
 Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
 Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

These singers, preachers without portfolio,¹⁴⁹ preach “far better than they knew” because their sermons sing on today for the life of a community. They did not preach for fame or fortune but for the survival of a people. Their lives call into question why preachers preach today. Is it for the fame of a television ministry and marketing privilege that grows one’s followers and monetary offerings? Is it for the bigger car or larger house? Or, is it for ministry to those, like the black bards, who are “gone, forgot, unfamed . . . untaught, unknown, unnamed”? These whose names or faces are not known are the ones who have contributed to the history of the world, music, and preaching. They share homiletical pearls of wisdom. Those who are “unlettered,” the underside, the marginalized, the other, teach preaching quite unlike any seminary or divinity school. Remembering the spirituals causes one to recognize a long line of unknown human beings as a valued part of the community. They, too, teach and preach and call us to listen to the *other*, those at the bottom rung of society. If they are excluded, authentic Christian preaching cannot happen because among the least of these is where Christ, the center of preaching, is found (Matthew 25). In this case, preaching lessons arise from these humble, “unfamed” domains of creativity. To forget them is to forget the roots of preaching and purpose of ministry. Preaching is a living memorial to those whose lives are “forgot” so easily.

The lives of the poor and unfamed, not just the lifestyles of the rich and famous, also should matter to preachers. The preaching bards call us to remember the suffering of those forgotten, unwanted, and unneeded, because they, too, are humans made in the image of God. God’s community is wide and inclusive, challenging our sermons to do the same—to include those who are left out many times and bring the stories of the marginalized into the larger relational story of humanity and God. To talk about “dry bones” one has to engage those suffering most in society. The weak and powerless are foundational to an understanding of preaching that

finds its power in a device of human torture, a cross. Those “gone” before have much to teach modern-day preachers who desire greatness because of a “drum major instinct.”¹⁵⁰ The unknown and forgotten bards are great because they respect the least of these in the world and call preachers to minister to them, rather than blessing the corrupt empire of oppression that demonizes them. This preaching legacy of a community of have-nots leads one to resist the empires that dehumanize the poor, the jobless, and the homeless, the forgotten in society. Preaching in this communal tradition aims to help the listener re-member the human community by including all humans into this collective presence in the world. To forget the “forgot” is to forget what preaching is all about and who is at the heart of the gospel—an executed God who was on crucified lockdown.

The spirituals help preachers remember the most vulnerable among us so that no one would ever say, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21), because each member of the human community is indispensable, even if they are unknown. One must go back to the place of death (e.g., slavery) in order to excavate life, to remember the past for the present and future, to make the unknown homiletically known to today’s proclaimers of the gospel. The spirituals possess a wealth of homiletical wisdom that has not been tapped into as of yet, and the teachers’ names are not even known. Moreover, they are “untaught” teachers without an enlightenment educational pedigree, but they are illumined by the Spirit, “the fiery spirit of the seer.” Some so-called sophisticated preachers may want to ignore them because they were illiterate, ignorant, nonseminary-educated, premodern preaching bards; yet, Morrison sheds light on this when she talks about reading to her grandmother:

And I have suspected, more often than not, that I *know* more than she did, that I *know* more than my grandfather and my great-grandmother did, but I also know that I’m no wiser than they were. And whenever I have tried earnestly to diminish their vision and prove to myself that I know more, and when I have tried to speculate on their interior life and match it up with my own, I have been overwhelmed every time by the richness of theirs compared to my own.¹⁵¹

The wisdom of the *spiritual* preachers is unmatched, though some may think otherwise. They expand notions of community and preaching and remind us of the humble roots of the gospel in the face of economically exploitative preaching practices. At their wellsprings of knowledge and at the altar of their souls, preachers may drink and bow to learn what one did

not know or could not know about preaching without them. These voices preach from the past with melodies that should haunt our homiletical memory. They haunt homiletics because they call contemporary preachers to reclaim the weightiness of the call to preach.

Remembering the Weight of Preaching

The fourth lesson from the spirituals that preachers can learn is that the ministry of preaching is a matter of life and death. In other words, it is a weighty task. For the bards, they sang and preached to fight for life in the domain of death. Words were weapons of freedom and dignity. Just the “legacy of inhumanity”¹⁵² that shapes these musical sermons should be enough to add weight to the task of preaching. To know that there was not “anything humorous”¹⁵³ about the nature or performance of the spirituals requires preachers to take preaching seriously. Preaching is not the latest joke to be told or funny story to be imagined or a hysterical shout to be heard. Remembering the spirituals reveals that there is much more at stake behind the sacred desk, the pulpit. Life and death are in the balance. Preaching as a form of resistance to deathly powers and a lifeline to an enslaved community reclaims the urgent impulse of proclamation. Because of the tremendous need of humanity, preaching requires a sense of urgency and passionate conviction that modern-day resurrections can arise from crucifixions, and there is healing for brokenness and strength for the weak. This kind of transformation will not come from the newest Facebook fad, fastest technological gadget, or the fanciest interactive church website, but from God. Life and wholeness from death and brokenness is God’s specialty.

Dealing with a context of death requires God’s presence and power. Preaching powered by the Holy Spirit is a miracle just like the spirituals, adding divine weight to this ministry of hope. Yet, many innovative preachers underestimate the power of God through words, thus they experiment with “fresh” ways of preaching that are powerless because they neglect to plug into the power of God. If preaching’s purpose is to initiate life, bring justice, and affirm the dignity of all people, something more than a PowerPoint projection or a clever turn of phrase in a sermon is needed. The weight of preaching suggested by the spirituals indicates that God is needed and God is actually the one who provides preaching with the most weight. As Samuel Proctor says, “We deal with the deep center of human existence and the extreme outer perimeter. We are concerned with things

that are ultimate.”¹⁵⁴ God is ultimate and preachers who proclaim the gospel discern and name the eternal in our private and public affairs, life in the domain of little deaths. Even when facing the gallows of death, one could sing of the ever-present God, “Over my head, I hear music in the air. . . . There must be a God somewhere.” The spirituals propel this notion of preaching and this should be affirmed because preachers “traverse terrain having to do with life and death.”¹⁵⁵

The spirituals challenge nonchalant, casual preaching in which nothing appears to be at stake, as if God will not be present in and through sermons. This kind of preaching does not recognize that life and death are in the power of the homiletical tongue. It ignores the *spiritual* foundation of preaching that demonstrates the weightiness of proclamation. Lightweight preaching is easily blown away by the slightest breeze of struggle into the sea of forgetfulness, leaving churches searching for other innovative ways to feed people. The real, weighty substance of the Bread of Life is absent. Lightweight sermons may tickle the ears of the congregation but will not reach the depths of their hearts nor usher Christ into their lives because there is no costly blood flowing through the preacher’s homiletical veins, the blood of the cross. The spirituals want preachers to gain weight, the conviction that preaching is a matter of life and death in which everything is at stake.

Remembering the spirituals calls us to not repeat the past of human oppression but to preach in solidarity with the oppressed. Weighty preaching requires that the preacher put everything on the line for others, even his or her own body and life. Preaching necessitates a holistic approach not only to resist the powers of death but to help others discern “eternity bending low all around us.”¹⁵⁶ The weight of preaching resides at the intersection of eternity and humanity, divinely authorized for some human good. The spirituals help us to reclaim this view of preaching the gospel. But to gain weight in our preaching, one must not be afraid or hesitant to remember the past, for there is much to be learned from it, as the spirituals reveal.

As noted earlier, there are various reasons why people do not want to remember the past. Some take the view of Paul D, in *Beloved*, who tells Sethe, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody, we need some kind of tomorrow.”¹⁵⁷ The past has been too painful and one does not want to relive or remain in the past through memory because memory keeps the past alive. Others like Fred Shuttlesworth, Baptist minister and former leader of Southern Christian Leadership Conference, believe, “If you don’t tell it like it was, it can never be as it ought to be.”¹⁵⁸ For him, truthful recounting of the past is the pathway toward a better future. There

is an obvious tension about remembering the past of death and suffering and this should not be taken lightly. But, “remembering is the preacher’s *duty*.”¹⁵⁹ In fact, “the entire substance of Christianity, since Christ has not reappeared on earth, consists in the remembrance of his life and teachings.”¹⁶⁰ If a preacher celebrates forgetting the past, this is something to be lamented because in that forgetting, the gospel story itself will be forgotten. Fred Craddock names remembering as essential for the ministry of preaching when he says, “If you’re too young to remember, then you’re not old enough to preach.”¹⁶¹ Craddock is talking about the spiritual maturity of a preacher. Embracing memory as critical to the practice represents how well one is prepared or not to preach.

Memory not only shapes the identity of a community but also of preachers.¹⁶² It affects not only what one does in sermons but who one is in living the sermon. A forgetful preacher might likely neglect the valley of dry bones that has wedged its path throughout past and present human history. The exodus and the passion of Christ may have no impact on this kind of preacher because they have forgotten the significance of those events and do not realize their critical presence even in the spirituals. Human tragedy and death, God’s story of death, the forgotten ones in the human community, and the weighty nature of preaching, may be overlooked for lighter and brighter sermonic possibilities; but, to re-member the future of the church and preaching, one must remember the past depicted by the spirituals. “Memory is not only a source of information about the past but also a force in creating the future.”¹⁶³ As a force, “it breaks into the present and gains a new lease on life.”¹⁶⁴ Remembering (death) provides life in the present and for the future. This is a “hermeneutics of memory”¹⁶⁵ that actually leads to what I will call the “hermeneutics of hope” in chapter 4. To remember the dismembered is to re-member the future of preaching in the valley of dry bones. Memory funds Christian preaching.

A preacher remembers “the days when hope unborn had died” in order to prevent another miscarriage of hope. Preaching midwifes hope into the world, and when it is born it will not disappoint (Rom. 5:5). However, “Hope depends upon living memory made palpable.”¹⁶⁶ This link between hope and the memory of death, specifically, will become more obvious in the next chapter through a discussion of the relationship between death and hope in the spirituals.