Kissed by Nature’s Sun: The Black Church as a Life-Giving and Life-Sustaining Institution

FROM ROOTS TO RENAISSANCE
“what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals[a] that you care for them?” Psalms: 8:4

- Roots: Knowing our roots is important because they make us who we are. We have familial roots and communal roots.

- The Mission of the Holy Spirit
  - Genesis 1:2 - “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
  - Acts 2 - All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit…
  - II Corinthians 13:14: …and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children...
What is the Black Church?
A Few Definitions

“Today "the black church" is widely understood to include the following seven major black Protestant denominations: the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church and the Church of God in Christ.”

Marilyn Mellowes, American Experiment

“Upon the hard rock of racial, social and economic exploitation and injustice black Americans forged and nurtured a culture: they formed and maintained kinship networks, made love, raised and socialized children, built a religion, and created a rich expressive culture in which they articulated their feelings and hopes and dreams.”

Lawrence W. Levine
The enslaved slipped down into the bushes to worship the God they knew. They gathered in "hush harbors" -- woods, gullies, ravines, thickets and swamps -- for heartfelt worship which stressed "deliverance from the toil and troubles of the present world (from enslavement to freedom), and salvation in the heavenly life to come."

This became the foundation of what we now call the Black Church.
The Birth of Black Preachers and Race Women

"the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil," a man who "found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people."

W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

This was a unique new way of being. In Africa, women were never excluded from leadership roles in religious systems. (Joel 2:28)

On American soil, women were denied, and in some spaces, are still denied access to pulpits and to preach. Nevertheless, our foremothers forged their own pathways as God as their guide. They found various ways to live out their faith in public life and in the church. They organized social service organizations, women’s clubs, missionary societies, sororities, wrote for religious periodicals, owned newspapers, formed reading groups, et al. They fought for suffrage and demanded social reform.
The Birth of Independent Black Churches

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones organized the Free African Society of Philadelphia, which later evolved into two congregations: the Bethel Church, the mother church of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination, and St. Thomas Episcopal Church, which remained affiliated with a white Episcopal denomination.

Mother Bethel A.M.E.
Acts 9:36-41

36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.
#ifnotforthewoman
“Scratching and Surviving”: Free to Wander and to Wonder

The survival strategy in the everyday economic life of back people was to just get by or “survivin’ one day at a time. Survival meant to eke out a living by whatever means possible” (Lincoln and Mamiya, pg 240)

“The origins of the black self-help tradition were found in the attempt of slaves (enslaved) to help each other survive the traumas and terrors of the plantation system in any way they could.” (Lincoln and Mamiya, pg 243)
What is the Mission of the Black Church?

“Ministers were not always educated. But it was the lay members -- deacons, ushers, choirs, song leaders, Sunday school teachers and "mothers" of the congregation -- who gave the churches their vitality and strength. Church socials, Sunday picnics, Bible study and praise meetings encouraged social cohesion, heightened a sense of community and nurtured hope in the face of discrimination and violence. By the 1950s, the infrastructure of black churches and the moral resilience they encouraged had laid the foundation for the crusade that would transform the political and religious landscape of America: the civil rights movement.”

Marilyn Mellowes, American Experiment
The Sanctuary (a place to get resurrected from the week; to get loved on; to find community)
- serves as a site for community life;
- signified black achievement – owning buildings and land and independence from white control

Black Politics and Economics
- Mutual Aid /Beneficial Societies
- There was a “symbiotic relationship” between the church and these societies. (Free African Society)
- “The Black Church is a reflexive institution that moves constantly between the poles of survival and liberation in the political and economic arenas.” (Lincoln and Mamiya, pg 241)

Red Summer and the Great Migration
- The Black Church's Response
- "Upon this Rock": The Role of the Black Church in Freedom Struggles
- God the Waymaker
- Cites for education; mass rallies; collection of funds; strategy sessions et al.
Friendship West Baptist Church will be a game changing Christian movement connecting people to Jesus Christ, fighting for justice, while creating the “Beloved Community.”
What do these “stones” mean?

The status and role of the black church in the post-civil rights era has been the subject of lively debate among African American scholars. Some argue that "the black church" is "dead," that it has lost its prophetic and progressive voice and its capacity to mobilize for reform on the national stage. Others argue the church is very much alive, and point to the results of the 2008 Pew Religious Landscape Survey that shows that African Americans are more likely than any other ethnic or racial group to report a formal religious affiliation. Even those who count themselves "unaffiliated" describe themselves as "religiously unaffiliated."

The Holy Spirit is still giving birth, The Holy Spirit is still active and alive in the world and in your life

The Black Church has been and continues to be THE anchor institution for counseling, economics, politics, culture, spiritual formation, civic engagement, education, and site were healing, justice, peace and love can be lived out!
According to Professor Jonathan Walton, for more than 300 (400) years, the black church in America has provided a safe haven for black Christians in a nation shadowed by the legacy of slavery and a society that remains defined by race and class. Inspired by the story of Exodus, African Americans can think out, pray out and shout out their anger and aspirations, free from the unstated yet powerful constraints that govern dialogue with the larger white society. In the pulpit and the pews, in choir lofts and Sunday schools, the black church continues to offer affirmation and dignity to people still searching for equality and justice, still willing to reach out for a more inclusive, embracing tomorrow.