

INTRODUCTION

In the Middle of a Valley

The Need of Preaching

*. . . he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down
in the middle of a valley . . .*

—EZEK. 37:1

Go down in de lonesome valley, To meet my Jesus dere.

—TRADITIONAL

Much of the writing of this book took place with a clear view of death. Through the large glass windows of the Princeton Public Library on Paul Robeson Place in Princeton, New Jersey, I gazed at the Princeton Cemetery of the Nassau Presbyterian Church where the “many thousand gone” rested. I felt that to write about preaching and death, I had to have enough courage to face death regularly. Thus I chose to reflect on preaching and its relationship to death and hope while looking at the tombstones of a great cloud of witnesses. In this cemetery, many well-known persons such as Jonathan Edwards lie alongside countless

others whose names are not famous, though they, too, struggled in the fight against death.

To look at the vast impact of death symbolized in this cemetery challenged me to consider whether I really believed in the resurrection of the dead and preaching resurrection hope. Is there any hope among death's ashes? Through those library windows, I saw death's sting and the grave's apparent victory. I chose to write about preaching, death, and hope in the face of death because I knew that if I was not ready to face death, I was not ready to preach life and hope or even ready to discuss it. Facing death taught me about the life of the ministry of preaching. John Witvliet puts it this way: "For the living, there is no better antidote to arrogant, sloppy living than intentional visits to a funeral home, a walk through a cemetery, or attendance at a funeral. Rule number one for thoughtful living: Do not miss a funeral."¹ Likewise, an antidote to sloppy preaching and a key rule for thoughtful preaching is to face the reality of death daily. This means preaching must entail pain and suffering even though this is not popular with numerous Christians who only want their souls massaged and not strengthened, resulting in a type of preaching that promotes profits for speaker and listener (most certainly for the preachers) and a particular theological school of thought controlling the homiletical airwaves.

"Candy" Theology in Contemporary Preaching

Preaching has become a big business in a good deal of today's Christendom. Glamour and glitz glare through various media forms as some preachers pimp the gospel for financial profits. When high-tech marketing or branding of a certain type of spiritual beauty dominates, then "an aesthetic of prosperity becomes an ethic of prosperity."² In this spiritual marketing strategy, the flaunting of one's material wealth and physical health is a validation of the Christian faith. This so-called prosperity gospel, which has become an important part of North American Christianity, is a version of consumer culture. Thus it is believed that the more one possesses materially, the more it is obvious that one is blessed by God and is doing God's will. Because of this lens of prosperity, one continually asks for more to get more. It is a love affair with more. Marvin McMickle observes in a critical way that, in prosperity-gospel churches, "every passage of scripture [serves] as a passport to a bigger house, a larger car, or an expanding bank account."³ He questions "the apparent celebration of the exorbitant and self-indulgent lifestyle that is avidly pursued by an increasing number

of preachers in America, often as a result of milking and bilking their congregations through some prosperity gospel scheme.”⁴ McMickle is not alone in his criticism. Robert Franklin declares that the implicit muting of prophetic ministry by the proclamation of prosperity has helped to create a “crisis in the village.” He writes, “If most black preachers—and other preachers for that matter—are preoccupied with pursuing the ‘bling-bling’ life of conspicuous consumption, then poor people are in big trouble.”⁵ I would add that not just poor people, but anyone experiencing existential pain and suffering on any level is in big trouble.

This theme of prosperity threaded through some preaching also finds its way in the music ministries of many of these congregations such that they emphasize “praise and worship” or celebration without likewise acknowledging lament and death in real life, what Gordon Lathrop calls “little deaths.”⁶ “Little deaths” foreshadow our last death and reveal how we are dying on a regular basis even in the midst of our living. These little deaths may be physical sickness or disabilities, moments of transition and loss, failures, manifestations of violence, experiences and corrupt systems of injustices, and the like. These deaths occur daily to demonstrate that we are dying a slow death. In many ways, this book, in discussing death, will have in mind these “little deaths” while not ignoring the “big” death at the end of life.⁷

Prosperity preaching seems not to take any type of death seriously as a crucial component of the Christian life. This could be because the prosperity gospel promotes a kind of “pain-free religious experience,” according to Stephanie Mitchem.⁸ Within its spiritual purview, pain is not a part of prosperity. Critiquing this camp of Christendom, Melissa Harris-Lacewell notes that “Christ is an investment strategy and a personal life coach whose power can be accessed by believers to improve their finances, protect their families, strengthen their faith, and achieve personal authenticity.”⁹ The power of Christ is accessed for prosperity purposes. There is no place for pain in this gospel strategy. This approach to the Christian faith is not surprising when one considers the core beliefs and practices of a key wing of the prosperity gospel, the Word of Faith movement. At the core of this movement is knowing who you are in Christ, positive confession or mental attitude, and emphasis on material prosperity and wealth and physical health.¹⁰

Despite the numerous critiques of prosperity preaching, it is still the case that these preachers, in some way, answer a longing of many African Americans and others. I say this not to endorse this “pain-free” preaching

enterprise but to highlight the complexities that are involved. For a people who have been disenfranchised economically and socially for centuries, prosperity preaching can be appealing. It offers a message of personal and individual empowerment for those who desire upward mobility in society. The prosperity message can be viewed as an “ideology of socioeconomic transition”¹¹ that meets the longing of many who want to achieve success and social acceptance. This “spirituality of longing” finds its answer in “prosperity as realized spirituality,” the concretization of a faith rooted in overcoming social rejection by accumulating wealth.¹² Monetary cash flow is implied to be that which can fill spiritual emptiness and quiet the longing in a hurting people. The problem with this approach is the perception that God is a Santa Claus delivering monetary gifts to consuming children who always want more than they have. In addition, the biblical witness asserts that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10), suggesting that prosperity preaching may be leading some Christians down the wrong path.

In a prosperity-driven ecclesial environment, whenever the community gathers it is primarily as a means toward greater health and wealth, to get more. “Mo’ money, mo’ money, mo’ money” takes on new religious meaning in this setting. But the obvious tension with all of this is that this prosperity gospel appears to meet the needs of people in the pews, at least on the surface. One cannot deny that masses of people adhere to the prosperity gospel; its permeating presence on different media outlets evidences its popularity. Prosperity proclamation has a huge following and those who subscribe to this message should not be castigated for it. After all, who would not want “Your Best Life Now”¹³ in this world when all one has possibly known is suffering? As Jonathan Walton says, “Though in my mind God offered liberation from racial and gender injustice and capitalist exploitation, I saw other preachers seemingly get further with a Jesus who provided the keys to the Kingdom in the form of a four-bedroom house and a Mercedes-Benz.”¹⁴ For have-nots, to finally have something, especially in the way just described, could be perceived as a divinely sanctioned physical blessing. The issue becomes what it means to “get further” with Jesus, that is, what it means to live the life of Christian discipleship, including the content of our proclamation.

Popular prosperity Christianity is just that, popular, partly because of what has been called “teleconditioning.”¹⁵ This is where one’s Christian faith is conditioned by what is viewed through television and the Internet. The perceived prosperity of the preachers validates their message. As

noted, the aesthetic leads to an ethic of prosperity that becomes the heart of the adhered-to gospel. In a 2006 *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* interview, legendary prince of the pulpit Gardner Taylor was asked to assess the current preaching scene. What he says is illuminating for this book's conversation:

there is now a tendency, I think, more than ever, to make [preaching] a kind of Sunday Chamber of Commerce exercise—motivational speaking, which has its place but is not the Gospel. It becomes a kind of opium, if opium is a stimulant, for people, which gives them often a false notion of what life is all about. I think much of contemporary preaching does not prepare people for the inevitable crises of life. When we talk constantly about prosperity, well, life is not constantly prosperity. It has adversity and difficulties, and if one is trained, conditioned to see only the bright side of things, then one is not prepared for living in this world.

. . . Of course, people want to hear it, because candy is a very pleasant thing. . . . When [my daughter] was a little girl, I suppose we could have fed her candy morning, noon, and night, and she would have taken it morning, noon—and enjoyed it. Soon she would have had no teeth, and soon we would have had no daughter, I think, because candy is wonderful. I love it, but one needs in one's diet more than candy.¹⁶

Taylor's notion that a prosperity-only message is like "candy" suggests that this type of theology and preaching is initially sweet to the taste, a "pleasant thing," but in the end it is detrimental because life is not just about the "bright side of things." If one chews on this prosperity message long enough, one will end up with "no teeth" because "one needs in one's diet more than candy." Prosperity preaching may be sweet like a candy cane at first but it will eventually be sour for the soul and bad for one's spiritual teeth and nerve. "Candy" homiletical theology does not sustain people's lives in the end because it does not take into consideration "what life is all about." The hardships and pain of life tend to be muted in this bright, sunny gospel. It is a false, distorted picture of the gospel if death and sorrow are ignored. Prosperity preaching does not engage the valleys of life truthfully but only "name and claim" the mountaintops of the high life. Yet in the valley of the shadow of death, God can also be found. "Thou art with me," the psalmist says (Psalm 23, KJV). Furthermore, God may even

be the one who leads us to the valley, the valley of dry bones, death (Ezek. 37). The prosperity gospel proclaims a hope but its version of hope erases death. This, in fact, is not hope at all, because Christian hope is not hope without death. Real hope is discovered in the midst of death, created on the anvil of adversity.

Denying Death in a Context of Death

One of the major flaws of prosperity preaching is its attempt to proclaim hope while avoiding or denying death. To follow Jesus Christ through our Christian preaching does not equate to proclaiming bigger and better material goods; rather, it involves taking up crosses and following him in his death and life. Preaching entails truthfulness about his crucifixion and resurrection, his death and life, and the hope found in him. To follow Jesus through our preaching means that one must take suffering seriously. Thus one cannot preach prosperity hope without being honest about human pain and agony, about “little deaths.” I do not aim to denigrate this prosperity-gospel segment of the church but I do want to highlight what I think is a huge theological hole in this form of proclamation and any other contemporary approach to preaching that avoids dealing with death substantively.

Within prosperity-gospel teaching, pain of varied kinds is deemed a problem, stemming from a person’s lack of faith or the devil. Shayne Lee notes, “Word-of-faith teaching asserts that Christians have the power to control their physical well-being and financial fortunes through their faith. . . . However, God’s ‘hands are tied’ from blessing many Christians who lack faith and misappropriate biblical principles, thus explaining why all Christians are not experiencing prosperous and healthy lives.”¹⁷ Wealth and health are the proper inheritance for God’s children. If this material and physical prosperity are absent, it is the individual’s fault in some way or the devil is at work. The realization of systemic sin through structures that keep the poor poor and others oppressed is not even acknowledged. There is a clear disregard for or ignorance of what Chuck Campbell calls the “powers of death.”¹⁸ Rather, positive confession and right faith with proper handling of the Scriptures is the right equation to win the prosperity lotto. Some do see a “glimmer of hope”¹⁹ in this type of gospel preaching; but, at the same time, one of the harshest criticisms of this doctrine is how it implies the condemnation of those who are not healthy and wealthy. Sometimes, tornados blow through the valley of life and it is no one’s fault

or due to a lack of faith. Sickness and suffering come as a part of what it means to be human in a broken world. This is often denied in a pain-free preaching approach. The perceived glimmer of hope through prosperity preaching is actually a false sense of hope because of its disconnection from the crucible of life. Christian hope grows within and without of the crucible of death. Any preaching that denies death will ultimately be hopeless because it does not engage earthly realities.

Even those who feed their souls through prosperity preaching discover sometimes that a fuller gospel should be proclaimed. Marla Frederick interviewed African American women who watch prosperity televangelists and discovered a form of discontentment among them. In one case, she states, “While popular television ministers might boast of multimillion dollar homes, women in the viewing audience . . . often must negotiate their interpretations of prosperity against the limited resources of their communities.”²⁰ The negotiation happens because the prosperity preachers preach a gospel that is detached from “little deaths,” our human reality that includes such things as limited resources. In another interview, one woman announces her discontentment with Creflo Dollar’s message:

You know every time I hear him, it’s the same thing. . . . You know sometimes you need to hear something more than prosperity. You know you’re going through some things and there’s some other things that you’re dealing with in your life. . . . You know, something spiritual. . . . You know, not just always prospering. So, that’s why I stopped listening to him. . . . But, it’s not that I didn’t like his ministry. It’s just that at different times in your life you need other Word coming forth.²¹

What this woman reveals is the conflict between the preached word and her life. Basically, a need was not being met through the prosperity message. There was a divide between her Christian life and the Christian life that was preached because, as she acknowledges, one goes “through some things.” Life is “not just always prospering.” “Sometimes you need to hear something more than prosperity.” Why? It is because human life includes pain and suffering, too, and the prosperity gospel denies their role in Christian discipleship, viewing them as something to be ignored or denied. It is at least a “masking of mortality”²² and human struggle. Little deaths are relegated as part of human faithlessness or blamed as the devil’s doing. I believe this is the case because preachers in this context do not know what else to say nor does their theological framework allow for the

ways in which death is a part of life. Tom Long claims in relation to funerals that “Americans are no longer sure what to do with our dead.”²³ This ambiguity over or discomfort with the dead is also an indication about how in our preaching we do not know what to do with the dying present in our everyday living, the little deaths. What is clear is that the prosperity homiletical approach is inadequate to meet the needs of struggling individuals and communities because human experience includes tough realities for many. Life in the middle of a valley reveals that death is all around. Preaching that ignores this will eventually fail and not do the ministry it was commissioned to do.

Preaching has many aims, one of which is to minister to the felt needs of people.²⁴ The world is brewing with ongoing trouble—war, famine, genocide, governmental corruption, economic instability, to name a few. To ignore these expressions of death is to be homiletically blind and irrelevant. In African American communities alone, the existential devastation is vast. There are megachurches that preach a mini-gospel at times, one that promotes a feel-good religion. Yet the people in the pews and in the surrounding communities are not always feeling good because that is not the earthly reality. As McMickle observes, there are numerous black congregations that are located in neighborhoods resembling “bombed-out war zones.”²⁵ Drugs, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, domestic violence, and rising poverty rates among children pervade many urban communities.

I preach monthly at a Presbyterian church in Newark, New Jersey. The building is large but the congregation is small. This is a church whose “glory days” have blown away in the wind of a changing demographic in that particular community. The good ol’ days of economic prosperity and social safety in the neighborhood have passed. This church and neighborhood are in transition and are struggling to survive. In this mostly African American and Latino/a neighborhood, “little deaths” are all around as police sirens sound during many sermons. What kind of power would a prosperity gospel have in this setting without dealing with the concrete realities in that community? Death stares at this congregation in the form of a crack house across the street, while preachers declare the cross of Christ faithfully. In the proclamation of the cross, one has to name human pain, even the agony of Christ. This naming is important to overcoming not only the “crisis in the village” but the “crisis in the pulpit.” Robert Franklin argues that “leaders who are unaware of, or uncomfortable with engaging and addressing, the pain of the people are unlikely to mobilize the power of the people.”²⁶ Individuals should be mobilized for public service

in society, not for personal gain and prosperity. Public service is vital as an outcome of life-giving preaching, especially in light of existential suffering in black communities and other segments of the global society. But this service stems from preachers truthfully naming the realities of death.

In light of the heartbreaking realities, these “specters of death,”²⁷ it is preposterous that some preachers can separate the gospel from the presence of death in the world as a way of avoiding it in the pulpit. Preaching itself is a part of a larger liturgical framework permeated by images and symbols of death. Through the rite of baptism, we die and rise with Christ (Rom. 6:4-5). Baptism is life but it is also a death. Baptism by immersion depicts this well as a new convert is submerged, buried, under the water, and then raised out of the water. Likewise, communion is a table of death and life. In the words of the apostle Paul, “for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). The Eucharist proclaims a death. At the heart of Christian worship is death. This is unavoidable, though many times not accented or recognized. As Witvliet writes, “We all live under a death sentence.”²⁸ This is revealed through our liturgies. But this should not be a shock because Christianity is about a Jewish man who died and eventually conquered death. More will be said about this later; for now, it suffices to uncover the stench of death that permeates the communal worship in which preaching happens.

Furthermore, various historical accounts in which literal deaths transpired during a worship experience poignantly demonstrate the fusion of death and worship. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated while he presided at the Eucharist. The founder of the Taizé community in France, Brother Roger, was fatally stabbed to death by a mentally ill woman during a prayer service; his hospitality killed him. Alberta King, the mother of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., had her life stolen by a sniper’s bullet while playing smooth harmonies on the Hammond organ at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. Corporate worship can be bloody, figuratively or literally, as these accounts show, but many times in the North American context, worship, including preaching, is sanitized and highly commercialized, as in the case of prosperity ministries and other consumer-oriented groups. Death is muted and even quarantined from the worship experience.

However, these existential and liturgical realities demonstrate that death is prominent as a context for preaching. Death has historically been denied in culture and “alienated from the normal compass of daily experience.”²⁹ Preachers have followed this trajectory by alienating death and

anything that might have its smell from sermons—what might be called the homiletical quarantining of death. But preaching that ignores death is irresponsible, a theological lie, and unable to declare real hope. It is, in fact, Spirit-less preaching. If this approach to preaching is theologically faulty, what then does it mean to preach Christian hope in a meaningful way? It means that one proclaims death.

In order to experience life, resurrection, or hope, one must go through death. In fact, the Spirit leads preachers to a milieu of death each Sunday in order to proclaim a word of life that ultimately breathes hope into the lives of people. Yet, in many contemporary churches, some preachers avoid dealing with death because they do not realize its vital connection to the substance of Christian hope. Because of this denial of death, we are left with sermons that possess a weak pneumatology and are fundamentally hopeless.

Telling the Gospel Truth

The purpose of this book is to remedy some of the theological and homiletical shortcomings in contemporary preaching by probing the concept of death as a critical aspect of the meaning of Christian hope. Preaching hope is inadequate without taking death seriously. Not only is death the context for preaching hope, but hope is generated by experiencing death through the Spirit who is the ultimate source of hope. Death is placed in the foreground not to celebrate death but to accentuate the resilient power of life and hope. By affirming death as necessary for preaching Christian hope, I imply that giving hope is a key, if not one of the most important, purpose of preaching. Interestingly, in one book about “key terms in homiletics”³⁰ and in another about “the purposes of preaching,”³¹ the theme of hope is missing. Maybe this signals how hopeless Christian preaching has become. This is not to suggest that no one discusses hope in preaching, as some do, but even these treatments are not sustained and lack substantive explorations that integrate death into the conceptualization of hope. In addition, homiletical literature that reflects on death and preaching is limited and much of what is written has only to do with funerals or Christology.³² These are important, yet this book not only attempts to bridge death and hope in constructive ways but asserts that death is more than an event at the end of someone’s life; death is a part of life as “little deaths,” as discussed above. This study endeavors to be a sustained treatment of the relationship of death and hope in preaching

and it does so by drawing on African American resources in particular, namely the spirituals, of which I will soon say more.

One could frame this vital conversation in the wake of Japan's 2011 tsunami or Haiti's 2010 earthquake and ask, "What does it mean to preach amid the rubble?" or "How can one preach in devastating situations?" Of course, many communities and individuals have not experienced any earthquakes or tsunamis in their entire existence, and especially not with such an aftermath as in Haiti, for example—sidewalk graves, dead bodies in the streets, people setting up home on the street, mothers weeping and gnashing teeth over lost children, or being trapped under a slab of cement from a collapsed building. However, it is possible that someone's life in any congregation is in shambles because a metaphoric earthquake has hit their life, making it a valley of dry bones. Many people in the pews are in the middle of their own valleys for various reasons.

In a church where I once served as a pastor, there was a woman named Rose. Rose and I sat in a restaurant to share a meal together. She told me about her relationship with her husband and how he had abused her and her daughter for many years and yet she remained married to him. At one point in the conversation, after hearing the horrific stories and seeing the tears of pain drop from her face, I said to her, "That's not living." Rose said, "Luke, I died a long time ago." She was a part of the walking dead. Her situation represents many parishioners who are already dead or are dying in various ways. People like Rose come every Sunday to church for a word from the Lord. They are dead and are in need of resurrection. Preaching that engages death as a part of preaching hope will reclaim preaching, in the words of James Forbes, as a "ministry of raising the dead."³³ To preach resurrection, we must acknowledge the presence of death, which is what envelops our lives. The resurrection of Christ implies that resurrection "preaching bears in its own fiber a note of victory."³⁴ There is the hope of the resurrection *and* the death of the crucifixion. But the hope arises out of the death. This is why some refer to the ministry of preaching as a "burdensome joy."³⁵ The acknowledgment of death in life is the burden along with the embrace of the responsibility of the call to preach, but joy comes when resurrection life overwhelms death with the realization that God can use feeble human gifts to raise others to newness of life. The gospel includes both dying and living, death and hope. Perhaps this is what leads Gardner Taylor to declare that the preacher's message "involves issues nothing less than those of life and death."³⁶

To ascertain the pervasiveness of death in life, even the walking dead, means that preachers have the responsibility to proclaim “the whole counsel of God,”³⁷ the whole truth of the gospel. A key aspect of the truth is that “Death is something we cannot elude.”³⁸ Kirk Byron Jones reminds us that even “Calvary was not a hoax,” thus sometimes preaching becomes “blues preaching,”³⁹ or what I have called elsewhere “sermonic lament.”⁴⁰ As an aspect of preaching, the blues means that one proclaims the “gospel as tragedy.” Frederick Buechner says that “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.”⁴¹ Good news is not the totality of the gospel; thus to tell the whole gospel truth one must preach the bad news, too. The bad news is the suffering and pain experienced by humanity, the little deaths. Preaching this would hopefully meet the needs of many listeners.

In a 1938 interview, Henry Baker, an ex-slave, provides insight into effective preaching based on his advice to preachers of his day. He says, “I talks ter de preachers en says dat all ‘nominations gottes git togedder en center on one thing en dat is de suffering uv de people, ‘gardless uv whut nomination or whether dey is even in de church.”⁴² Baker encourages preachers to focus on the suffering of people and not avoid it as if it does not exist. He wants preachers to be truthful about reality, about the gospel. Suffering is part of the gospel truth. To preach about it may not be comfortable or a delight but, as Mitchem reminds us, “a religion constructed for one’s physical comfort ultimately does not assist spiritual maturity . . .”⁴³ Preaching the whole counsel of God will nurture a mature spiritual life rather than a spirituality that cannot handle death and attempts to hide it. Preaching should not “keep [death] behind a curtain or locked in a closet”⁴⁴ any longer but expose its nature in all of its forms. This can be difficult in a death-denying culture in which “Death is not allowed to offer its body in public except through a surreptition.”⁴⁵ By removing the veil over death in our world and naming it, one might actually move closer to preaching hope, for the only way to preach Christian hope is by proclaiming death. This is how one tells the truth of the gospel, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* presents a confrontation between Macon Dead and his son Milkman, where Macon says, “You a big man now, but big ain’t nearly enough. You have to be a whole man. And if you want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth.”⁴⁶ These words speak deeply to the task of preachers. It is not enough to be a big-name preacher riding in a Bentley. The church needs whole preachers and if one wants to be a whole preacher “you have to deal with the whole

truth.” The whole gospel truth is that life is real but so is death and death is the context out of which hope grows. Through this study, I will argue that preaching in the Spirit means proclaiming death as an avenue toward hope. In short, no death, no hope. That is the truth I attempt to uncover in this book.

Exploring the Gospel Truth

Spirituals as Primary Source

To assist in the process of telling the gospel truth, I will engage homiletical theory, theology, ethnomusicology, and biblical studies, but there are two important resources that will be particularly helpful in this study. The first are the African American spirituals. Because of the interface of death, hope, and the Spirit, themes very much present in the spirituals, in this study I will explore these historical and cultural musical “sermons” produced in the midst of death as a vital resource for preaching Christian hope. I will examine the history and theology of the spirituals through textual analysis primarily but also be sensitive to their musical soundscape. One could call this whole project a homiletical study of the spirituals.

Several books provide insight into the theological themes of the spirituals, while others are historical or musicological studies. Many of these have been resources for this book, but none provide a homiletical lens. Viewing the spirituals as musical sermons and integrating the spirituals as a significant theological and cultural resource for contemporary preaching makes a distinct contribution to homiletics. No work on preaching explores the spirituals in any substantive fashion with the aim of enhancing the theory and practice of preaching despite the rich historical link between intoned preaching and the spirituals. Thus I hope much fruit will be born from this work.

In particular for this book about preaching, death, and hope, the spirituals are important because the reality of death permeates them. Unlike those who engage death at a distance or not at all, the creators of the spirituals had “immediate, inescapable, dramatic” contact with the dead.⁴⁷ These musical sermons were born out of deathly experiences of slavery. Thus a conversation about preaching, death, and hope will be served well by their inclusion. Homiletical lessons about death and hope can be learned from the spirituals. The presence of death is obvious in these songs but so is hope and life, even if simply represented in the phenomenon of singing

itself. In his classic text *Black Song*, John Lovell notes, “. . . the African blood has always sung.”⁴⁸ This singing was a sign of life within environs of death. Despite the blatant hardships, the “haunting overtones”⁴⁹ of life and hope rang out. Preachers will do well to pay attention to these songs that preach.

Furthermore, the spirituals provide an opportunity to use African American cultural resources to teach all preachers about preaching. The spirituals may be rightly poised to do this because, as Lovell says, they “dug deep into the universal human heart.”⁵⁰ They are particular yet speak universally out of that specific setting about the human experience. There is something for everyone in these songs. They are, as W. E. B. Du Bois asserts, the “rhythmic cry of the slave” and “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas.” Furthermore, he states that the spiritual “still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”⁵¹ Though the spirituals are, in the words of James Earl Massey, the “earliest documented worldview of African American spirituality,”⁵² they resonate with many people in a variety of cultural contexts. Therefore, this turn to the past for the present is a turn for all preachers who desire to preach Christian hope in a more faithful, robust, and *spiritual* manner.

There have been many debates about the origins of the spirituals and their influences, namely, whether they are imitations of European songs or fully African.⁵³ This project is not interested in that historical debate but is concerned with the fact that the spirituals tell the gospel truth and can help our preaching tell that truth more faithfully and honestly. The spirituals transgress time, thus they are fruitful for contemporary homiletical reflection. In addition, despite the popularization of the spirituals by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and Hampton Institute Singers through their public concert tours in the past and present, this study attempts to explore the spirituals and imagine their performance from the rugged vantage point of their original context, enslavement and death.⁵⁴ Of course, one cannot travel back in time to be in that setting to grasp the original “mood.”⁵⁵ But what is clear is that these songs were not art music or art for art’s sake; they were a matter of life and death created by the unknown black bards.⁵⁶ James Weldon Johnson says the bards were “unfamed . . . untaught, unknown, unnamed.”⁵⁷ This book turns to the so-called unlettered black bards for pearls of homiletical wisdom.

Valley of Dry Bones as Metaphor

In conjunction with the primary sources of the spirituals, the biblical story of the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 will be another important literary resource for this study on preaching, death, and hope. Ezekiel and the vision of the valley of dry bones has been an important rhetorical trope throughout African American musical and sermonic history. Henry Louis Gates refers to this story as one of the “canonical narratives” within African American experience.⁵⁸ Its presence is particularly strong in the history of the practice of black preaching. Allen Calhahan notes, “The biblical vision of the valley of bleached bones became a venerable image in African-American preaching.”⁵⁹ The truth of this is affirmed in the preface to James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*, where he talks about folk sermons that were slightly modified as they were passed on “from preacher to preacher and from locality to locality.” One such sermon was “The Valley of Dry Bones” based on Ezekiel 37.⁶⁰ This sermonic tradition of a “valley of dry bones” is evident in the preaching of numerous black preachers.⁶¹

It is obvious from a reading of homiletical history that Ezekiel and the vision of the valley of dry bones has been a sermonic trope in African American settings. This biblical trope has also been present in African American music and other art forms as well. Probably most popular is the spiritual “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones,” which focuses on the bones connecting to one another. In addition, Oscar Micheaux’s 1925 silent movie *Body and Soul* depicts Paul Robeson as a preacher who proclaims a sermon about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones, “Dry Bones in the Valley.” The intertitle says that this sermon “is a sermon which is every black preacher’s ambition,”⁶² confirming again the particular prominence of this biblical narrative in preaching. But even certain plays incorporate this biblical trope in their story lines, as August Wilson does in his play *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, though he uses the watery grave of the Middle Passage instead of the valley of Ezekiel.⁶³ Nonetheless, this biblical story looms large in various cultural productions within African American contexts.

Perhaps this is not surprising due to the prominent theme of exile in Ezekiel 37, a theme that is particularly relevant for African Americans. In his commentary on the book of Ezekiel, Dexter Callender writes, “The conditions of Jerusalem’s deported were different, given that they were largely people of means whose experience was not that of chattel slavery and who retained some control of their economic destiny. . . . Still, their

tradition of exile as emblematic of their experience resonated with surviving victims of the African slave trade, who engaged it in a variety of ways.⁶⁴ The black experience in the Americas can be described as exilic. Callahan writes, “Ezekiel’s wind-swept valley continues to remind slavery’s children of their exile. They continue to be strangers in a strange land. And they continue to be haunted by the bones.”⁶⁵

Another reason this biblical vision of the valley of dry bones is so prevalent in African American culture historically could be due to the sense that God was experienced through the Bible. As Callahan suggests, “The oracle of God’s reviving spirit does not merely recount an event of divine presence: the words of the text now signify that presence. Ezekiel’s luminous text is the verbal image and likeness of God.” This biblical vision is “iconic.”⁶⁶ For African Americans, Ezekiel 37 has great importance, especially sermonically, as shown. This trope has been viewed as their experience in exile while still affirming the presence of God in their lives, even through this particular text. However, there has also been homiletical, hermeneutical, and musical freedom in relation to this passage because “neither Negro spirituals nor African-American preaching traditions comment on the Bible’s postexilic narratives.”⁶⁷ Blacks have most assuredly embraced the dry bones and their coming together but have not invested their energies in pure reiterations of biblical texts; more will be said about this later. For now, it suffices to note how significant Ezekiel and the vision of the valley of dry bones have been in African American preaching and other forms of communication.

Therefore, this book will embrace this vision of the valley of dry bones as a metaphor for preaching in the Spirit and as a way of continuing in this long cultural tradition. Though this biblical story has been used in the practice of preaching as a trope, I will utilize it for the purpose of preaching theory, to help foster reflection about the nature and purpose of preaching today. I desire to reimagine what preaching is because what we think preaching is shapes how we prepare to preach and how we preach. Ezekiel and the vision of the valley of dry bones complement the spirituals such that one is challenged to take death, hope, the Spirit, and preaching more seriously. Through a conversation with these resources and others, preaching may regain its spiritual courage and nerve with something more at stake than a nice whoop or paycheck. When we preach, we preach at the intersection of life and death. Ezekiel’s vision leads us hopefully to become more interested in a theology of preaching and not just the mere technology of preaching.

Through this approach, I affirm the dry bones trope's significant function within African American experience historically. Moreover, such a metaphoric lens suggests a context of death for preaching with the presence of the Spirit restoring hope in God's people. This will become clearer at the outset of each chapter in which I discuss an aspect of this biblical narrative as a theo-biblical entrée into the focus of each chapter.

Movement of This Book

This introduction has attempted to provide the overall rationale for this project on preaching, death, and hope by presenting the perceived problem of contemporary preaching as being the avoidance of dealing forthrightly with death as a part of life and not just primarily in funeral sermons. This is a theo-homiletical problem, especially in light of a contemporary context of death and violence in society on numerous levels, especially in African American communities. The problem is clear and the major purpose of this study is to argue that death is a critical aspect of preaching Christian hope by being in primary conversation with African American spirituals through the metaphorical lens of Ezekiel and the vision of the valley of dry bones. As I suggest, this will help me to tell the gospel truth. The groundwork for this book has been laid in this chapter while the argument will unfold in the following way in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the spirituals as historical and cultural musical sermons proclaimed in the midst of death as a key resource for exploring what it means to preach Christian hope today. The main purpose of that chapter is to utilize the spirituals and their context to argue for death as the context of preaching, reinforcing what the Ezekiel 37 passage highlights. It will conclude with some thoughts on why remembering the spirituals is important for preaching.

Following the first chapter's emphasis on the context of death, chapter 2 will demonstrate the Spirit's role in this particular understanding of preaching by using the lens of Ezekiel 37, followed by a discussion of the meaning of "spirituals" as songs of the Spirit that voice ideas of death and hope as expressions of the Spirit in these musical sermons. I will explore the interaction between the concepts of death, hope, and the Spirit by doing textual and acoustical analysis of the spirituals. These *spiritual* expressions will be shown to be significant for preaching because it is the Spirit that speaks of death and encounters death head on as part of a

hope-filled sermonic discourse. This chapter will make clear that it is the Spirit who animates hope while embracing death.

Chapter 3 will be a further investigation into the nature of Christian hope and its relationship to death and the Spirit in conversation with various biblical and theological thinkers. The ideas discussed will be put into conversation with the spirituals to deepen even further what has been discovered in the spirituals for preaching. A particular stress in this chapter will be on how hope is generated through preaching in the Spirit.

Chapter 4 will be the most practical segment by providing hermeneutical approaches to reading Scripture in order to preach Christian hope and death more faithfully and effectively. This will be done by drawing on the hermeneutic of hope embedded in the spirituals. As the spirituals take the Bible as a critical resource for their musical sermonic work, this chapter takes the Bible seriously as an important partner in preaching, though it is not the only component of the homiletical arsenal.⁶⁸

Through this particular approach to this topic of preaching, death, and hope, I desire to promote the depth of the gospel, so deep that one realizes that engaging the pit of death allows one to rise to the height of life. As Witvliet declares, “We give our people the most satisfying spiritual food not when we withhold the depth of the gospel but when we deliver it. No saccharine substitute will suffice.”⁶⁹ This book aims to give a nutritious taste of the gospel truth for preaching. No easy and glamorous prosperity gospel will do. It will take death, even the hope of the death of Death. The view in the middle of the valley may not be sweet but it will be honest and uncover the tremendous need of contemporary preaching to be brutally truthful about the whole gospel, in its gory glory. To remember that we are dying “little deaths” may help us in living, hoping, and preaching.