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Sermon and Song

A Musically Integrative Homiletic

Catherine E. Williams

Sing to the Lord, bless his name, proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.

Psalm 96:2 (NKJV)

Many of us know the delight of combining two elements that do well enough on their own, yet when blended create a superior, integrated product. Orange juice and champagne each provides its own gustatory experience, period. Blend them into a Mimosa and that period turns into an exclamation point! Or if one prefers nonalcoholic drinks, imagine a tray of summer beverages with a pitcher of iced tea next to one of freshly squeezed lemonade. The Arnold Palmer integrates tea and lemonade to deliver, by way of taste, a more nuanced delight than its separate elements are capable of. As a musically trained homiletician, I have witnessed the nuanced, integrative delight where sermon and song are harmoniously conjoined; the resulting sonic blend has an impact that exceeds what speaking or singing on its own would produce. I use the terms *hymn*, *song*, *music*, *congregational song*, and *singing* interchangeably to indicate sung lyrics in the context of worship. Within the limits of this discussion, I do not differentiate between homily and sermon, though in other contexts differentiation between the two is warranted. *Sermon*, *homily*, *preaching*, and *proclamation* appear interchangeably in this essay to indicate the act of declaring or telling forth the good news of the Gospel in a service of Christian worship. This harmonious blending of sermon and song or homily and hymn is well established in current Christian worship practices across denominational and cultural groups.

Although utilized every Sunday somewhere in the world in one of its many iterations, the sermon-song dyad rarely, if ever, appears as a methodological option in classic homiletical repertoire or pedagogical literature. Although songs often appear in and around sermons, how many preachers have been taught to think of this combination as a substantive homiletical method? How many homilists resource hymns as a routine part of their sermon preparation? There is no denying the numerous biblical examples that validate this dyad's effectiveness, the significant precedents of its use in the history of the church, and its ubiquity in a wide variety of worship settings, particularly among faith communities of color. Students from Black, Brown, and Asian communities are entering North American seminary classrooms in increasing numbers. There is growing need for formal preaching instruction to pay more informed attention to the underrepresented preaching practices and values of these growing numbers of diverse students in the seminary classroom. Preaching in these academically minoritized communities is often thriving, essential, and central to worship life; it is also often organically and synergistically blended with music in their worship services. This essay argues, therefore, that sermon and song, harmoniously conjoined, not only deserves a conspicuous place in homiletical pedagogy, it merits closer attention in the preacher's sermon preparation process.

I enter this musico-homiletical conversation bringing a symbiotic set of perspectives that include: lifelong experiences in the church as the daughter of a pastor-musician; over forty years of formal musical training and experience as a pianist, vocalist, vocal coach, choral conductor, and church music director; and more than twenty years of training and experience as a homilist (one who preaches) and homiletician (one who studies and teaches preaching). Lifelong exposure to a variety of worship liturgies has endowed me with a personal database of hundreds of “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs”¹ across the many genres sung in Christian worship. Years of formal musical training have given me theoretical and practical lenses through which to analyze and evaluate church music. Eleven years of formal theological education have afforded me theoretical and theological lenses for examining and understanding the practices of preaching and singing. Scores of classroom lectures in preaching and worship have connected me with students from many countries, denominations, and cultural backgrounds, all of whom have expanded and enriched my homiletical horizons. These educational opportunities and lived ecclesiastical experiences are inextricably fused within me as a practical theologian, hence the profound interest in this conjoined method of preaching and singing, and my witness to its efficacy.

In the following discussion, I begin with a review of recent scholarly conversations around preaching and singing as a homiletical method. Next, I consider the precedents of conjoined sermon and song found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. Precedent continues throughout the history of the Christian church. Here, I briefly overview historical

practices and reflect on the contributions of women and minorities to this homiletical method. Following these warrants, I offer to preachers an introductory view of some variations on this theme of conjoined homily and hymn, including one contemporary example. Then, drawing on homiletical theory and practice, I make a case for including integrated preaching and singing in the introductory canon of methods taught to students of preaching. Ultimately, I urge homileticians and homilists to bring this age-old method out of the shadows and into vibrant use. Our faithfulness to the social locations of our diverse students and congregations is at stake.

Scholarly Soundings

A survey of literature published in the past fifteen years in the disciplines of homiletics and liturgy reveals that this dyad of sermon and song has not been given the significant methodological attention it deserves. The *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* hosted lively scholarly conversation around preaching and singing in its first year of publication, 2015. Markus Rathey, guest editor of this themed issue, writes pointedly of the symbiotic value of these two liturgical elements: “The musician and the preacher both perform a text. And preaching and music both elicit an emotional as well as an intellectual response from the listener.”² One particular contributor to this journal issue explicitly challenges homileticians to pay serious attention to this integrative method.

Musicologist Emmett G. Price III issues a resounding call in “Singing the Sermon: Where Musicology Meets Homiletics.” Price believes it is “imperative to study singing and preaching together, in addition to studying them separately.”³

Using biblical and historical warrants and the contemporary experience of Black preaching, Price calls our attention to the proven effectiveness of this dyad, particularly when there is alignment of message and medium. Price's analysis points to the importance of conjoining preaching and singing as a matter of cultural resonance in Black worshipping communities. Africana communities share a holistic worldview in which all of life is gathered up into the sacred, the spiritual; dichotomies give way to a more permeable way of being in the world. The experiences of a sung sermon or a preached song, a hymn that proclaims or a song-filled sermon, are organic expressions of shared values across African diasporic communities. Like Wyatt Tee Walker before him, Price gives credit to preaching and singing in Black church traditions as vital, historic, culturally accredited methods of communication.⁴

In addition to Price's scholarly article, two volumes, published within the past decade, amplify the call for homileticians and homilists to give attention to this dyadic method. *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*, by Luke Powery, professor of homiletics and dean of the Duke University Chapel, is a groundbreaking work that examines homiletics through the lens of the spirituals of enslaved Africans. The conjoining of preaching and singing in *Dem Dry Bones* is a spiritual activity particularly meaningful at the intersection of life, death, and hope. Powery emphasizes the sermonic nature of these songs: "Singing the spirituals was a part of what it meant to preach; thus even singing the spirituals counted as preaching. . . . The most profound sign of their union is the musicality of both."⁵ Drawing attention to the significance of conjoined preaching and singing within

the earliest Black communities in the United States, Powery reminds us that such preaching is still a matter of life, death, and hope for today's Black congregations. Furthermore, all congregations stand to benefit from the organic blending of spirituals and sermons.

A second recent volume that calls homileticians to pay robust attention to the sermon-song dyad is Tom Troeger's *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry*. Classically trained flautist, poet, hymnist, and veteran homiletician, Troeger writes under an informed conviction that artistic portals between the human and the holy are indispensable to our sense of wonder in worship. Troeger covers hymns, "pure" or wordless music, and poetry in this discourse on art accessible in and through preaching. He is convinced that use of these art forms as texts "is a method that belongs in a preacher's repertoire of varied homiletical strategies."⁶ In his chapter dedicated to preaching on hymns, Troeger offers insightful analysis of hymns as midrashim. He argues that, like rabbis, Christian preachers also understand biblical texts to be subject to multiple interpretations that connect specifically with the life situations of the interpreters. Therefore, "hymns as midrashim keep the gathered church mindful that what matters is not simply the literal page but the encounter with the living God, who, like the wise rabbis, allows multiple and even conflicting interpretations of the same biblical passage."⁷ For Troeger and many other preachers, this is how thoughtful, inspired hymn lyrics can preach effectively and with relevance. The chapter ends with three of Troeger's sermons, one written on a spiritual, the other two based on hymns by Charles Wesley. These sermon samples

model thorough exegesis of both content and creation of the hymn selection.

The writings of Price, Powery, and Troeger in the past decade endorse, explain, and model the strategic use of conjoined sermon and song. They affirm preachers who employ this method. They also make a case for teachers of preaching to add this perspective to their syllabi.

Biblical Soundings

The claim, shared by Price, Powery, and Troeger, that the sermon-song dyad deserves greater homiletical focus finds support in substantial biblical warrants. The corpus of songs in the Hebrew Bible titled the Psalms is a rich repository of songs-that-preach and sermons-that-sing. A quick database search on “preaching the Psalms” or any combination of words that link the Psalms to preaching will reveal the perennially popular use of these songs in pulpit delivery. Their very inclusion among the weekly Revised Common Lectionary options used by preachers for sermon texts is reason to value a homiletical method wherein music is integral. Common usage of these preaching texts draws attention to the theological or ethical themes within these songs and their liturgical value as mediums of prayer or praise. Yet when we preach on a psalm we are actually conjoining sermon and song. As he urges worship designers to consider the musical value of the Psalms, John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, reminds us: “While reading Psalms is accessible and open to several creative variations, the vast majority of resources for rendering the Psalms in worship involve singing. The Psalms cry out to be sung.”⁸ These original Hebrew sermon-songs have inspired thousands of hymns, spiritual songs, and nonliturgical music over the

centuries. One recent, seminal collection that offers several, diverse musical settings of each psalm points to the sermonic value of the psalm-inspired hymns, “Each musical setting of a psalm is, in its own way, a miniature sermon or interpretation of the psalm.”⁹ Thus, whether recited, sung, or preached, psalm texts call us to consider the merits of the sermonic dyad in proclaiming God’s good news.

In both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament writings, the practice of incorporating psalm and hymn fragments instructs and affirms preachers drawn to this homiletical method. This interweaving of psalms and doctrine, of song fragments and preaching, occurs frequently and organically in the scriptures. The songs are about real individual and communal life against the backdrop of a living faith in a living God. Lament, confusion, frustration, anger, and hopelessness find musical expression equally with thanksgiving, jubilation, and commemoration. Something about singing adds meaningful dimension to life in all its highs and lows. In St. Paul’s letter to the Romans there is a remarkable example of the way a song fragment assists the preacher to proclaim.

Romans reads for the most part like a theological treatise or a legal argument. Although dry and dogmatic in some parts, there are times when the writer gets caught up in the inspiration of an idea, his speech becomes noticeably heightened, and before you know it he is preaching, and out comes a song. Romans chapter 8 segues from the lament that ends chapter 7, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Chapter 8 launches into an answer that features the beautifully complex work of the Spirit that essentially compensates for our human weakness. Before long, Paul seems touched

by that Spirit as he moves into a rhetorical rhythm that bespeaks his growing assurance. At the height of his impassioned argument-turned-sermon, the apostle shifts into a sequence of rhetorical questions reminiscent of the celebratory ending of an African-American sermon. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Paul eloquently enumerates one dire human situation after another, in the middle of which he bursts into a psalm/song fragment that underscores the rising sense of devastation: "for thy sake we are being killed all day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (Ps. 44:22). Somewhere from the depths of the writer's soul surfaced a song he may have chanted many times in the synagogue, a song just fitting for that peak sermonic moment. These rhetorically sequenced, climactic cadences of this well-known and oft-quoted scripture passage (Romans 8:31-39) have inspired hundreds of hymns, songs, choruses, and poems.¹⁰ Such is the enduring power of the harmonious merger of sermon and song. The epistle to the Hebrews, the letters attributed to Peter, James, and John all contain fragments of or allusions to the Hebrew psalter, as the writers combine teaching or preaching with song. On occasion New Testament writers will insert fragments of early Christ-hymns or Greek poetry in their letters,¹¹ adding artistic value and texture to their delivery. The biblical writers, in their manner of proclamation and teaching, invite us as homilists and homileticians into the delight of blended sermon and song.

Historical Soundings

As in the earliest days of the Christian church, this dyad of homily and hymn has been employed by preachers in service of

the many functions of the church. Greek musical culture is said to have had a significant influence on the preaching of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In doing their apologetic and exegetical work, these early church fathers tapped into existing pagan musical ideas to teach the rudiments of Christianity to the faithful.¹² The field of Byzantine studies reveals a similar practice as "the liturgical performance of Christian hymns and sermons creatively engaged the faithful in biblical exegesis, invited them to experience theology in song, and shaped their identity."¹³ Song and preaching are said to be two persistent themes of Franciscan musical thought.¹⁴ Artistic representations and other artifacts of medieval preaching reveal that not only was Francis known as a singing preacher, but his was "a model that Franciscan patrons imitated in their own vocation as clerics and priests."¹⁵ The antiphonal chanting of the Divine Offices throughout early and late medieval liturgical practices is linked with this idea of combined proclamation and music. In speaking to a gathering of Dominican brothers, Br. Lawrence Lew OP reflects on St. Paul's admonition to the early Christians in Ephesus and Colossae. He sees a compelling correlation between "addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) and preaching. Brother Lawrence reasons that when Christians down through the ages sing the Divine Offices to one another antiphonally, "the sung Liturgy is an important kind of holy preaching that we, gathered as the Body of Christ, can perform together. Truly then, singing the Office, is a kind of preaching that all of us – lay and ordained – can share in."¹⁶

Prominent figures of Christian church history who have combined sermon and

song with enduring impact include the Reformer, Martin Luther (1483–1546). Luther, and his clerical protégées after him, not only used hymns as illustrations in their sermons, they would often use Luther's scripturally and theologically dense hymns in lieu of biblical texts. Lutheran scholar Robert A. Kolb concludes that "Luther's concept of God's Word as the Holy Spirit's instrument for bringing people to saving faith enabled his followers to see in hymn texts a basis from which the biblical message could be proclaimed."¹⁷ For Lutherans today preaching on hymn texts remains a homiletical practice, but not just any hymn will do, according to the title of missionary John Bombaro's article in a Lutheran e-newsletter.¹⁸

Arguably the most prolific historical example of a musical homilist would be Charles Wesley (1707–1778). Although best known for his copious contributions to Christian hymnody, very early in the course of the Methodist movement Wesley established himself as "a preacher of significant ability whose discourses were powerful and able to affect those to whom they were addressed."¹⁹ A student of the Bible in its original languages, trained in the art of rhetoric and logic, and familiar with patristic, medieval, and Reformation theologians, Wesley's hymns and homilies had a remarkable impact on early Methodism. Wesleyan historian J. Ernest Rattenbury believes it was Charles', and not his brother John's, "that was the most effective and comprehensive statement of Methodist doctrine. He expressed in attractive and forceful verse what sometimes John wrote in labored syllogisms."²⁰ As preacher and poet, Charles Wesley shaped the congregational song into a vehicle that functioned in every way as a potent, perennial means of

proclamation. Like Luther, Wesley would often preach and sing a hymn on the same biblical text. The musico-homiletical legacy of these sixteenth- and eighteenth-century figures of church history is one we do well to study and emulate in our congregations and classrooms.

It is worth mentioning that women hymn writers have historically done significant preaching through their hymns. Women such as German Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), student and friend of Martin Luther Elisabeth Cruciger (1500–1535), Danish hymnist and translator Birgitte Hertz Boye (1742–1824), North American mission worker Fanny J. Crosby (1820–1915), and Black Gospel Music Hall of Famer Doris Akers (1923–1995) are but a few representatives of women hymnists whose proclamation in song has been enduring and influential. Historically, most of these women were denied access to a formal pulpit, yet they found a way to proclaim the Gospel to countless Christians through the lyrics of their sermonic songs. In her study of the Scandinavian Lutheran hymnody of seven female composers, Luther Seminary professor of rhetoric and hymn writer Gracia Grindal notes the strong influence of preaching on their music and poetry. It became clear to Grindal that in their hymns, these women "were also addressing their audiences as preacher, even though the notion of being pastors and preachers had probably not been an aspiration they had felt."²¹ Contemporary female examples of singing homileticians or preaching hymnists would include singer, songwriter, and gospel music recording artist Shirley Caesar-Williams (b. 1938) and Presbyterian pastor and hymn writer Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (b. 1961). In reflecting on the homiletical

maxim of using the Bible and the newspaper as resources for faithful, relevant preaching, Winfrey Gillette sees her hymns doing the same work: “Like sermons, hymns can help us to celebrate how faith and life go together.”²² Caesar-Williams calls herself a singing evangelist: “Anyone who has been to any of my group’s concerts or who has attended my church knows this is what I do: I sing a sermon and I preach a song.”²³ As an African-American artist Caesar-Williams models a culturally authentic practice familiar to African preachers and singers.

In Africa and the African diaspora, the sermon-song dyad taps into deep cultural and spiritual history. African-American preaching has historically had its roots in the storytelling traditions of West African griots, whose narratives, speeches, and community announcements were either sung or embellished with song.²⁴ African bishop Eben Nihwatiwa declares matter-of-factly in his guide for local preachers that Africans are singing people. Thus “An African preacher is expected to embellish the sermon with songs.”²⁵ Musicality, whether rhythm or intonation, is integral to communication in African-oriented communities. Early Black preaching in the United States led to the creation of spirituals, many of which were an impromptu riff off a meaningful catchphrase delivered by the preacher. For students and scholars of preaching for whom this feature of Black preaching remains in the historical shadows, there are numerous homileticians whose writings cast light on the importance of musicality in Black preaching. Wyatt Tee Walker, Henry H. Mitchell, Ella Pearson Mitchell, Frank A. Thomas, Cleophus J. LaRue, Valerie Bridgeman Davis, and Teresa Fry Brown are but a tiny sampling of Black scholars whose works are ample in their historical analysis and explanation of varied

dimensions of Black preaching. In this vein of preaching and music, Evans Crawford’s *The Hum* and Luke Powery’s *Dem Dry Bones* are fitting works for the homilist’s bookshelf and the homiletician’s syllabus.²⁶ The musicality of Black preaching is addressed more specifically in the following section.

Musical Soundings – Theme and Variations

The subject of blended homily and hymn is one some might find intimidating on account of the musical element. Preachers or homileticians may wonder how accessible this method might be to someone who considers themselves lacking in musical ability or sensibility. I hope in this section to touch on the variety of ways preachers all along the spectrum of musical ability might engage this dyad.

Theme and variations is a musical form that allows the composer to start with a single musical theme or idea, then “play” with that theme, restating and expressing it in a variety of creative ways.²⁷ I use this musical nomenclature to highlight the expansive nature of this homiletical theme of harmoniously conjoined sermon and song. Based on this analogy, the main theme is the basic combination of sermon and song, or homily and hymn. There are many ways to achieve this blend, allowing for differing musical abilities and tastes—these would be the variations. To the one who questions whether this is truly accessible to all preachers, the answer is an encouraging “Yes.” This section on “musical soundings” is meant to affirm those who use this practice, and demonstrate various levels of engagement to those who may be shy or skeptical of it.

One of the more accessible variations lies within the scope of structured liturgy.

This approach relies on the ways worship designers—pastor, musician, or both working together—intentionally preselect congregational, choral, or other service music to align with the sermon’s scriptural or thematic base. These selections create a general sense of harmony throughout the liturgy, when the theme or focus of the service is stated and reiterated between scripture, prayer, sermon, and music. As a pastor, I once served alongside a spiritually grounded, formally trained music director, who took great care to find just the right choral anthem and hymns for each service, based on the Scripture or seasonal theme of the day. The result was often an amplification of the Word proclaimed. Collaboration between preacher and musician provides access to this method of preaching for a “nonmusical” preacher, for whom Tom Troeger provides an encouraging nudge: “Good preachers are always learning about fields other than what they studied in school and using what they learn to proclaim God’s word.”²⁸ If the pastor is both preacher and worship designer, this is a prime opportunity for creating such harmony between the sermon and the music, particularly the congregational songs. For the non-musically trained pastor putting together a service of worship, it helps to bounce ideas off a member of the staff or the congregation regarding the selection of music. Someone who is musical, or a music aficionado, can add the artistic perspective that brings integrative delight to preaching. Collaborative preparation adds depth and dimension to our liturgical work.

More direct integration is possible between homily and hymn when the preacher, in the process of sermon preparation, identifies a song that underscores the main sermon idea. The

preacher may begin, end, or bookend the sermon with this musical selection. In my preaching classes, I encourage students to have as handy resources not just the Bible and the newspaper—a maxim questionably attributed to Karl Barth—but also a hymnal or a hymn database website. Most hymnals have several indexes at the back that identify connections between specific hymns and certain topics or scriptural references. It is not unusual for those lyrical resources to end up as the sermon title or a pithy catchphrase within the sermon. Consonance between hymn and homily in this structure adds dimension to the sermon delivery just as four-part harmony adds depth to a hymn tune. This strategy is also accessible to the preacher who might self-identify as unmusical or lacking a singing voice. The congregation or other vocalists can take care of the singing, leaving the preacher to verbally highlight phrases or stanzas that co-relate with the sermon.

In a slightly different variation, the preacher may use a refrain or several stanzas of a song to weave through the fabric of the sermon. This polyphonic pattern of sermon and song happens through a process that may resemble a musical fugue. In this musical form a melodic theme is sounded by one instrument or voice before being handed off to another. By the end of the fugue the theme has been restated directly, indirectly, in different registers and timbres. In this variation of the homily-hymn dyad the preacher selects a hymn that aligns closely with the scripture or topic, then weaves fragments, phrases, or entire stanzas of the hymn throughout the sermon. One pastor used John Ylvisaker’s hymn *Borning Cry*²⁹ as a parallel lyric text woven throughout her sermon on Christian Education Sunday.

The lyrics of *Borning Cry* represent the voice of God, reassuring singers of their Creator's abiding presence from first to final breath and the life-stages in between. The preacher used the parallel theological idea of Christian Education as a life-long discovery of God through varying levels of maturity. She sang the song's stanzas at those corresponding life-stages in the sermon. The impact of this repeated, staggered layering—of lyrical ideas over didactic thought over biblical references—can give a robust feel to the sermonic moment. It also facilitates the kind of coherence and consonance that enable listeners to recall the central message of the sermon.

Another intentional use of this dyadic method treats the sermon as an exegetical journey through a theologically rich song. This is no new homiletical invention. There are historical as well as contemporary examples of this powerful preaching practice, where the music is the preaching text.³⁰ Often when the preacher is also a poet, when the homilist is also a hymnist, this harmony of preaching and singing is effortless and organic. Emmett Price illustrates such synergy in his analysis of Charles Albert Tindley's song-sermon titled "Heaven's Christmas Tree." Price points to the organic alignment within this method, so effective that Tindley was prevailed upon to preach this same song-sermon every Christmas for several years running. "Tindley's alignment to the systematic theology of the United Methodist Church is reflected in both song and sermon. It allowed him to effectively transition back and forth between the two mediums, particularly when he 'sang the sermon.'"³¹ Effective use of this variation of conjoined homily and hymn serves to

amplify the hymn's theological value; it draws due attention to the theological rigor of many hymns whose value might otherwise remain at the level of sentiment.

This list of variations on the theme of conjoined preaching and singing would not be complete without mention of the stylistic use of heightened, intoned speech that comes at the climax of a sermon. This practice is more common in African-American preaching traditions, where it goes by many names—(w)hooping and tuning up are two of the more commonly used. Teresa Fry Brown eloquently describes this musical sermonic feature as "an intensified, poetic, alliterative, verbal or nonverbal, spirit-endowed rhetorical device [where] the voice runs the entire tonic scale."³² At its finest this sonic crescendo provides something of a tonal center in the worship space, inviting all in the room to resonate within the same spiritual key of the sermon. For Evans Crawford this congregational resonance extends the sermon beyond the sole purview of the preacher; it gathers the listening community into what he calls "participant proclamation," a communal expression of the priesthood of all believers.³³

This stylized variation of the sermon-song dyad is laden with cultural and spiritual meaning for many in Black worshipping communities. Martha Simmons writes about this practice as a signature tonality with its roots in African culture; she reminds us that "not all African American preachers are whoopers."³⁴ Similarly, not all whoopers are Black. Simmons references this tonality in some historical and contemporary white preaching. She offers that the tonal preaching of the eighteenth-century revivalist George Whitefield can be traced into what was called in Georgia the "holy whine" in White Baptist churches. Tonal preaching tends to feature

more frequently in traditional Pentecostal, Baptist, or Holiness traditions. Within some Black communities intoned preaching is also evidence of anointed or Spirit-inspired preaching. William C. Turner argues for homiletical musicality in Black preaching as “kratophany,” or manifestation of divine power. He writes, “within the context of the culture that sustains black preaching, there is no modality more indicative of the presence of deity, power, and intrusion from another order than that of the preached word circumscribed by musicality.”³⁵

It must be acknowledged that musicality in Black sermons is not limited to the practice of whooping. Simmons writes that “the post-1970’s forms of whooping are much less melodic and filled with fewer pauses. They require a quick speech pace, and they contain numerous crescendo moments and continuous cadence.”³⁶ Whatever the degree of musicality within the sermon, it is common today for delivery to climax in a form of heightened or musical speech, often to the accompaniment of a musical instrument such as a Hammond organ. In his sermon of January 3, 2021, Rev. Dr. Freddie D. Haynes of Friendship West Baptist Church in Dallas provides an example of one iteration of the intoned sermon.³⁷ His measured cadences match the poetics of his language and syntax as he makes his way through his interpretation of Psalm 30:1–3. Haynes makes a noticeable shift toward the climax of his sermon around one hour and twelve minutes into the recording. The organist catches the shift and begins to play in the key of Haynes’s musical mode. Some of Haynes’s syllables are more intoned than others, but the accompaniment of the organ keeps the musicality constant. Before long the James Cleveland gospel song *God Is* makes its way

into the sermon – another variation of Black sermonic musicality where a favored, fitting song or hymn gathers the congregation into the sermon’s climactic moments.

Rev. Dr. Gina M. Stewart is another sought-after contemporary preacher whose sermonic delivery ends with musicality. In her highly motivating delivery style, she ends in the celebratory mode that gives way to music.³⁸ Around the thirty-sixth minute of her sermon “Do It Anyway,” there is a noticeable shift in energy, which the organist picks up as he locates her tonality. This is a moment of rich communal participation as preacher, organist, choir, and congregation are all engaged in “deep and intense modes of improvisation.”³⁹ Before long Stewart slips smoothly into her Baptist hymnal as she quotes, “If when you give the best of your service,” the opening lines of the gospel song *He’ll Understand and Say Well Done*. Both the above samples of intoned preaching are better experienced than explained. Although Simmons is referring directly to whooping, her thoughts ring true for any kind of musicality expressed in Black preaching: “The phenomenon called whooping is seen and described in various ways; one takes risks in any simple attempt to narrowly define [describe] it.”⁴⁰

The final sermon-song variation discussed in this essay is accessible to the nonmusical and musical preacher alike. It works whether the preacher’s preference is for manuscript or extemporaneous delivery. This variation utilizes a series of song fragments sprinkled throughout the body of the sermon; whether spoken or sung, each underscores or illustrates an idea. It is worth mentioning that in all variations of the song-sermon dyad the choice is not restricted to music composed specifically for liturgical or church use. A broad variety of song titles,

musical hooks, and lyrical associations can create a musical “score” that highlights certain critical sermonic moments in the same way a movie orchestral score might function to intensify the screenplay. As naturally as the vocabulary and grammar of the scriptures show up in the course of a sermon by a preacher steeped in the scriptures, in the same way hymnic or other lyrical vocabulary and grammar can thread through sermons by preachers steeped in various genres of music. In this variation the nonmusical preacher seeks to discover—and becomes attuned to—the musical tastes or preferences of the congregation. Once again, collaboration with a colleague or a member of staff or the congregation can yield fruitful, appropriate resources. The preacher need only mention the well-known lyric, and someone may begin singing or humming it to themselves or aloud, thus creating the conjoined effect. This variation gives the musical preacher an opportunity to bring their full selves to the preaching moment, strengthening the sermon’s impact. Luke Powery’s sermon “If We Are Silent” (AV Ex. 1)⁴¹ offers a vibrant example of this variation. For Powery, it makes sense for songs and song fragments to be in dialogue with the scriptures and with sermons; he considers his preaching identity an embodiment of this method.

In his sermon, delivered at New York City’s Riverside Church in July 2015, Powery begins with a prayer. For many preachers the pre-sermon prayer is a moment of centering; Powery’s invocation is typical, except he sings it. “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on me.”⁴² The sung prayer lasts ninety seconds; it closes with the spoken

words “This is our prayer, O God, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and all of God’s people said, Amen.” This moment of prayerful invitation is for the Spirit’s presence, and also for the congregation’s participation. The spoken coda indicates the song is intended to be a collective prayer, “This is *our* prayer . . . and all of God’s people said, Amen.”

Powery methodically gathers song into his delivery as his sermon develops, whether by musically intoned syllables, or by singing a song in whole or in part, or by mention of a line or title of a song. In the twenty minutes of this sermon, including the opening prayer, there are seven musical moments, mostly clustered toward the beginning.

The preacher begins with puzzlement over the abrupt ending of Mark’s Gospel as recorded in the earliest manuscripts. The preacher wants to know, where were the shouts of joy over the empty tomb, or at least “President Obama’s rendition of *Amazing Grace*”? Here Powery alludes to the poignant moment at the end of a nationally publicized funeral eulogy following the shooting of the Charleston Nine. Although *Amazing Grace* is not quite the equivalent of a shout of joy, Powery refers to it on account of the freshness of the collective memory. This surprise insertion of a song at the close of Obama’s moving eulogy, one month prior, drew shouts of joy seconds after the president intoned the first two syllables of the hymn. People were on their feet and joining in jubilantly by the time he got to the fourth syllable.

As he continues musing on the strange, unhappy-ever-after ending to Mark’s Gospel, Powery declares this ending will not do for pleasure-seeking folks. But Mark does not care, he is not writing his Gospel to the soundtrack of “Happyyyy a la Pharrell

Williams, like a room without a roof.” Powery intones the word *happy*, vocally pulsing the beat of the lyric.

Training his homiletical spotlight on the women who first heard of Jesus’s resurrection, the preacher calls attention to their fearful response by way of musical contrast. “When the women are told to tell the disciples and Peter, we don’t hear them sing, like the Jackson Five, ‘I’ll be there!’” — the last three words rendered in Powery’s best Motown vocals. It is becoming clear by now that the preacher has written his sermon with something of a musical score in the background. Just as in a movie the music rises and subsides to highlight some particular action, the music thus far in this sermon serves to accentuate ideas and call the listener’s attention to specific themes.

By way of further contrast, the preacher underscores the enigma of the women’s silent, fearful responses at the end of what he calls Mark’s sermon. Powery pulls in a traditional Easter hymn in dramatic counterpoint with a spiritual to make his point. “They didn’t sing, ‘Christ the Lord is risen today, Hallelujah!’ No, it’s more like ‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.’” Powery’s demeanor switches from head-lifted, celebratory joy to shoulder-stooping lament as he sings both these opening lines. The preacher’s ultimate take-away from the sermon is, “the only thing worse than a fearful disciple is a silent one.” The song fragments woven into the sermon are sonic reminders of the need for followers of Jesus to lift our voices in audible witness to the good news.

The final musical element within this sermon underscores that Jesus is on the move ahead of the disciples despite their silence. “He’s on the move, like Willie Nelson, ‘on the road again.’” The vibrant

beat of Nelson’s song correlates with the increasing tempo of Powery’s sermon as it heads to a close. To anyone who has already conjured the song in their imagination, the energy of both song and sermon is now fused as Nelson’s guitars strum vigorously in the imagination. The applause of Powery’s Riverside audience indicates they are keeping pace with the preacher as he rides into the final moments of this dynamic message, meant to energize us into breaking the silence of fear. With skillful musical scoring, the sermon has moved from beginning to end layering song fragments over biblical explication over challenge and application over contemporary issues to produce a nuanced, multitextured reading of scripture with its urgent call to break the silence. For musical preachers like Powery, this model is a call to bring the preacher’s full self into the preaching moment.

Homiletic Soundings

This section evaluates some of the more commonly taught homiletical methods. It recommends intentional inclusion of musically enriched sermonic preparation and delivery. Core methods and approaches to preaching classes have earned classic status in part because they have proven effective in particular social contexts. Each of these classic methods may be enriched by the integration of preaching and music. Students need to know that expository preaching can be enhanced through the use of hymnal indexes and databases that show the rich correlation between congregational music and biblical texts. The hymn texts of Martin Luther, Isaac Watts, and Charles Wesley are among the more classic, theologically and biblically rich choices suited to the expositor’s rigor. Narrative methods, such as the Lowry Loop,

are enhanced by hymns as cogent sources of the stories that have shaped the Christian faith.; Christmas and Easter hymns do this particularly well. Inductive preaching that depends on listener reflection, offering invitational rather than imperative or declarative endings, is supported by the congregational music of many contemporary writers, such as Brian Wren, Shirley Erena Murray, and Ruth Duck. Their hymns on contemporary issues provoke thought and invite theological reflection. Deductive preaching, in which the preacher speaks as one with authority—a shared cultural value found often in congregations of color—may be conjoined with hymns in support of propositional claims. Other classic forms of preaching taught in seminaries—plots and moves, the dialectical sermon, four-page sermon, and journey to celebration⁴³—combined with the preacher’s commitment to creativity and collaboration, will lead to the discovery of a variety of ways to teach, delight, and move by traveling along this continuum between speech and song. On its own, this homiletical dyad of sermon and song merits a more conspicuous place among methods routinely taught in preaching classes, providing faithfulness and effectiveness in the following ways.

Faithfulness to our listeners as learners. In his treatise on interpreting scripture, Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354–430), gives some enduring advice to his priests. Chapter 12 in Book IV of *De doctrina Cristiana* is titled “The Aim of the Orator, According to Cicero, Is to Teach, to Delight, and to Move. Of These, Teaching Is the Most Essential.”⁴⁴ If preachers are inclined to follow Augustine’s dictum, then we do well to give due consideration to the many ways people learn, rather than to teach based on the way we learn, or the way we were taught.

Educators at all levels have come to value the concept of multiple intelligences that names a series of preferred portals through which students gain access to knowledge.⁴⁵ One such preferred way is through musical intelligence, where a person’s appreciation for and understanding of music serve as a means of access to nonmusical ideas, such as theology. Tom Troeger and Leonora Tisdale find theological grounding for the use of multiple intelligences in the Hebrew *Shema*. If we are to love God with all of who we are—heart, soul, mind, strength—it calls for a multidimensional hermeneutic. Homileticians and homilists alike do due diligence when they “make a conscious effort to broaden their repertoire [of ways of knowing] so as to reach a wider range of listeners, aware that many of those ‘listeners’ are using far more than their ears to receive, process, and respond to the sermon.”⁴⁶

Faithfulness to biblical literary modes is another reason to raise the level of awareness of this dyad in the preaching classroom. The biblical genres, in all their variety—narratives, wisdom literature, poetry, letters, historical chronicles, and others—are the texts from which many select their weekly sermons. This variety alone is instructive regarding the methodology of preaching. Fred Craddock observes, “If one were to compare a large section of scripture with a file of sermons based on that section, one of the most noticeable differences between the two would be the striking variety in the literary forms of the one as over against the dull uniformity of the other.”⁴⁷ This is Craddock’s way of making the point that preaching is most faithful to the biblical text when it allows the form of the scripture passage to inform the preaching form or method the preacher employs. Following this homiletical maxim

leads to the integrative delight of sermon and song at least a few times a year for a lectionary preacher.

Faithfulness to the congregational context is yet another resounding reason for bringing this method to a place of prominence in the preaching classroom, where diversity in the preaching classroom, where diversity of seminary student populations is evident. When Yale professor of homiletics Leonora Tubbs Tisdale tried using the same homiletical approach in two socially diverse congregations, the cognitive disruption she experienced bewildered her. This experience prompted her honest reflection on preaching as “a highly contextual act, requiring its practitioners to consider context as seriously as they consider biblical text in the interpretive process.”⁴⁸ Tisdale asks us to do the work required for our sermons to be as faithful to the biblical context as they are fitting to the social context of the persons who will hear these sermons. This commitment to being “faithful and fitting” applies as much to preaching classrooms as it does to congregations.

Faithfulness to our calling as educators. When students from minoritized social groups embark on their journey of theological education, taking classes meant to prepare them for clerical ministry, they often experience dissonance with the form and content of classroom instruction. Professors do harm when they sideline or discount practices that have proven effective in their students’ worship communities, and instead present as normal or universal those practices valued historically by mainstream, dominant, historically Euro-North American Christianity. As homiletics we do well by our students to point out ways the sermon-song model can enrich the classic methods. We also do well to give this method its own due as a vibrant, relevant way to proclaim good news. Students need

to leave an introductory preaching class fully aware that the music their listeners know, love, and sing is equally vital to the preacher’s pulpit delivery. In fact, many would agree that those lyrical expressions of the gospel tend to linger longer and replay more often than the finest eloquence of words spoken.

Faithfulness to today’s diverse ministerial leaders. Students of color, particularly Black students, share a worldview whose holistic values and expansive epistemologies make the sermon-and-song homiletical dyad a powerful means of experiencing divine presence. It is often a portal between the human and the holy, through which God comes to us, and through which we can enter to encounter God. Whether or not students articulate explicitly the cultural importance of musicality in their preaching, they understand the rich resonance they experience when a sermon engages them in this way. Many of them also know that their congregations gauge the preacher’s effectiveness and spirituality according to the way the sermon moves along this sonic continuum from speech to intonation. They understand intuitively a weekly liturgical structure where the music in the service leads up to the sermonic moment, which then segues into more music. They have heard song fragments in sermons and sermon titles with as much frequency as fragments of scripture. Many students understand the classic form of preaching as testimony⁴⁹—not a “classic” method, but integral to the expectations of some congregations. In this way the songs of testimony such as *I Don’t Feel No Ways Tired* or *We’ve Come This Far by Faith* do a significant amount of preaching. Any glance through the topical index of a Black denominational hymnal will show an extended list of these

favorites. Therefore, it is a wise, informed homiletician, committed to educational justice, who will study and honor this method of preaching in all its iterations.

There is much at stake in bringing into vibrant use the conjoined sermon and song in any or all of its variations. Preachers and professors of preaching who have been at their craft for many years stand to benefit from refreshing their approach to this sacred work by including this method. Those new to the craft stand to benefit from expansive approaches both inside and outside the

homiletical box. For the sake of pedagogical integrity, for the sake of faithfulness to the biblical tradition, for the sake of historical continuity, for the sake of equity in our congregations and classrooms, and for the sake of sheer integrative, interdisciplinary delight, let those of us who preach and teach preaching bring the harmoniously conjoined sermon and song out of the methodological shadows into a more conspicuous place among core methods taught and used. Our faithfulness to the social locations of our diverse students and congregations is at stake.

NOTES

1 Common nomenclature for congregational song taken from New Testament writings found in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

2 Markus Rathey, Editorial, *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 1/2 (2015): 3.

3 Emmett G. Price III, "Singing the Sermon: Where Musicology Meets Homiletics," *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 1/2 (2015): 50.

4 Wyatt Tee Walker, *The Soul of Black Worship: A Trilogy* (New York: Martin Luther King Fellows Press, 1984), 55.

5 Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 23.

6 Thomas Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

7 Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 34.

8 John Witvliet, "Realizing the Psalms: Options for Singing or Speaking," *Psalms for All Seasons*, <http://psalmsforallseasons.org/content/realizing-psalms-options-singing-or-speaking> (accessed Aug. 18, 2020).

9 Martin Tel, Introduction, in *Psalms for All Seasons*, ed. Martin Tel (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2012), ii.

10 A scripture reference search in one online database alone yielded 384 selections. <https://hymnary.org/texts?qu=scripture%3ARomans%208%3A31-39%20in%3Atexts> (accessed July 14, 2021).

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17 Robert A. Kolb, "Preaching on Luther's Hymn Texts in the Late Reformation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 34/1 (Spring 2020): 17.

18 John Bombaro, "When All Else Fails, Preach a Hymn (But Not Any Hymn)," *1517*, <https://www.1517.org/articles/when-all-else-fails-preach-a-hymn-but-not-any-hymn> (accessed Aug. 27, 2020).

19 Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Sermons of Charles Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

20 J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley's Hymns*, 3rd ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1954), 61.

21 Gracia Grindal, *Preaching from Home: The Stories of Seven Lutheran Women Hymn Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), vii.

22 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2009), ix.

23 Shirley Caesar, *The Lady, the Melody, and the Word: The Inspirational Story of the First Lady of Gospel Music* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), Kindle location 520 of 3326.

24 Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 1–17.

25 Eben K. Nihwatiwa, *How We Preach: Preaching in the African Context* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources International, 2012), 68–69.

26 Though these are the two major volumes written by Black scholars, this element of Black preaching has also been the subject of articles by Emmett G. Price, “Singing the Sermon: Where Musicology Meets Homiletics”; William C. Turner, Jr., “The Musicality of Black Preaching: A Phenomenology,” *Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2/1 (Spring 1988); and more recently the work of Braxton D. Shelley, whose 2017 University of Chicago dissertation was titled “Sermons in Song: Richard Smallwood, the Vamp, and the Gospel Imagination”

27 “Theme and Variations,” Merriam Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theme%20and%20variations> (accessed July 14, 2021).

28 Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 89.

29 John Ylvisaker, *Borning Cry*, in *The Faith We Sing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 2051.

30 See Barbara Pitkin’s article on the reformation of preaching in Germany and Switzerland, and Markus Rathey’s article on preaching and the power of music, both found in *Yale Journal of Music and Religion* 1/2 (2015).

31 Price, “Singing the Sermon,” 65.

32 Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 171.

33 Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 57.

34 Martha Simmons, “Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present,” in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, ed.

Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 865–71.

35 William Turner, Jr., Foreword, in Jon Michael Spencer, *Sacred Symphony: The Chanted Sermon of the Black Preacher* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), x.

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43 See Ronald J. Allen’s *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1998) for one of the most comprehensive collections of sermon forms with examples.

44 St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 2009), 121.

45 The work of Howard E. Gardner is instructive in this regard, such as *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

46 Thomas H. Troeger and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *A Sermon Workbook: Exercises in the Art and Craft of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), 67.

47 Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 113.

48 Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), xii.

49 Anna Carter Florence’s book of the same name, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), validates this method of preaching as one vital to the proclamation of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century women, whose preaching often surpassed that of the men of their day in effectiveness, but could not be called “preaching” on account of religious polity.