



WE CAN'T
BREATHE JUSTICE
&
WITHOUT MERCY

PREACHING IN THE MIDST OF ...

How Black Preaching Has Changed
in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Rev. Amiri B. Hooker

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By Rev. Amiri B. Hooker

South Carolina United Methodist Advocate Press

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Dedication

To my three mentors: One who trained me,
one who believed I could preach,
and one who told me to write:
Rev. Washington Charles Kearns (1928-2005),
Dr. Alonzo Clark Jenkins (1953-2013),
and Rev. William Bobby McClain (1938-2020).

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Foreword

What disposition shall we make of the preaching task in the midst of a pandemic? The Rev. Amiri Hooker answers that question with passion and keen insight in his book, *Preaching in the Midst Of . . . : How Black Preaching Has Changed in the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

Hooker does not leave behind the previous two pandemics, racism and poverty, in the clarion call to his colleagues to preach the gospel in its manifest relevance in this climate—the tripartite threat to human mortality!

The uniqueness of this work is that it is not a how-to book on preaching nor is it the standard collection of sermons published by so many ministers. Hooker puts his brand on this work and separates himself from other ministers of the gospel by fiercely challenging Black preachers in particular to aspire to greatness in their preaching. In this sense, the book serves as a prophetic shaking of the foundations. He often lifts up the phrase, “great Black preacher,” a consistent theme running throughout the work, leaving no doubt as to the immediacy of prophetic, transformative preaching in a context of so much manifold death.

Hooker’s analysis is as penetrating as its passion. While a Festschrift on biblical hermeneutics for sure, Hooker’s “dialogue partners” in this work range from public intellectuals to hip-hop and blues artists to the words of great Black preachers and theologians, as well as to iconic figures like James Baldwin. All of these ingredients go to the finished product of a succulent dish that embraces “Black Lives Matter” in both ontological and organizational legitimacy.

Hooker is insistent that Black Lives Matter is neither a fad nor an aberration. Rather, Hooker is unapologetic in his contention that the truth of the gospel message in this context calls for a new paradigm for preaching that tears asunder the universalism endemic to the European homiletical tradition and opts instead for a public declaration, a prophetic declaration, of the unquestioned right of the darker people of the world to their God-given freedom. Any other form of preaching is to

forfeit the greatness that Black preaching demands in the kairos of the historical moment and is really not preaching at all!

Written with the passion of and the lucid identification with the prophets and Jesus in the agape demand to feed the sheep of tripartite suffering, *Preaching in the Midst Of...* is a truly life changing read. For any minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ looking for a measuring stick with which to determine the effectiveness of their ministry/preaching, this book is it.

—Harry Singleton III,
*Professor of Theology at Benedict College and author of Black Theology
and Ideology: Deidological Dimensions in the Theology of James H. Cone;
White Religion and Black Humanity; and
Divine Revelation and Human Liberation*

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Introduction

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.”

—Luke 4:28-32, NRSV

“Monie in the middle (Where she at?) In the middle; Yep, Monie’s in the middle (Where that at?) In the middle.”—“Monie in the Middle” by Monie Love, album Down to Earth

The story of the song “Monie in the Middle” is about how Monie is caught between two young men at her high school: she is trying to get attention from one guy, while another she can’t get to leave her alone.

Currently, the Black preacher in America finds him or herself caught in the middle of a moment: in the middle of having to preach the Word of God with power and liberation, while being thrown off America’s colossal granite-face Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills in Keystone, South Dakota, without a mask.

In the Gospel of Luke, Luke summarizes Jesus’ activity by juxtaposing preaching with miraculous acts of liberation. Jesus’ proclamation evokes both wonder and rejection. These two reactions continue in our contemporary United States of America.

In the midst of the people’s rejection, Jesus encounters hostile spiritual forces. The Black preacher in America is today—because of a calling to preach the message of Jesus Christ to the oppressed—facing hostile forces. Jesus is always dealing with the reality behind the scenes of everyday life. Jesus and the Black preacher must preach

God's kingdom. They both must explain how God's rule and God's justice come in stages, and how to overcome forces hostile to humanity and God.

How has the church and the preacher changed during this time when racial inequities are being exposed, indigenous communities and Black communities are disproportionately suffering and dying from COVID-19? A time when miles of cars in food lines are not unlike the food lines of the Great Depression, and we are living through health care professionals dying? A time with ever-increasing new cases of COVID-19 and older people alone in assisted living and nursing homes? A time when people with disabilities are very isolated? A time when children are in front of computers all day trying to learn history, math, and language arts, and college students are arriving home, many for months, and hopefully not carrying the virus?

The church and community have to have Black preaching in the midst of this pandemic of disease, racism, and poverty—or tri-pandemic. Black preaching transforms congregations and communities into a movement of liberation and self-determination. Great Black preaching can deliver much-needed spiritual insight into issues of social injustice.

Black preaching is different in that it reminds society of its responsibility to all in the kingdom of God. Black preaching at its best speaks prophetic fire to core relationships of race, class, and family.

What does Black preaching look like during a worldwide outbreak of a novel coronavirus? What kinds of strength, wisdom, character, and discernment do Black preachers collectively need to preach in the midst of this tri-pandemic of disease, racism, and poverty? What does it mean to be a Black preacher in the uncharted territory of online ministry? And lastly, does the role of Black preacher provide the power for the Black communities' racial uplift?

These are all questions that this book tries to wrestle with.

Now that in-person worship has unfortunately been replaced by livestreaming, one might wonder if God is better off personally just using Facebook Live and YouTube. Would it be better for the Black preacher during COVID-19 to take the advice given to man in the Book of Judges: "Hold thy peace, lay thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us" (Judges 18:19 KJV)?

Sure, the Black church community has been living by the idea that, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:37 NRSV). This community has seen the power of the One preached and celebrated in all things.

So if Black preachers must preach, then it is my hope that this book will show ways to preach in the midst of the current tri-pandemic and civil race war. For, during this current civil race war against the human race, we need the collective wisdom, artistic vision, and empowering gift that Black preaching has brought the

church.

We are faced with a multitude of questions as the days of shelter-in-place turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. Most experts acknowledged that the global pandemic has led to millions of deaths and is likely to be more like a “little Ice Age” than a long winter or a stormy blizzard. While churches and schools rapidly transitioned to meeting online, hopes that we would soon return to normal have faded.

On July 30, 2020, Trust for America’s Health, American Public Health Association, NAACP, the National Black Nurses Association, the National Collaborative for Health Equity, and the National Medical Association hosted a virtual congressional briefing focused on the disproportionate health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Black community and other communities of color, and how structural racism drives systemic inequities in health, the economy, and criminal justice.

It was during this online discussion that many began to see just how bad the virus was for the least of these. The briefing made it clear that while the economic, social, and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are felt by everyone, they are not felt to the same extent. As has been the case with previous public health emergencies, the COVID-19 pandemic is exposing other pandemics, such as racial inequities, that have long existed in the U.S.

Data from throughout the country are showing that people of color have higher rates of cases and hospitalizations and are tragically dying at higher rates from COVID-19 than their White counterparts. While church officers hoped church sanctuaries filled with worshipers and bank accounts filled with donations would instantly reappear, many were immediately dealing with the heightened anxiety of facing a future with no clear understanding at all of the future.

Why Use ‘Black’?

Before continuing, some terms need to be defined. For the purpose of this text, the term “Black” is used as referring to a racialized classification of people, usually a political and a skin color-based category for specific populations with a mid- to dark-brown complexion. America is home now to millions of immigrants who were recently born in Africa. Their cultures and identities are split between Africa and the United States. They are referred to in modern America as African Americans.

In talking about Black preaching, we need a way of pointing to that reality by using a term that, first, makes some sense and, second, does not insult the actual African Americans taking their place in this country. To name all Blacks as part “African” reinforces a sad implication: that our history is basically slave ships, plantations, lynching, fire hoses in Birmingham, and then South Central, and that we need

to look back to Mother Africa to feel good about ourselves.

But what about the Black business districts that thrived across the country after slavery was abolished? What about Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, Thurgood Marshall, Ella Baker, and my grandfather—none born in Africa and all deeply American people? We are not African to any significant extent, but we are not White either, and that is much of why Jesse Jackson's presentation of the term "African American" caught on so fast. It set us apart from the mainstream.

However, we are Black, and it's time that we reclaim this powerful term that speaks of the collective of Black and Brown heritage. It's much like The United Methodist Church's understanding when the group Black Methodists For Church Renewal chose to call itself Black to include Latin and Caribbean and other Black and Brown persons from the diaspora.

"Black" is much larger than African Americans. "Black" isn't perfect, but then no term is.

Meanwhile, the extraordinary value of "Black" carries the same potent combination of pride, remembrance, and regret for which "African American" was designed. Think of what James Brown meant with "Say it loud, I'm Black, and I'm proud." And then imagine trying to say, "Say it loud, I'm African American, and I'm proud."

Why Use 'Black Church'?

The second term that needs to be handled is "Black church." The term "Black church" is used to describe Protestant churches that have predominately Black congregations. Richard Allen's cultural exclusion from mainline Methodism took the forms of Bethel African Church, founded in 1794, and the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, established in 1799. These twin creations are recognized as the emergence of the formalized Black church.

Over more than two centuries since then, the Black church has become a proper noun, a fixture, a seeming monolith in American society. There have been internal criticisms of the Black church almost as long as there has been a Black church. A nineteenth-century bishop of the A.M.E. denomination scorned call-and-response praise songs as "cornfield ditties." E. Franklin Frazier, the eminent Black sociologist, depicted the church as an obstacle to assimilation. Malcolm X ridiculed Christianity as "the White man's religion."¹

One must understand that the term Black church never meant the Pentecostals, the spiritualists, the Nation of Islam, the Garveyites, and the like. It was meant for

1. Samuel G. Freedman, "Call and Response on the State of the Black Church," New York Times, April 17, 2010, New York edition.

those traditional groups of Black Baptist, AME, and other religious denominations. Having grown up a Black United Methodist, it is clear to me that United Methodists and Black Catholics were never one of that great number of the historic Black church either, in the traditional sense.

Whatever the Black church may be historically or socially, the fact of the matter is, the Black church intuition represents liberation. The Black church still needs to be understood as a venerable institution that is central to Black life and a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation. Black churches are a religious reaction to unfortunate cultural realities. When and where African Americans were excluded from the many spheres of society—i.e., economic, educational, political, and mass media—the Black church lives.

Yet it must be acknowledged, as Dr. Ronald B. Neal of Claflin University pointed out, there is a clear myth that the Black church is only the oratory, quasi-liberal politics, and charismatic swagger of Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, Jesse L. Jackson, Al Sharpton, and Tavis Smiley. As Dr. Neal went on to point out, the definition is often limited also to “these living caricatures of Black and Christian America and PBS specials, black-and-white footage of the Civil Rights era, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”²

Thus the real problem, as some have framed the conversation, is that the Black church experience has become a caricature. The mythic Black church—as presented in movies by comedians and rappers depicting their ideas of the Black church—makes it difficult to imagine if you don’t know the full nature of the Black church. Many also limit the Black church to what they hear every time an African American who is a good orator (including President Obama) gets that intonation just right, sounding like a prophetic Black preacher.

So when all America sees are the caricatures of the Black church, it has turned into a cliché. The Black church is much more than its caricature. The legacy of the Black church is a long one. The church continues to redefine itself to meet the demands of new generations; there are those within its ranks who work to remove factors of social conservatism and align it with new movements.

But no matter what position it takes in the future, it cannot be denied that the Black church has been a pivotal force within Black American communities for hundreds of years, and that these generational memories are not likely to fade.

And yes, as a response to the current tri-pandemic, the social media virtual Black church is still growing and resurrecting itself.

2. Ronald B. Neal, “RIP: The Myth of the Black Church,” *Religion Dispatches*, March 15, 2010, <https://religiondispatches.org/bupdated-with-responseb-the-black-church-is-dead-long-live-the-black-church/>

Why Use ‘Black Preacher’?

Another term that needs some clarification is “Black preacher.” The Black preacher is a public theologian. The Black preacher fills the role of minister of public justice in creating and implementing religious policies and society procedures. They have defined the vocation of the pastor in a broad sense to providing counsel for various communities and institutions through sermons, lectures, writings, social protest, and direct action.

The Black preacher takes on a model similar to the Apostle Paul’s mentoring presence for evangelists in the early church. Many of the Black preacher’s writings are pastoral epistles. They tend to be focused on social justice and liberation. The Black preacher is committed to interpreting and explaining the significance of God’s justice.

Public theology is how a theologian represents a theological perspective in the public sphere to converse with and influence public-policy considerations. As a public theologian, Black preachers, from their cultural context, celebrate the value of all humanity. While many might think Black preachers are limited to their ethnic community, their preaching/teaching reaches the community as a whole regardless of race and ethnicity. Taking this conversation into the public square, they liberate the oppressed.

Words from my former president-dean from the International Theological Seminary, Robert Michael Franklin, seem a fitting description for the Black preacher’s ministry. Franklin writes that public theologians enter public conversations with a profound sense of humility, while they also respect the “sacredness of people and traditions.”³

For the Black preacher, the sermon is the primary product of the Black church, and it is the focus of ministry. However, this book uses Black preacher and not Black pastor to be intentional about the preaching role being extended into the ministry of the church.

The reality is there are Black pastors who can’t preach well, but there are no Black preachers who are not effective in the pastoral ministry of the church.

The influence of Black preachers’ sermons on religious persons is immeasurable but obvious. Black preaching infused much of the protests and demonstrations during slavery, the civil rights movement, and even now in the Black Lives Matter moment during the triple pandemics of disease, racism, and poverty. In most instances, the Black preacher has been the only person free enough to provide the type of commentary necessary to address the triple ills of society.

3. Adam L. Bond, *The Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Black Public Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 150, Kindle.

The Black preacher continues to bring up stories that question fairness and justice.

Being from Bennettsville, South Carolina, one of my favorite local writers is Dr. Chancellor Williams. In Williams' book, *Destruction of Black Civilization*, he tells the story of a young traveler in Africa who asks an old man, "Whatever happened to the people of Sumer? Legend has it that the people of ancient Sumer were Black!"

The old man stopped and thought for a moment. Then he softly said to the young traveler, "Ah! They forgot their story, and so they died!"⁴

America has a long list of stories that have been forgotten or covered up. Policy violence, rejection, and greed have too often been our legacy. And often, despite the calling of the Spirit and instruction of the Scripture, that legacy has been endorsed by the church. Think if you will of the Trail of Tears, the rejection of America's Native indigenous people and the genocide of those folk. In America's story, they have been rejected.

Think of the rejection of Black people's humanity, not just slavery, but chattel slavery, reducing human beings to nothing more than mere property and animals.

Think how, even in the original writing of the Constitution, women were rejected and poor White men who didn't have land were also rejected. Any people who fail to preach their story, any people who no longer celebrate God's involvement in their history, any people who ignore their past are people who are on their way to death. Psychologists call it social death. Theologians call it spiritual death. The Black church calls it eternal dry bones.

The Akan people have an essential symbol known as "sankofa." It is expressed in the Asante Adinkra symbols as a bird whose body is heading in one direction but whose head is turned in the opposite direction. What the symbol is teaching is that we cannot go forward without first going back to our past to understand how it is we got to where we are. Put another way, sankofa means that if we do not know from whence we came, we will forever be heading in the wrong direction.

The African concept of recognizing the past, honoring the past, understanding our history, embracing our past, and learning from our past is found not only among the Akan people. It is located in the purpose and function of the Black preacher.

Above all else, this book is written to help the Black preacher return to their first calling, telling the stories of the social, compassionate, and liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Black preacher must stand on the teachings of Jesus despite the pressure and magnetism of contemporary societal fads to mitigate the cross's work for the influx of capital expansion. The Black preacher must focus on sharing the Great Commission while also preaching a message of freedom, justice, equality, and hope

4. Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987).

for all persons from all stations of life.

This book is an attempt to lay out a plain and simple response to what some are calling the “new normal.” This new normal—while including Wi-Fi, weak internet, temperature checks, and face masks—has many old demons of American culture.

While this is a book for the Black preachers looking to refine and perfect their understanding of preaching, this book also is relevant to all preachers. This is also a book for any pastor who wants to improve their connection with the Black members that sit in their pews or work in their ministries.

This book is written to look at current issues of the day-to-day reality of Black Americans during and post COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis has, in fact, done to all of America what Hurricane Katrina did in 2005 for New Orleans: In its devastating impact, it shows that the political and social timbers have already been rotting away.

This book will make suggestions as to what the Black preacher should be preaching and will demonstrate what happens when great Black preaching takes place.

It will also, finally, show why Black preaching is different and what Black preaching can accomplish at its best.

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Chapter 1

Preaching in The Midst of a Civil Race War

“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”—Philippians 1:18, NIV

“Daddy once told me there’s a rage passed down to every Black man from his ancestors, born the moment they couldn’t stop the slave masters from hurting their families. Daddy also said there’s nothing more dangerous than when that rage is activated.”
—Starr, from *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

“We were unarmed, but we knew that blackness armed us, even though we had no guns.”—How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi

“All wars are civil wars because all men are brothers. ... Each one owes infinitely more to the human race than to the particular country in which he was born.”—François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon

The United States of America is at war. Many of the members in modern Black churches find themselves unarmed and unprepared during this war, the tri-pandemic’s civil war.

The United States is facing a conflict that, for years, took place behind the scenes and out of sight, but is now being fought in public and out in the open. The country finds itself in a civil race war.

As heavily armed, anti-lockdown protestors and far-right militias take to the

streets at the same time as hundreds of thousands protest against police brutality and racial injustice, an already traumatized American public and outside observers are now understanding that the United States is in trouble. A lot of that trouble, perhaps most of it, has to do with racism. Everywhere we turn, there is discord and division, death, and destruction. When we survey the land, we see a country full of a suffering we cannot fully understand and a history we can no longer deny.¹

The United States is still reeling from years of racial tension and graphic violence. While there is more than enough anger in America, some continue to fan the fire that has been lit under issues of health disparities and nonliving wages. This war started long before Dylann Roof's massacre of five Black clergy and four Black laypersons at Mother Emanuel AME in South Carolina and his announced race war. This civil race war is not White people against Black people. It's not a battle against North and South. It's not a battle against the union of the church and secession of the evangelical. It's God's Word fighting against racism.

Take a look at this society's decline in terms of organized religion. Preachers preach, and spiritualists teach, but fewer people listen, and those who visit churches and healing centers rarely heed what they hear. Today in this nation, racial and religious bigotries, blind nationalisms, and a myriad of other injustices are tolerated and even glorified by our philosophers, politicians, and presidents. These same leaders seem to be consumed with hatred regardless of their denominational affiliations. A brief look at America's stock market profits during the death of hundreds of thousands associated with COVID-19 is proof of how our country is sinking in greed. Many workers who fall way below a living wage fear tomorrow, while their bosses grab what they can today.

Since America's original Civil War, racism has not been as virulent throughout America, with short fuses burning on a thousand powder kegs. We have seen our most significant law enforcement agency, the FBI, sit for weeks in a stalemate with a small Montana cult, the Montana Freeman. The leaders of many racist groups preach that the descendants of northern Europeans are "God's chosen people," that Jews are "the children of Satan," and that Blacks and other people of color are by nature dumb and immoral.

We see the Proud Boys and other hate groups like the Aryan Nation, the skin-heads, the Ku Klux Klan, and assorted militias piling up weapons for what they say is a coming race war in America that will precede the return of Christ. The country cannot count on the FBI to always be as successful as it has been so far; a mass-casualty White-supremacist terror attack could inflame the situation beyond easy repair, which makes it even more urgent to win the ideological debate now, while continu-

1. Michael Eric Dyson, *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017), Kindle.

ing to hope that no such attack takes place.

Steve Bannon, former presidential advisor, has given many speeches in which he described *The Camp of the Saints* as his favorite book and quoted extensively from it. Bannon used the invocation of *The Camp of the Saints* to paint darker-skinned immigrants as an existential threat to White America and Europe, combined with a strain of Islamophobia to make a particularly toxic mix. Bannon talked about this explicitly in a speech he gave in the Vatican, where he praised the Roman Catholic Church for keeping Islam out of the Western world, referencing the Battle of Tours (AD 732) and the Siege of Vienna (AD 1529) and suggesting that the rise of the Islamic State group was the beginning of a generational conflict between Islam and Christianity.

In Bannon's words, "There is a major war brewing, a war that's already global. It's going global in scale, and today's technology, today's media, today's access to weapons of mass destruction, it's going to lead to a global conflict that I believe has to be confronted today."²

Yet many of these hate groups remain unchallenged by many of the preachers of the day. And on an even sadder note, many Black preachers have failed to renounce these cults' activities, choosing to keep a false sense of peace. The preacher's powerful platform, which can be used to promote love, hate, or indifference, has remained silent.

One of the many sad aspects of the civil rights movement is how so many churches endorsed and encouraged hatred. Some clergy condemned the marches for equality, while others tacitly supported White supremacists by refusing to talk about what was happening in the streets just outside their doors. Some church leaders were segregationists who cherry-picked Bible verses to try to justify their racism. Others were sympathetic to the civil rights movement, but afraid to speak out because they might be ostracized by other preachers or members of their own congregation.

Many times, Black preachers also knew they could become targets of the racists who lynched civil rights leaders and bombed not only Black churches but the homes of Black preachers. These preachers feared they could be next. They might end up having to carry that cross, too, and they were reluctant to do so.

Some White church leaders settled for addressing hate in muted terms in order to not offend the White supremacists sitting right in front of them in the pews. These preachers' refusal to criticize racism directly was seen by White supremacists as an endorsement from God. The current refusal of some of the country's leading political leaders and prominent Black preachers is nothing new.

2. J. Lester Feder, "This Is How Steve Bannon Sees The Entire World," BuzzFeed News, November 16, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world#.nbJr-rXK8gx>.

You cannot dismiss the recent rise of all these White hate groups as mere “angry White men,” for they have put forth acts of war in America. Look at Oklahoma City—the hate groups there were influenced by a novel, *The Turner Diaries*, published in 1978 under the pseudonym of Andrew Macdonald by a former physics professor named William Pierce. An uncompromising racist, Pierce has become the prophet of a Caucasian war, and his book has become the bible of the “save the White race” movement. Many White people who have just begun to read this book seem fixated on when and why “angry Blacks” will start the race war.

Four years ago, in the midst of civil unrest that followed five years of well-publicized reports of shootings by law enforcement of unarmed Black men, a growing chorus of public commentators suggested that America was on the verge of experiencing “another 1968.” They were referring to waves of violent, political protests with military and law enforcement responses, specifically over ongoing issues with racial oppression. Mass murderers who are inspired by White nationalism—from Anders Breivik in Norway to Roof in South Carolina to the Christchurch killer in New Zealand—echo French philosopher Albert Camus’ catchphrases in their writings. The vagueness of these catchphrases allows murderously minded individuals to apply the idea against anyone they may see as an outsider, including Muslims, Sikhs, Latinos, African Americans, Jews, and leftwing Norwegian activists. Fox News TV hosts Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham regularly promote these ideas.³

There is little new in the ideas that underpin White nationalism, White supremacy, the alt-right, and fascism. At its core, White nationalism is little more than an attempt to cloak White supremacist ideas in the more respectable language of racial separatism, just as the alt-right has tried to repackage fascist thought in a more modern form. All these variants are built on common notions of a White identity and racial superiority. They promote hate and violence as valid political tools, rejecting values of equality, coexistence, and the rule of law in favor of raw power and ethnic division.

You see, to understand the American war machine, you need to realize that America has in its history with the Civil War an ability to go to war and disregard the cost. Ta-Nehisi Coates clarifies just how important nationalism is to America, noting, “The implications of the true story are existential and corrosive to our larger national myth. To understand that the most costly war in this country’s history was launched in direct opposition to everything the country claims to be, to understand that this war was the product of centuries of enslavement, which is to see an even longer, total war, is to alter the accepted conception of America as a beacon of

3. Courtney Hagle, “How Fox News Pushed the White Supremacist ‘Great Replacement’ Theory,” *Media Matters for America*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.mediamatters.org/tucker-carlson/how-fox-news-pushed-white-supremacist-great-replacement-theory>.

freedom.”⁴

American nationalism is a combination of ideas, sentiments, and representations by which Americans understand the United States and their relationship to it. This has primarily been the province of U.S. historians and political psychologists. Yet, by almost any definition, the United States is no stranger to nationalism. And in recent U.S. political campaigns, conflicts over the nation’s meaning—from its treatment of immigrants and religious minorities to its rightful role on the world stage—have mobilized large segments of the Black church’s congregations. Michelle Alexander is correct when she lays out the truth that it has been the sin of racism that has masqueraded itself as nationalism that continues to survive. As Alexander said, “The history of racial caste in the United States would end with the Civil War if the idea of race and the racial difference died when the institution of slavery was put to rest. But during the four centuries in which slavery flourished, the idea of race flourished as well. Indeed, the notion of racial difference—precisely the idea of White supremacy—proved far more durable than the institution that gave birth to it.”⁵

Separating church and state is difficult for modern American Christians to comprehend because, too often, we incorporate nationalism and patriotism into much of our religious expression and even our faith. Christians’ challenge is to simultaneously honor the virtues of sacrifice, service, and freedom without idolizing the sin of nationalism, celebrating bravery without romanticizing violence, and realizing that our salvation comes from the Prince of Peace and not the wars of men. We may think it’s no big deal that our country’s flag stands alongside the Christian Flag in the Church on Sunday. But try to imagine the apostle Paul and the earliest churches pledging their allegiance to Caesar—conquering legions who were slaughtering anybody who stood in their way.

As citizens of the United States, it is almost impossible to follow Christ within a similar context as the earliest Christians were living within a mighty empire and susceptible to state-sponsored religion where it was socially, politically, and economically advantageous to adhere to certain political beliefs and leaders, even to the point of becoming a pseudo-theocracy. Jon Meacham maintains that the war between the ideal and the real, between what’s right and what’s convenient, between the larger good and personal interest is the contest that unfolds in the soul of every American⁶

Unfortunately, the Black church has been historically susceptible to nationalistic “Christianity.” We often treat our faith as a civic religion where we can establish a voting bloc and create enough influence to legislate laws, gain wealth, and consoli-

4. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (New York: One World Publishing, 2017).

5. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

6. Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2018), Kindle.

date power rather than sacrificially serve and love others. The stress between the Black church's nationalistic identity and its racial heritage has to be resolved. Since before the slave codes, Blacks have lived in a country filled with racial terror and state-sanctioned violence. This reality continues.

Many have rejected the idea that America is heading toward a race war, arguing that improvements in race relations and economic opportunities for Blacks, while far from perfect, mitigate against any kind of ongoing, widespread unrest along the lines of what we saw in 1968. However, in recent months, that type of optimism has faded. We face social unrest amid a backdrop of coronavirus-induced mass unemployment and increasing food scarcity, conditions most experts see as persisting for months. That will likely only exacerbate the potential for violence and unrest.

Economic uncertainty and food scarcity have fueled mass domestic violence throughout history, from the French Revolution through the Russian Revolution through the Arab Spring. There is a probability that the United States is next. We hear words being used that have not been spoken publicly in decades with purposeful wantonness so as to invoke and justify state-sanctioned racial terror. We are witnessing state-sanctioned violence used against peaceful protesters asserting their First Amendment rights. On June 1, 2020, police used rubber bullets and tear gas to clear peaceful protesters so that President Donald Trump could take a picture in front of St. John's Episcopal Church, across Lafayette Square.⁷ When the history of that presidency is written, the clash at Lafayette Square may be remembered as one of its defining moments. It may also be remembered as a blatant act of war against the Black Lives Matter protest.

Most pastors realize people come to church with deep fears, sorrows, and concerns that often remain unexpressed in worship. Many church members come to the church experience with a ready-to-battle mentality. As a preacher, I welcome the worshipper into my world of preaching social justice, prophetic preaching, dangerous homiletics, and beyond-the-norm teaching.

The best of historic Black preaching has always made space for healing. In worship, we use prayer, songs, sermons, silence, and reflection to process our grief. There has always been an understanding that the membership brings particular insights and trauma into the Black church. The Black preacher preaches to a community where childhood traumas of the physical, sexual, psychological, or family dysfunction—perhaps because of a depressed, addicted, absent, or abused parent—affect the congregation. Yet in the message, there is often a form of deliverance from the suffering.

In a society with a narcissistic egotist clinging to power and political office, how

7. Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman, "How Trump's Idea for a Photo Op Led to Havoc in a Park," *New York Times*, June 2, 2020, updated Sept. 17, 2020.

strange it would have been for someone like Jesus to declare that the rejected would lead the transformation.

In days past, the clarion call and mission of the Black preacher was twofold: they served as a beacon of hope for the lost soul who was seeking grace and mercy, but they also provided in their message a death knell for all issues affecting the community.

An excellent friend and mentor of mine once made the point that “sermon-building is a farce if the preacher has nothing to say.”⁸ Thus, the preacher’s message is to sum up the primary role Jesus lived out in kingdom building. God’s kingdom continues to unfold in the lives of the Black church. Within the church, there are many ways of recognizing that God’s kingdom is turning the world upside down with transforming power.

What Should the Black Preacher Preach in the Midst of a Race War?

The Black Preacher Has to Preach Christ

The Black preacher has to preach Christ even when the church and culture are at war. Black preachers must gladly join in the efforts to deal with race as a simple outworking of the Gospel in our cultural context. However, the Black preacher has to acknowledge we are in the midst of a race war. The Black preacher has to preach about the reality of the struggle.

As tension continues to mount, some claim we’re starting to see the beginning of this race war in America. But in reality, the narrative of racial warfare in the United States goes back two centuries. In a letter he wrote before assassinating President Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth claimed that “this country was formed for the White, not for the Black man,”⁹ a theme picked up by the KKK in its angry, murderous, and garbled calls for White power.

In 1967, Black militants like Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown, also noted racial violence in the United States was unavoidable. “I say violence is necessary,” Al-Amin said decades ago. “Violence is a part of America’s culture. It is as American as cherry pie. Americans taught Black people to be violent. We will use that violence to rid ourselves of oppression if necessary.”¹⁰

This is not to suggest that the Black preacher preach violence, but rather to be able to acknowledge its reality. Sure, the Black preacher could go the way of Mal-

8. Samuel D. Proctor, *The Certain Sound of the Trumpet: Crafting a Sermon of Authority* (King of Prussia, PA: Judson Press, 1994).

9. John Rhodehamel, ed. *Right or Wrong, God Judge Me: The Writings of John Wilkes Booth* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

10. H. Rap Brown, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Rap_Brown.

coln X and state: “The world since Adam has been White—and corrupt. The world of tomorrow will be Black—and righteous. In the White world, there has been nothing but slavery, suffering, death, and colonialism. In the Black world of tomorrow, there will be true freedom, justice, and equality for all. And that day is coming—sooner than you think.”

But the Black preacher has to say it in the voice of peace, not instigation. Peace is a much more useful term for understanding the collaboration of people of color in upholding and maintaining racial hierarchies that do not involve force. Peace is better than the phrase “internalized racism,” a term most often used to suggest that Black people have absorbed negative feelings and attitudes about blackness. The idea that to preach peace is not a reduction of the appeal to a higher morality is clear. Jesus Christ is the only reason we can truly live peacefully with God. The right relationship with God is the foundation of living in harmony with all his creation. The peace of Christ is a key to have harmony in life, enabling us to live with a grateful heart (Colossians 3:15).

Jesus addresses not only our spiritual needs but also our emotional and physical concerns.

Great Black Preaching Aligns Scripture

Great Black preaching aligns Scripture with the significant issues of the day in the form of prophetic truth-telling. They deliver a prophetic word of Jesus as the Messiah at war.

The Black preacher has to preach Jesus as a political revolutionary. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was a political revolutionary. We have to understand Jesus as a political figure in the middle of a war.

I repeat: Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was a political revolutionary.

Now, to say Jesus was political doesn't mean he sought to start yet another protest party in Galilee or Washington, D.C. Most congregations are fed up with political parties, red and blue alike. No, when we understand Jesus as a revolutionary, it doesn't mean he was “involved in politics” in the sense that we know it today, with its bargaining and compromises and power plays and partisanship. And it certainly doesn't mean he wanted to wage war or overthrow the Roman Empire by force.

What it means is you can't see Jesus if you don't see his role as Messiah. A messiah is a savior or liberator of a group of people. The concept of Mashiach (Messiah) is a king or high priest traditionally anointed with holy anointing oil. Messiahs were not exclusively Jewish. Great Black preachers also have to make sure their preaching connects the Messiah concept with the ideals of the Old Testament prophets. Black prophetic preaching means they deliver messages modeled by classical biblical prophets, such as Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, and Amos, who boldly and publicly

critiqued the oppressive and exploitative behaviors of the rulers and ruling classes in their respective settings in life.¹¹

The great Black preacher cannot become so entangled with a message of Messiah riches that it overlooks the crucial issues of daily life: deteriorating education, unaffordable housing, rising unemployment, marginal health care, and more.

The Black Preacher Is Different Because of Trauma

The Black preacher's preaching is different because it is born of many different dimensions of trauma. In the Black congregation, there are members suffering a variety of traumatic stress often diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. Simultaneously, the PTSD diagnosis conjures up images of hollow-eyed combat veterans or terrified rape victims.

New research indicates that racism can be just as devastating as gunfire or sexual assault. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Black preaching has had to take on new expressions and relevance. Their preaching must always be relevant to one's social condition and still available to speak truth to power. As Ralph Ellison once commented, "Trying to deal with the Negro problem apart from dealing with America's problem is like trying to do brain surgery with a switchblade."¹²

The term "trauma" describes exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure. Black people are at very high risk for complex trauma exposure. Black people living in racially and economically segregated communities are more likely than persons in other communities to live in poverty, to be placed in foster or substitute care, to be exposed to both familial and community violence, to lose a loved one to violent death, to have a family member incarcerated, to experience contacts with police and the justice system, or to become homeless.

The nation's recent events have brought on a lot of challenges for many people across the country and around the world. While this can affect everyone's mental health, it is apparent Black people are particularly affected. Not only can social isolation from COVID-19 cause feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression, but when you add in the fact that Black people are dying at a disproportional rate—because of the virus and recent extreme police brutality and violence—these events can take a serious toll, especially on spiritual persons of color.

Black preachers have to understand there is no way to preach effectively on empowerment when the congregation is battling daily, in the streets, issues like hate,

11. Obery M. Hendricks Jr., *The Universe Bends toward Justice: Radical Reflections on the Bible, the Church, and the Body Politic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), Kindle.

12. Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), loc. 173, Kindle.

poverty, and racism. However, the death factor adds more stress to an already unbalanced system. Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put the Black community at an increased risk of getting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The disproportionate deaths and illnesses in the Black community because of COVID-19 can be an additional stressor for a person already experiencing stress, anxiety, or depression.

Many people of color work in so-called essential industries, such as nursing, home health care, grocery stores, and mass transit, where they are more likely to come into close contact with people who are sick. To make matters worse, these jobs are often poorly paid, and a large proportion of such workers lack health or life insurance. In addition, many Black, Latinx and indigenous communities have high rates of underlying health conditions, including diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, which are known risk factors for severe illness and death from COVID-19. These disparities can be traced back largely to the racism and redlining that have resulted in poor, overcrowded housing and exposed people of color to more severe levels of air pollution, factors that exacerbate all these health problems.

These are the same persons who are coming into local Black churches looking for a sense of trauma relief during the virus. The Black preacher thus comes to realize that their role in biblical and theological reflection cannot end in preaching. The work of the church must matter on the ground. The ground—where people are living and bleeding.

The Black preacher is different because they have to tell folks, both now and the next time there is a pandemic (and there will be a next time), that we cannot allow the same appalling racial disparities to determine who lives and who dies.

Black Preaching at Its Best Preaches Biblical Justice

Black preaching at its best preaches on the more than 2,000 Scriptures in the Bible that talk about how we ought to challenge injustice toward the poor, women, children, immigrants, and those considered on the margins. These preachers need to look at Jesus's political theology.

When Jesus preached his first sermon, he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18a KJV). The "poor" were those who had been victimized by economic exploitation. And the good news was healing to the brokenhearted, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed.

Most importantly, Black preachers at their best connect all these ideas with a strong attachment to Social Gospel. This approach to the social message of Jesus had already started to divide Protestants by the end of the nineteenth century. Since the creation of the Protestant fundamentalist movement, the Social Gospel was being

downplayed by conservative Protestants (especially evangelicals).

But Black preachers have to view racial and economic oppression as social evils that Christians have a moral duty to resist. They see the church as equally weaponized for war to both individual and social salvation. That's why Frederick Douglass said, "You can't love the Christianity of Christ and embrace the religion of the slave master. To love one is to hate the other." And that's why Douglass never called the religion of the slave master Christianity.

The Black preacher has to preach a gospel that teaches that winning a war is good and just. It is time they rejected the idea that Black Christians should "turn the other cheek," especially when confronted with violence designed to maintain the status quo. They have to realize simply to say that Jesus did not use violence is not evidence relevant to the condition of Black people as they decide what to do about White oppression. Therefore, Black people must determine their own means of resistance, and violence remains an option.

What is more, in the Black preacher's view, the terms "violence" and "nonviolence" were misunderstood. It was an irony for them that White critics discussed Black violence especially in relation to civil rights movement actions but were usually silent about White violence against Black people.

Despite its terrible realities and unfortunate tragedies, the Black preacher sometimes has to see war and even violence as an instrument of justice and a means toward peace where there is no peace. Since even Scripture admits "there is a time for war," and since Revelation envisions a second coming framed in militaristic metaphors, war has its time and should not be considered all evil.

At the risk of seeming militaristic, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.

The Black preacher is responsible for preaching that enlightens the member that there is a war at hand.

About the Author



A native of both Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Bennettsville, South Carolina, Rev. Amiri B. Hooker received and accepted his calling in junior high school. He has been active in ministry now some 27 years. His immediate family includes his loving wife, Sgt. Valerie Hooker, oldest son Gabriyan, oldest daughter Sba Onesty Asha, youngest son Omri Charles-Bernard, and baby girl Sia Bari Ashira.

Hooker attended Methodist University in Fayetteville, North Carolina, at the encouragement of the late Bishop Joseph B. Bethea. There he majored in biblical studies, helped organized the State Black Student Network, and worked with the Children's Defense Fund and Black Community Crusade to help resurrect the Freedom Schools concept and the idea of racial uplift in young African-American adults.

After graduating with high honors from Methodist University, Hooker went on to enroll in a Master of Divinity program at the famed Gammon Division of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where he majored in theology with a concentration in African thought under the direction of Dr. Asa Hilliard.

During seminary, Hooker was ordained as a United Methodist pastor, received several awards, and was selected as a member of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations. Hooker has prophetically served churches he has been appointed to in various ways. He has faithfully served the South Carolina Annual Conference as a Bishop Joseph Bethea Award winner, Advocacy Convener and chair of the inaugural Racial Reconciliation Design Team. He has also partnered with schools, Head Start, and minister's groups. He serves as a board member of the South Carolina Christian Action Council and the National African American Ministers Leadership Council as the chair of the MICAHA Group and is one of the tri-chairs in the South Carolina division of the Poor People's Campaign. He is also a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Black Methodists for Church Renewal.

Yet the simple truth is best. If asked, he says, "I am just a child of God, called by God."

"For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts."—1 Thessalonians 2:3-4, NIV

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What does it mean to be a "great Black preacher" in the midst of the fear, uncertainty, new technological challenges, and ever-changing scope of the church today? That's what the Rev. Amiri B. Hooker explores in this groundbreaking book on innovative and Spirit-filled ways to bring Jesus and justice to the people. A fierce challenge to rise up and embrace prophetic, transformative preaching, *Preaching In the Midst Of ...* draws from a rich blend of hip hop artists, theologians, and other intellectuals as it guides readers toward a new paradigm for bringing the gospel message with relevance, authority, and truth.



Rev. Amiri B. Hooker has been an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church for two decades in South Carolina. He is active with a number of groups including the Advocacy Ministry Team and Racial Reconciliation Design Team for the UMCSC, South Carolina Christian Action Council, National African American Ministers Leadership Council, Poor People's Campaign, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Black Methodists for Church Renewal.

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