Sweet Chariots: Preaching from the Pulpit in Black Churches

By Sam Lemon, Ed.D.
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When I was a boy, growing up in Media, Pennsylvania, after church on Sunday morning we'd come home to the little house my great-great grandfather purchased a hundred years earlier and I'd sit on the front porch listening to the sweet strains of gospel music gently wafting over in waves of sound from the African American church across the street. The music – sometimes a spirited, joyful noise unto the Lord; but at other times a solemn, soulful plea for deliverance from bondage or sorrow – was often punctuated by the fiery sermons of the pastor preaching to the congregation. It was all very different from the carefully cadenced music of old Anglican hymns and notably calmer but no less sincere homilies of our parish priest.

There was an austere beauty to our church with its wood-paneled walls, hand-carved pulpit, and grand church organ with its two-story high bronze pipes reaching up toward the vaulted ceiling, pumping out powerful refrains of *All Creatures of Our God and King, I Sing a Song of the Saints of God*, or our ever-popular recessional, *Onward Christian Soldiers,* that always inspired the congregation's finest female sopranos to lift their mellifluous voices to even loftier heights. But the sacred music and religious experiences of these two churches were as different to me as classical is to jazz. Or *spirit* is to *soul*.

Emanating from within the sanctified stone walls of Campbell A.M.E. Church, were spirituals I never heard at Christ Episcopal Church. It was evident to me that African American church music often told a story. And I loved to hear songs like *Down by the Riverside, Wade in the Water, Go Down Moses,* or *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. I was deeply moved by this music – not merely for its richness and beauty – but because it also told part of my family history: my ancestors had been among the founders of that church.

My great-great grandparents, Cornelius and Martha Jane Parham Ridley had been runaway slaves from neighboring plantations in Virginia, who, with the help of Quakers and the Underground Railroad, were eventually reunited in Media and lived the rest of their lives there. Especially during and after slavery, church played an indispensable role for African Americans, providing a balm from Gilead that offered hope of deliverance – if not in this life, then certainly in the next. The black church was not only a House of Worship; it sometimes served as a school, social service agency, food cupboard, voting booth, meeting hall, sanctuary, a stop on the Underground Railroad, or final resting place. It was the hub of the black community that held it together.

In the black church on Sunday, one might encounter tambourines, guitars, drums, shouts, hand-clapping or the holy dance. Not only was the music vastly different, serving vastly different congregations, vocal ministry in the two churches could not have been more different. In my overwhelmingly white Episcopal church, where I served as an acolyte, sermons were like thoughtful, scholarly lectures – not that they were completely devoid of enthusiasm. Yet both were a far cry from the quiet Quaker Meetings I attend today, where God may talk to us in silent worship, or through the messages of those who are moved by the Spirit to stand and speak. At

Campbell A.M.E. Church, sermons were passionately preached, and I could hear every word from across the street. These were not theological entreaties to live up to “the better angels of our nature” – they were exhortations in the style of Hosea, Samuel, or Joel.

The black preachers gave powerful and urgent warnings about the harsh and perpetual punishments that sinners could expect if they failed to change their evil ways. They preached fire and brimstone sermons of an angry, Old Testament God and the certainty of falling down a chasm of eternal damnation, into the clutches of Satan who was as real as the parishioner sitting in the pew next to you. But these messages were not all just gloom and doom. They also offered a beacon of redemptive light every bit as bright and constant as the North Star that guided so many slaves – like my ancestors – to freedom. These sermons and spirituals were liberation theology, long before the term was coined, which spoke not only of the dangers and potential pain and suffering in the next world, but of the ones black people had to endure in this one.

Whether officially ordained or simply called by God to preach The Word, black preachers, pastors, and ministers were not only spiritual leaders – men and women of the cloth – they were also community leaders, social advocates, political observers, and Christian soldiers who had moral and spiritual obligations to challenge America to let their people go and be treated with equal rights and protections under the law. Black clergymen like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – who was greatly influenced by the philosophy of peaceful civil disobedience of Mahatma Gandhi – and Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy, were an integral part of the Civil Rights movement, participating in and creating faith-based social activist organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In a contemporary venue Nation of Islam Minister Malcolm X, who later underwent profound social and spiritual enlightenment during his pilgrimage to Mecca, strongly believed that religious institutions could not ignore the pressing problems of poverty, discrimination, and social injustice. These arguments were supported by the sentiments of Reverend James H. Cone – an early proponent of black liberation theology. On the world stage, it is eminently worth noting that extraordinary prelates such as South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and martyred Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez of San Salvador, devoted their lives to the cause of human rights. Consequently, after centuries of religion being used as a justification for slavery and oppression, it is within this etiological context that African American churches and ministers were forced to address a mosaic of civil, social, human rights, political, ethnic, economic, educational, and ecclesiastical inequities that could not easily be separated from one another.

A recent and notable controversy regarding these matters, were the prominently publicized comments of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, former pastor of the United Church of Christ in Chicago, where Senator Barack Obama was a member of the congregation. Reverend Wright’s style of preaching was something never before seen by many white Americans, who were taken aback not only by his incendiary words but by his dramatic delivery. Many felt he differed significantly, and negatively, from other dynamic, white, evangelists such as the highly

political, anti-communist Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Rex Humbard, and Oral Roberts. But within a range of homiletic styles, Reverend Wright's particular brand of preaching is not atypical in many black Baptist, Pentecostal, AME (African Methodist Episcopal), or UAME (United African American Episcopal) churches that I have personally attended.

In an article entitled, "Wright's style confuses some observers," (Cathy Lynn Grossman, *USA Today*, May 5, 2008), Michael Duduit, editor of *Preaching Magazine* states:

"That delivery style is actually not abnormally flamboyant. I'm a white preacher, and I've seen this kind of emotionally engaging and interactive speaking style in any number of black and white churches. What makes his seem exceptional to a national audience is that you don't see this often in a mainline church such as his denomination, the United Church of Christ. But you do see it in Pentecostal or charismatic denominations and even more in evangelical churches of many kinds where people focus on a direct personal experience with Jesus."

These substantive differences in styles of preaching are documented by my observations at the beginning of this article. Usually, in the black church, the expectation is that attendance is participatory. One cannot simply sit back silently and be entertained. Black oratorical ministry comes down from a tradition of dramatic and prophetic storytelling, in which events and mysteries of the Bible are acted out like passion plays, in a way that parishioners who lacked formal education could relate to and understand – particularly, during historical times. It is, with respect, a kind of "theological theater" in which the minister is inspired to give God's message – to individuals and institutions – in animated, vociferous, and unequivocal terms. In that forum, worship is a form of engagement; in which the preacher calls, and parishioners must respond with equal and earnest enthusiasm. This is a cultural model probably derived from ancient tribal ceremonies in Africa.

Grossman's article in *USA Today* also includes insights from Teresa Fry Brown, Associate Professor of Homiletics and Director of the Black Church Studies program at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University who says, "Prophets don't make it up as they go along. They're really affirming what the people already know and don't want to do. It's not something you volunteer for. Prophets get ostracized, attacked, even killed."

While many of Reverend Wright's words were ill-chosen and others skillfully edited out of context into disturbing, repetitive sound bites, he also expressed a great deal of legitimate anger and frustration for people of his generation who experienced innumerable acts of discrimination and atrocity not limited to the South. Our failure to acknowledge history – even recent history – is partly why compelling social and racial problems remain unresolved today. By acknowledging and understanding that each group of people has a unique historical experience, that invariably includes familial suffering, which shapes their respective world views, ethnic identity, and spiritual beliefs and practices, we can work toward a better and more just world for all.

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