

BLUE NOTE PREACHING  
IN A POST-SOUL WORLD

*Finding Hope in an Age of Despair*

OTIS MOSS III

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments		ix
Introduction		xi
Chapter 1	THE BLUES MOAN AND THE GOSPEL SHOUT	1
Chapter 2	BLUES SENSIBILITY	22
Chapter 3	HIP-HOP ENGAGEMENT WITH A POSTMODERN WORLD	47
Sermon 1	LOVING YOU IS KILLING ME	66
Sermon 2	GAME OF THRONES	82
Sermon 3	MINISTRY AND OUR MANDATE	94
Sermon 4	HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER	111

## INTRODUCTION

The work and art of the preacher is a peculiar enterprise, often misunderstood and misinterpreted. The preaching art has been satirized in popular culture and shaded with demonic overtones by literary mavens who do not recognize the work of the preacher as a discipline and an art. Preaching has faced the judgment of academia and been marginalized by western culture, yet the word continues to go forth in various forms.

I grew up in a faith community where preaching and the preacher were respected as artists *and* academics, weaving together poetry and pragmatic wisdom for daily living. On Sunday mornings, I witnessed my father and pastor of the Olivet Institutional Baptist Church shape a new reality with metaphor, poetic rhythm, and intellectual engagement of philosophers. He stood week after week and dialogued with a text while he referenced Howard Thurman, Reinhold Niebuhr, Abraham Heschel, Fanny Lou Hamer, Khalil Gibran, Benjamin Elijah Mays, Constance Baker Motley, and Dorothy Day.

Each Sunday was a full meal of word, current affairs, Southern storytelling, and humor. Each week, my father created a message in which he struggled with great ideas and challenged us to question the world. He was raised in the segregated South, a pioneer in the Civil Rights Movement,

organizer with the Atlanta Sit-In Movement, and a pastor. His theology and preaching introduced me to the importance of Blues and Jazz to the preaching project.

Black preaching, I believe, is more than preaching with a Black face; it is a unique cultural narrative and theological enterprise where African motifs meet diverse western influences of North America. A beautiful, bold, homiletical voice, poetry, prophetic witness, southern storytelling, lament, blues, and celebration are born out of this tradition.

Before his passing, I spent several consecutive summers with Dr. Fred Craddock, without a doubt, one of North America's homiletical luminaries. He served as Bible study teacher and theologian-in-residence for the Children's Defense Fund, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference of Child Advocacy at the Alex Haley Farm in Clinton, Tenn. A bunch of preachers, young and old, gathered around the lunch table daily to ask Dr. Craddock questions. He was gracious with his time and patient with us. I remember him remarking about the importance of Black preaching; "All preachers will do well to study the history, structure, and theology of the preached word that is birthed from the Black church." It was a quiet matter-of-fact comment coming from this intellectual giant, but it spoke to the yearning in my heart.

The preaching I heard as a boy and studied as an adult was not confirmed or ratified by seminaries or western gatekeepers. The preaching I witnessed danced with Lorraine Hansberry, did sets with John Coltrane, flowed with Maya Angelou, and was inspired by Langston Hughes. The preaching I heard seemed to know Amos personally, conversed with Isaiah weekly, and painted a picture of Jesus with such power that the aroma of wine at the wedding of Cana would saturate the air. The diversity of thought,

theology, and technique boggled my mind. Dr. Garner C. Taylor, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jarena Lee, Vernon Johns, Ella Mitchell, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, Sandy Ray, Lizzie Robinson, Esther Smith, William Seymour, William Augustus Jones, C. L. Franklin, Miles Jones, Benjamin Elijah Mays, and Prathia Hall. The list goes on, beyond the time I have in this introduction.

During the Lyman-Beecher Lectures at Yale, I was given the grand privilege to speak about not only preaching but also the magnificent and sometimes painful history from whence Black, or “Blue Note,” preaching is birthed. The unique, brutal, yet sweet gift Black preaching gives to the world is to allow the gospel to be viewed, once again, from the eyes of those who sing Psalm 137:1–4 (NIV):

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
 when we remembered Zion.  
 There on the poplars  
 we hung our harps,  
 for there our captors asked us for songs,  
 our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
 they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
 while in a foreign land?

A Blues aesthetic frees the preacher and preaching from both personal-piety sermons and the ever-present prosperity mode now popular on television. Blue Note preaching seeks dialogue with Isaiah, Amos, Moses, the Woman at the Well, a Gerasene demoniac and an imprisoned Paul. Blue Note preaching dares to speak with love and creativity, “the world is not right, but God is still . . .”

This has and is a journey for me, and the work of these lectures has been a part of my life's working to bring the Blue Note back to the pulpit and reclaim the prophetic strand of a great tradition. I hope these lectures bless you. They were a joy to prepare and, I must say, I had a ball presenting them at Yale.

Asking you to imagine,  
The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III  
May 2015

## Chapter 1

# THE BLUES MOAN AND THE GOSPEL SHOUT

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the LORD with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel; <sup>11</sup>and they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD,

“For he is good,

for his steadfast love endures for ever toward

Israel.”

And all the people responded with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. <sup>12</sup>But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, <sup>13</sup>so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted so loudly that the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:10–13)

I want to read this passage of scripture from a different version, the “OM3” version of Ezra—that’s the Otis Moss III version. Beginning with verses 11–12:

With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord.

The Lord is good.

God's love toward Israel endures forever.

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the elders, the seasoned saints, the older priests and Levites and family heads who had seen the former Temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this Temple being laid. While many others shouted for joy.

And here's the remix of verse 13:

No one could distinguish between the gospel shout and the blues moan. No one could distinguish between the gospel shout and the blues moan because the people made so much noise. The sound could be heard far away.

One generation shouting because they had not seen the former. Another generation moaning because they remembered what happened in the past. A generational paradox. A challenge. One group trying to teach the blues. Another group that was just ready to shout on Sunday. Here you have this generational paradox wrapped up in this particular text. A blues moan and a gospel shout.

I contend that if we are to reclaim the best of the preaching tradition then we must learn what I call the Blue Note gospel. Before you get to your resurrection shout you must pass by the challenge and pain called Calvary.

What is this thing called the *Blues*? It is the roux of Black speech, the backbeat of American music, and the foundation of Black preaching. Blues is the curve of the

Mississippi, the ghost of the South, the hypocrisy of the North. Blues is the beauty of Bebop, the soul of Gospel, and the pain of Hip-Hop.

Many academics have brilliantly placed Jazz in the conceptual motif of preaching. Both Eugene Lowery and Kirk Byron Jones brilliantly framed the importance of Jazz to the craft of preaching. Lowery's Beecher Lectures and book, *The Homiletical Beat*, take apart the elements of Jazz in relation to preaching. Jones gives a motif of engagement and pragmatic structure to preaching and preparing, with Jazz as the central idiom for homiletical development.

Frank A. Thomas, while not explicitly developing a homiletical theory of Jazz and preaching, implicitly pays homage to this enduring tradition through his classic book, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*. Thomas masterfully connects celebration, theology, and the emotive process to African American culture and homiletical practice. Jazz is a backdrop to his work as he shares the power of reversals, sense appeal, and celebrative design.

All of these ideas are inherent in the construction of Jazz compositions. It is my task to give Blues her due and shed light on how she births a Jazz and Hip-Hop aesthetic of preaching.

Before we can speak of the Jazz mosaic or the Hip-Hop vibe for postmodern preaching, we must wrestle with the Blues. In his song "Call It Stormy Monday," T-Bone Walker laments how bad and sad each day of the week is, but "Sunday I go to church, then I kneel down and pray."

Walker's song unintentionally lifted up the challenge that the Blues placed before the church and that Black religiosity still seeks to solve. "Stormy Monday" forces the listener to reject traditional notions of sacred and secular.

The pain of the week is connected to the sacred service of Sunday. There is no strict line of demarcation between the existential weariness of a disenfranchised person of color and the sacred disciplines of prayer, worship, and service to humanity.

This Blue Note is a challenge to preaching and to the church. Can preaching recover a Blues sensibility and dare speak with authority in the midst of tragedy? America is living stormy Monday, but the pulpit is preaching happy Sunday. The world is experiencing the Blues, and pulpiteers are dispensing excessive doses of non-prescribed prosaic sermons with severe ecclesiastical and theological side effects.

The church is becoming a place where Christianity is nothing more than capitalism in drag. In his book, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, Marvin McMickle, president of Colgate-Rochester Seminary, asks what happened to the prophetic wing of the church. Why have we emphasized a personal ethic congruent with current structures and not a public theology steeped in struggle and weeping informed by the Blues? McMickle's book is instructive for us; he demonstrates the focus on praise (or the neo-charismatic movements) coupled with false patriotism—enhanced by the reactionary development of the Tea Party, the election of President Barack Obama, and personal enrichment preaching (neo-religious capitalism informed by the market, masquerading as ministry).

The Blues has faded from the Afro-Christian tradition, and the tradition is now lost in the clamor of material blessings, success without work, prayer without public concern, and preaching without burdens. The Blues sensibility, not just in preaching, but inherent in American culture, must be recovered. We must regain the literary

Jesus is on the cross at that Blue Note moment but does not fall into despair. He forces us to face the tragedy. Then, as the old preachers would say, a few days later, “Early on Sunday morning, Jesus got up with all power in his hands . . .”

But here is the thing, the one who taught me most about Blue Note preaching was a little girl about six years of age, my daughter, Makayla.

Trinity Church went through a very painful and challenging moment as my predecessor was unfairly lifted up and attacked in the media because there was a person who had been kissed by nature’s sun who was running for the presidency. As a result, we had media outside every day. There were death threats, at least a hundred every week: “We are going to kill you. We are going to bomb your church.”

You want to keep that sort of thing away from your family, but the stress was so painful, it made it very difficult to sleep at night. I remember one night I was half asleep and heard some noise in the house. My wife, Monica, punched me and said, “*You* go check that out” [Oh yes, it’s okay to laugh]. So I did. Just like a good preacher, I grabbed my rod and staff to comfort me. I went walking through the house with my rod and staff that was made in Louisville with the name “Slugger” on it.

I looked downstairs, and then I heard the noise again, and I made my way back upstairs and peeked in my daughter’s room. There was a six-year-old girl dancing in the darkness . . . just spinning around, saying, “Look at me, Daddy.”

I said, “Makayla, you need to go to bed. It is 3:00 a.m. You need to go to bed.”

But she said, “No, look at me, Daddy. Look at me.”

And she was spinning; barrettes going back and forth, pigtails going back and forth.

August Wilson, born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, is arguably America's most celebrated contemporary playwright, having created a cycle of ten plays for each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson's work is written with an overt Blues sensibility. He believed Blues Speech, carried by his characters and embodied by actors, has the power to save. For Wilson, speech wrapped up in the Blues is the antidote to the blues. The only way to get rid of your blues is to speak to your blues. It is his character, Ma Rainey, based on the real life Blues singer, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, who speaks of the Blues' prophetic power to release the individual from spiritual isolation:

The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* [New York: New American Library, 1985], 83)

Ma Rainey becomes a prophetic preacher with a deep Blues sensibility. She is not seeking tragedy, but with a Womanist vibe and a Blues sensibility, she is stating, "I refuse to fall into despair."

Through Wilson, I learned, and the preacher learns, a new definition of preaching. Here it is: Blue Note preaching, or preaching with Blues sensibilities, is prophetic preaching—preaching about tragedy, but refusing to fall into despair. That is blues preaching. "And they could not distinguish between the gospel shout and the blues moan."

In his Beecher Lectures, Walter Brueggemann communicated that when we look at the Bible we must “Read, speak, and think as the poet.” The academic or news reporter can neither understand the nuance nor conjure the power of prophetic Blues Speech.

Across the landscape of the cultural topography of America are reporters masquerading as prophets. You can hear them, can you not? They are announcing tragedy, sending notes of folly and foolishness, and crafting social-media posts of the decadence and demise of our culture. This is not prophetic Blues Speech; it is only shallow reporting and voyeurism, designed not to alter the world but to numb our spiritual senses. Over time we accept, when we hear this kind of speech, that the Real Housewives are actually real, even though everything they have is fake. That reality TV is authentic and anything shot on high definition video is a documentary. Blues Speech rescues us from acceptance and dares us to move from the couch of apathy to the position of work.

We view the world in multi-dimensional ways with Blues Speech and a Blues sensibility. We sing songs in major and minor keys and refuse to jettison lament from our vocabulary. The Blues dares us to celebrate all life and find the beauty in the midst of the magnificent mosaic of human contradiction. In Psalm 137, the psalmist speaks the Blues when the words go forth from the mouths of poets who speak with a Blues sensibility.

By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
There on the poplars  
we hung up our harps,

for there our captors asked us for songs,  
 our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
 they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD  
 while in a foreign land?

(vv. 1–4 NIV)

That is Blues Speech that gives reality to my reality, though I am not to speak about my reality. This is a Blues song. This song of lament and celebration dares us to speak of tragedy. August Wilson was informed by this speech. His was biblical speech, translated through the lens of Black culture. His work accurately portrays the power of this type of communication. When we speak the Blues and preach the Blues we connect with lost history and envision a yet to be.

All of Wilson's plays create and envision a world that royal speech, status quo speech, supremacist speech, cannot imagine. In this world, autonomous, artistic women control their destinies, as in the person of Ma Rainey. In this world, a mentally ill man, such as the character Gabriel in *Fences* demonstrates that he may be the angelic messenger of God, disguised in mental illness. It is through August Wilson that I am pulled into the world of the Blues, and through Zora Neale Hurston that I find the power of prophetic conjuring.

Zora Neale Hurston, Harlem Renaissance writer, folklorist, and novelist, spent her life recording the Blues speech and patterns of displaced Africans. Her body of work dares to claim that people of African descent do not need external cultural validation; they have a rich culture, whether or not it is acknowledged by Western scholars.

Hurston takes the speech of Southern storytellers, preachers, and singers, and peppers her fictional work with the wisdom gathered from these people, creating a rich tapestry of speech where Blues sensibilities and call-and-response moments are the norm. Hurston's famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, gives a theological perspective informed by her Blues sensibility. The main character of the novel, Janie, who has taken hold of her destiny by marrying the much younger Teacake, seeks to find her place in the world. In one stunning section, Janie and Teacake take refuge from a hurricane and the Blues theology that Hurston has collected over the years emerges:

“The wind came back with triple fury and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others and other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.” (Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1937], 191)

The preacher's call is to stand through storms after all the lights have gone out and the tourists have left the land. The call of the preacher is to stare in the darkness and speak the Blues with authority and witness the work of God in darkness and even in the abyss. Blues Speech and Blues theology change the gaze of the preacher. Flannery O'Connor calls this gaze the “grotesque in Southern fiction.”

Christian writers, according to O'Connor, are burdened by the fact that they have knowledge of an alternative world because they have encountered a God of grace and

love, but the world that they look at does not fit that which they have encountered. So there is a burden. This burden breaks forth from the fact that the writers know what the world should be, but they are burdened by the divine distance of humanity from divinity. Their gaze is cast upon what is called “the grotesque,” those who are out of sync with God and characters that demonstrate the grace of God, though they have great distance from God. Through this tension, the writer is drawn to the grotesque of Blues and finds that God is loose in the world.

Isaiah, with poetic power and prophetic boldness, speaks with this same Blues sensibility. In Isaiah 10:1–2 (NIV), he says, “Woe to those who make unjust laws, / to those who issue oppressive decrees, / to deprive the poor of their rights / and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, / making widows their prey / and robbing the fatherless.” The prophet speaks with poetic language and lifts up the grotesque in the world of Israel. It is the prophet who points to the existential elements that lead to tragedy. In other words, he is speaking with a Blues sensibility of the policies of those in power, who create a lopsided, unjust world; the patriarchy of politicians who view women as objects for sport.

Isaiah, the poet and prophet, has the same eye and the same gaze and Blues sensibility of Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit”:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.  
(Lyrics from a poem titled “Strange Fruit”  
by Lewis Allan, 1937)

Billie Holiday is not singing to cause the audience to fall into despair but to empower all who hear. I will not allow you to cover your ears or your eyes. If we are to see a world that is different than the world that is now, I must speak the Blues. I must sing the Blues. Isaiah and Billie Holiday are doing the prophetic work of taking the covers off of oppression. When preachers refuse to preach, speak, and teach the Blues, they are knowingly tilling the ground for more strange fruit. The Blues is more than renaming of existential darkness; it is a way of seeing, a strategy of knowing, and a technique to empower.

Jesus is central to Blue Note preaching. It is Howard Thurman who speaks of how we must view Jesus as the liberator of the disinherited. In his classic text *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he speaks of Jesus as savior and liberator of those who have their backs against the wall. Scholar Obery Hendricks borrows from Thurman and expands our understanding of Jesus. In the powerful book *The Politics of Jesus*, Hendricks makes the compelling argument to view Jesus not solely as the sociological savior of oppressed people; but our normative view of Jesus must be of a person who lived life as a colonized individual. Jesus understands the pain of terrorism and is acquainted with the structures of disenfranchisement that rob people of their humanity.

In other words, Jesus knows all about our troubles.

The preached Word, when played, performed, and preached with the Blue Note sensibility, has the audacity to reclaim Jesus as Savior and liberator of marginalized people. The God of the Blue Note empowers men and women and refuses to be categorized by puny, inadequate definitions created by humans and concretized to and by the academy. It is the role of the prophet/preacher to

meaning. We need a *Kulibah* word, a word with multiple definitions, which, when it is spoken, births new meaning.

The Blues lens for hermeneutical interpretation offers a wider pallet of colors to the preacher who is attempting to paint in a postmodern world that is addicted to ease, empire, and markets.

Jerome Clayton Ross, assistant professor of Old Testament at the Samuel Dewitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, shares a powerful view of the implications of this type of hermeneutic for preaching. “Except for the reign of David through Solomon, the Yahwists were dominated by super power nations during the biblical period . . . these nations superimposed their cultures upon the nations or peoples whom they ruled, thereby establishing the standards of living for them” (Samuel K. Roberts, *Born to Preach: Essays in Honor of the Ministry of Henry and Ella Mitchell* [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2000]). Ross goes on to share the six kingdoms that imposed a form of colonialism upon the Hebrew people: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. This has profound implications for preaching. If we are to recover a Blues sensibility, we must have the audacity to read the Bible with a Blue Note lens, understand the Blues inherent in the Bible, and preach what we read.

The hermeneutic for the Blue Note homiletic seeks contextualization and artistic imagination, drawn from engagement with scripture and deep, abiding spirituality. The preacher uses all the tools at her disposal, working to understand context in light of the limited freedom and agency of an ancient people and communicating grand theological ideas of the gospel. Through the merging of artistic imagination we are given a broader understanding, of not only the text but also the activity of God.

Artistic imagination, in the words of Eugene Lowry, is “dancing the edge of mystery” (*The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997]). Artistic imagination, in the words of Dr. Lenora Tubbs-Tisdale of Yale Divinity School, is “rekindling the fire within” (*Prophetic Preaching* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 21) as defines this act. Father Mapple, Herman Melville’s character from *Moby Dick*, tells us, “Woe to him whom this world charms from Gospel duty!” ([New American Library, 1892], 50). The artistic imagination gives over to the world a Blues sensibility to create a new world for the preacher.

I want to give you some of this idea of artistic imagination. As I dipped my pen into ink in my own sanctified imagination, I was able to write a Blues song. In dealing with David, the preacher’s/priest’s role is to play the Blues in public space. The people join in the song and acknowledge the story, and they even place embers upon the fire of atonement. The story of David and Bathsheba is a story I like to call, simply, “The Rooftop Blues.” It speaks to the eternal tragedy of human folly, nurtured by our gluttonous egos. While on the rooftop, David gazes upon the body of a woman who ceases, in his eyes, to have agency:

David’s gaze is cast against the stone skyline of the kingdom. He breathes a deep breath and exhales, and wonders how his men are faring in their campaign. Triumph has become an expectation for him. The late-night pacing has been replaced by elusive moments of anxiety, which are quickly dispelled by the history of triumph, and the otherworldly promise of his God.

He is king, raised from the barrio of Bethlehem, dismissed by all, including his own father, who

And God stepped out on space,  
 and he looked around and said:  
 I'm lonely—  
 I'll make me a world.  
 ("The Creation," *God's  
 Trombones* [New York:  
 Viking Press, 1927], 17)

Johnson viewed the preacher as an artist and healer with the power to create through an imagination touched by the divine.

The preacher functions like the cartoon character Simon, Weldon's poetry, and the prophet Isaiah: they draw with the paintbrush of the Word, strokes of tone, colors of oratory, auditory dynamics on a drab canvas of a broken world. Christ brings colors, tone, dynamics, chords, and a new time signature to the world.

You can hear, can you not, the sounds of women and men who had the smell of mud, manure, and magnolia on their feet. They stand with dignity as cool red clay presses between their toes and the unforgiving southern sun beats them with a continual whip of heat and humidity. Can you not see upon these unknown black bodies, tendons stretched beyond capacity and muscles bulging under the weight of rice, cotton, and tobacco? Somewhere between insanity and despair a new music is born: spirituals, ring shouts, and work songs, coupled with an oratorical dexterity the world had never seen!

Can I get a witness!

An entire orchestra was birthed "down by the river-side" as mothers sang "roll, Jordan, roll." A new speech, with conjuring power infused with an anointing that the West claimed did not exist, had stepped into the light. The

Blue Note and Blues sensibility was born in this place of death that became the place of life. Just as Jesus hung up on the cross and transformed an execution into a celebration, the Blue Note sensibility conjured life from death's domain. The Blue Note is the Africanization of a faith that forgot its roots. The Blue note turns the gospel back to Jesus, the church back to Christ, and the preacher back to the prophets. Christianity was a prisoner of markets, manifest destiny, and men, until the Blues set it free to see Christ, Calvary, and the cross once again.

The Blues, or Blue Note preaching, performed by the artist of African descent, brings a new vitality to the act of the performed word and structure of homiletics. Preachers of African descent were born outside of the American project, forced to gaze through the window of democracy. They yearned and wept for strange gifts that were on display on the other side of the windowpane, gifts with strange names, such as "freedom," "democracy," "free agency," "autonomy," and "humanity," and the list goes on. This distance and yearning gave the preacher of African descent a "second sight."

The preacher entered the pulpit and stepped up to the lectern with an eye upon the existential tragedy manufactured by a false anthropology and demented theology. The preacher witnessed a country claiming equality yet birthed in the blood of a holocaust of red and black bodies. The preacher—nursed upon the breast of inhumanity, yet raised on the promise of Christ's eternity—is given a second sight, born with a veil or "caul" upon her or his spirit.

Southern tradition claims that children born with a veil were "called," or given a second sight; a glimpse into the unseen world of ancestors, haunts, ghosts, prophecy, and God talk. Blue Note preaching has, for lack of a better

phrase, a “Duboisian” nature that allows it to penetrate the stronghold of American myth and embody the scripture with a renewed vitality rarely witnessed on these shores. Blue Note preaching does not appropriate biblical stories but embodies the Word.

The text lives and inhabits the breath and body of the preacher and people. For example, Moses is not appropriated as a liberator or a stand-in for people of color. Moses is African sociologically. Moses is African theologically. Moses is African metaphorically; and yes, Moses is African literally (the brother was straight out of Egypt). He ceases to be the Charleston Heston or Christian Bale myth and inhabits the bodies of Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., and Vernon Johns. The spirit of Moses transcends gender reassignment in the Blue Note tradition. Heston played Moses on film. Tubman conjured Moses in the flesh. This embodied action, born in the crucible of American cruelty, produced an ability to see beyond the mythos of the empire and to breathe life into the text.

There was nothing like witnessing, not just the preacher becoming possessed by the Word, but the entire congregation reshaping the message as they affirm, push, doubt, and support the preacher, with words such as, “Take your time,” and “That’s Right!” and with the assent of the preacher. Every stroke of the call and response etches a new message in the lived experience of the congregation. Whatever was written on paper is reshaped and reformed in the moment it is performed and presented before the people.

This second sight gives Blue Note preaching a unique perspective. Blue Note preaching is not completely African, yet it is rooted in West African motifs. It is not European, yet much of what it is has elements of Europe. It is American, a

Creole style and aesthetic that has the power to unhinge the American empire. Blue Note preaching has shaken foundations and toppled governments across the ages.

It is Martin Luther King Jr. and his very words—whether on the Mall in DC in 1963, or at Riverside Church when he broke the silence and came out against the war in Vietnam—that not only caused the Senate, Congress, and White House to take notice, but also caused the FBI to work overtime to destroy and disrupt the nonviolent Civil Rights Movement. Is it not strange and a peculiar irony that America places a monument in Washington, DC, to a small Southern preacher who pastored a church in Montgomery, Alabama, that could not seat more than 250 people? A stone was etched to create the figure of Martin Luther King Jr., and it now stands watch over Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln to ensure that the “yet to be United States of America” shall live up to its creed. This is the power of Blue Note preaching.

When we look at Blue Note elements biblically, we see that Moses found his power in this second sight. He possessed an intimate knowledge of Egyptian culture, from having been a student of Amen-Ra. He knew the Ivy League culture of the Egyptian mystery system. Yet he was still a child of Abraham. Moses had second sight, a veil giving his soul the power to see the true nature of the empire. Moses was what people in New Orleans call a “creole child.” He can recite the story of Abraham and sing the songs of Osiris. This section of his resume causes the heavens to take notice. He knows the pain of oppression and the comfort of the empire. It is Vernon Johns who stated, and I paraphrase, “When Moses hit the Egyptian upside the head with that brickbat, all of the heavens took note and God pointed and said, “Get me that young man. He knows about the pain of

oppression and he knows about the comfort of the empire. He shall lead my movement.”

Moses was Ivy League and urban league, Mozart and Mos Def, Handel and WC Handy, Rachmaninoff and Ma Rainey. His ability to understand the empire and still be faithful to his God was the root of his revolutionary power. “To be from but not of” is a unique burden and blessing. I recall Maya Angelou referring to it as sweet brutality; to love the sweetness but yet know that you cannot be released from the brutality.

W. E. B. Dubois puts it this way,

“The Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with-second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (*The Souls of Black Folk* [Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903], 3)

This is the tragic roux that is stirred at the bottom of the pot of Blue Note preaching.

I see two worlds. I witness the schizophrenic nature of American pathology, and I know a remedy for the spiritual bifurcation in my soul, and that remedy is Jesus. Jesus is so central to Blue Note preaching that it is accused of being Christocentric. Jesus ceases to be a past historical figure, a mere theological idea or textural object for examination. Quite the contrary—Jesus is real.

Jesus knows all about my troubles.  
 Jesus walks and talks with me.  
 Jesus picks me up and turns me around and plants my feet  
     on solid ground!  
 Jesus is a mind regulator,  
     a heart fixer,  
     a friend at midnight,  
     balm in Gilead,  
     trouble over deep water,  
     and bread in a starving land.  
 Jesus understands my predicament.

Why does he understand my predicament?

Jesus lived a life as a colonized person and as a minority in  
     a community that was under siege by an occupying army.  
 Jesus understands poverty created by an empire,  
 Jesus knows about racial profiling,  
 Jesus understands mass incarceration,  
 Jesus is frustrated with the traditional church,  
 Jesus experiences state sponsored torture,  
     knows what it's like to have a public defender who lacks  
     competency,  
     was executed for a crime he did not commit  
     and understands character assassination in the media  
     before and after one's death.  
 Jesus even knows what it is like to be stopped and frisked.  
 Jesus is acquainted with patriarchy,  
     since not a single brother would listen to any of the  
     sisters when they announced,  
     "Guess what y'all, the tomb is empty!"  
 Jesus knows all about our troubles . . .  
 Jesus wrestles with tragedy but does not fall into despair.

Jesus is on the cross at that Blue Note moment but does not fall into despair. He forces us to face the tragedy. Then, as the old preachers would say, a few days later, “Early on Sunday morning, Jesus got up with all power in his hands . . .”

But here is the thing, the one who taught me most about Blue Note preaching was a little girl about six years of age, my daughter, Makayla.

Trinity Church went through a very painful and challenging moment as my predecessor was unfairly lifted up and attacked in the media because there was a person who had been kissed by nature’s sun who was running for the presidency. As a result, we had media outside every day. There were death threats, at least a hundred every week: “We are going to kill you. We are going to bomb your church.”

You want to keep that sort of thing away from your family, but the stress was so painful, it made it very difficult to sleep at night. I remember one night I was half asleep and heard some noise in the house. My wife, Monica, punched me and said, “*You* go check that out” [Oh yes, it’s okay to laugh]. So I did. Just like a good preacher, I grabbed my rod and staff to comfort me. I went walking through the house with my rod and staff that was made in Louisville with the name “Slugger” on it.

I looked downstairs, and then I heard the noise again, and I made my way back upstairs and peaked in my daughter’s room. There was a six-year-old girl dancing in the darkness . . . just spinning around, saying, “Look at me, Daddy.”

I said, “Makayla, you need to go to bed. It is 3:00 a.m. You need to go to bed.”

But she said, “No, look at me, Daddy. Look at me.”

And she was spinning; barrettes going back and forth, pigtails going back and forth.

I was getting huffy and puffy wanting her to go to bed, but then God spoke to me at that moment and said, “Look at your daughter! She’s dancing in the dark. The darkness is around her but not in her. But she’s dancing in the dark.”

If you dance long enough, weeping may endure for a night, but joy will come in the morning. It is the job of every preacher to teach the congregation to dance in the dark. Do not let the darkness find its way in you, but dance in the dark.

May God bless you. May God keep you. But dance. Dance! Dance!

*[Click here for the original lecture video.](#)*