

Preface

The spoken and sung word formed the spiritual air that I breathed in the home of my parents. But one afternoon on 216th Street in Bronx, New York, I struggled to physically breathe and convulsed in my mother's arms due to a very high fever. One of my brothers had just arrived home from school and saw what was happening. He called my father while crying and said, "Luke is dead." The medical team said that I was "out for fifteen minutes." Death touched me as an infant, though I do not remember the incident, and it is a touch that never really goes away. I face my mortality with humility and recognize that my present dying helps me in my living.

The sting of death, however, was matched with the song of life, also as a baby. My parents tell me that at eleven months old I could whistle and would do so to our neighbor from a third-floor window of our home. This musical inclination has never left me either, so I sing on. This look backward brings me forward to this exploration of the spirituals as a way to study the intersection of singing and death, which has its roots in the soil of my childhood's soul.

This book on the spirituals, preaching, death, and hope is the second installment in an informal series that I call "traces of the Spirit"; the first was *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*. Both works draw upon African diasporan cultural sources to do theological work in the field of homiletics. Both deal with the Spirit's work in relation to suffering, thus taking God and human suffering seriously in the practice of preaching. This work takes up the spirituals of enslaved blacks in the United States in particular. These religious folk songs have historically been called the "Negro spirituals" and in modern times "African American spirituals." Because of the politics of naming and racial categorization, I have opted to refer to these songs created during slavery just as the enslaved did by

primarily calling them “spirituals” throughout the book (though sometimes I may refer to them as “African American spirituals”).

For this project, I used primarily the spiritual lyrics from three sources: *Slave Songs of the United States: The Classic 1867 Anthology*, eds. William Francis Allen et al.; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson’s *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, 2 vols.; and *Songs of Zion*. Other sources could have been utilized and been just as effective. Because the spirituals must be heard and not just read or discussed, I recommend consulting the bibliographies in the works noted throughout this book, specifically for audio/visual materials about the spirituals.

These literary resources cannot compare to the human resources that have encouraged me on this journey. Word-count limits prohibit me from saying all that needs to be said. But “in-a my heart” I sing a Eucharist for all who have supported this endeavor. I thank Princeton Theological Seminary for the sabbatical year in which most of this book was written; President Iain Torrance and Dean James Kay, along with other colleagues, particularly those in the practical theology department, have been a well-spring of support. Also, I thank the community of Yale Divinity School for their hospitality while I served as a Visiting Fellow during my sabbatical; the homileticians there, Nora Tisdale and Tom Troeger, were wonderful conversation partners and life-giving wells. Tom, the theo-musical homiletician, even reviewed some of my chapter drafts. I thank the Wabash Center for supporting financially some of the research for this project as well as Yolanda Pierce for lively conversations about this research. There are countless others in the heavenly and earthly cloud of witnesses who could be thanked. You know who you are. I will be forever grateful to those institutions, churches, and conferences where I had the opportunity over the last few years to present some of the ideas in this book. The questions raised and comments made influenced this work for the better. The research assistance of Joy Harris and Ashley Brown also made my task lighter. I would be remiss if I did not thank my extraordinary editor, David Lott, who was a constant joy with whom to work, always open to chat or e-mail; he gave me hope that the bones of this book would actually fit together as a whole! Last, I am indebted to my family—Gail, Moriah, and Zachary. Without their loving support, this book would have never been born. Like the spiritual, they make me say “Glory, Hallelujah!”