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Imagineer Preaching – Reviving Narrative Preaching in the Post-Modern Black Church

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Abstract

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The Black Church is experiencing a seismic shift. The number of Black adults who identify as "Christian" (2007 to 2021) and view the Bible as innerant (2009 to 2021) both dropped by 22%. These declines coincide with the rise in Black adults who identify as "Nones," namely atheist, agnostic or no faith at all (2021: 24%). These and other faith-related trends are symptoms of a rise in post-modernism impacting the Black Church. Post-modern thought, which questions authority and claims of truth and absolute truth, pushes against traditional faith thought and custom. Instead of relying on claims based on truth, the post-modern listener finds meaning from lived experiences. The Black Church and thus Black preaching need to pivot in order to address this cultural shift. The Black Church has embraced Expository Preaching almost to the exclusion of Narrative Preaching. Imagineer Preaching seeks to revive Narrative Preaching. Imagineer Preaching embraces the experiential style of Narrative Preaching that activates the listeners' five senses and places them within the Biblical Text and the Biblical Text amongst the listeners. Imagineer Preaching has four pillars: Imagination, Mystery, Authority and Prosperity (I.M.A.P.), which provide the framework to create multi-dimensional sermonic experiences for post-modern listeners. Implementing Imagineer Preaching will assist the preacher in delivering impactful and memorable sermonic experiences that redefine prosperity, embrace spiritual mystery and reorient the post-modern listeners' relationship with authority.

Imagineer Preaching – Reviving Narrative Preaching in the Post-Modern Black Church

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Introduction

I began my research project in 2021, as a study of the art of preaching in the Black

Church context. For our purposes, the Black Church is defined as a church that is: a member of a

historically Black denomination (AME, AMEZ, CME, COGIC, NBC USA, NMBCA, PNBC)[1];

has a majority Black congregation with a Black senior pastor; or is a historically, majority Black

congregation with Black leadership. My research coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic,

which forced preachers to address factors such as sermon length, preaching into a camera and

integrating technology into worship. Preachers also had to confront the reality that their audience

was changing, and in many ways had been changing for quite some time.

According to a 2021 Barna Research study, the number of Black adults who identified as

Christian was 71%. This is a steep decline from 2007, when that number was 93%.[2] The same

study found that almost one in four (24%) Black Americans identified as "none," which is

defined as atheist, agnostic or no faith. Given the historically high numbers of Black Americans

who identified as Christian, this percentage of "nones" is surprisingly high and on par with all

U.S. adults.[3] When looking deeper at the numbers of Black adults, there is a significant

percentage of Gen Z (25%), Millennials (28%) and Gen X (18%) who identify as "nones,"

especially compared to Baby Boomers (8%).[4]

Coupled with the decline of self-identified Black Christians, Black preachers are also

confronted with the task of preaching to an emerging and ever-expanding post-modern audience.

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[1] African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, The Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, National Missionary Baptist Church of America, National Baptist Convention of America, Progressive National Baptist Convention n.d.

[2] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future" (Dallas-Ft. Worth, TX: Barna Group, 2021), 24.

[3] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 22, 24.

[4] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 23.

Postmodernism is centered in a skepticism of authority that seeks to question any and every claim of absolute truth and instead values personal experience over reason. Post-modern audiences find outlets outside of the church to express their spiritual, social and political leanings.

Skepticism is not limited to the post-modern audience. Amongst both the unchurched[5] and churchgoers, the Black Church continues to deal with a high degree of cynicism with regards to its approach to money.[6] This apprehension towards real or perceived delinquent financial stewardship can create cognitive and spiritual dissonance for congregants and listeners. When sermonic messages addressing prosperity are primarily centered around wealth accumulation, the listener is implicitly or explicitly being told an important way to exercise their faith is by making financial contributions to an institution the listener doesn't financially trust.

This audience sits in proximity to the traditional, Biblically literate, Black Church Boomer who supports the leadership of the pastor[7], believes in the authority of Scripture[8] and the omniscience of God[9].

This dynamic led to my research question: How can a preacher in the evolving Black church context, sermonically engage and persuade a growing unchurched, post-modern audience that has redefined authority and truth through a lens of personal experience?

The thesis for this project is Black preaching needs to adopt a philosophy and methodology of preaching that provides the preacher with the tools needed to redefine the relationship between the preacher and listener, by creating a multi-dimensional preaching

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[5] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 55"Unchurched" is defined as not having attended church within at least the last six months.
[6] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 47.
[7] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 46.
[8] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 26.
[9] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 27.

experience for the listener centered around a re-imagining of Imagination, Mystery, Authority and Prosperity. This preaching system is entitled, "Imagineer Preaching."

Before moving deeper into "Imagineer Preaching," I want to provide a deeper examination of the issues preachers are currently facing in the Black Church context.

The Burden of Black Preaching

Black preaching has to do more than convey the words given by God to the preacher. Given the history of institutional racism and chattel slavery, Black preaching has to help an often oppressed and discriminated against segment of America make meaning of a life that is consistently under pressure from white supremacist structures. Black preaching has always been tasked with digging more deeply into the lives of the congregants and the world in which they live. Henry Mitchell puts it this way in the homiletical classic, *The Recovery of Preaching*:

> Black preaching assumes a target of whole persons. The largely cerebral appeal of most White preaching would seem to imply a primarily intellectual target, with the homiletic skills sought and taught focusing on the production of stimulating ideas. In contrast to this I see in the African-American continuum of religious experience and practice an answer that lies in the *combination* of the intellectual with the less rational but equally valid processes. We sometimes refer to them as feelings, and we sometimes think that they are void of solid content. But we must preach to the combination in varying emphasis or balance. While *all* human communication partakes of the emotional or the appeal to the less rationally conscious, the best of the Black preaching tradition has synthesized the appeal to the conscious and the so-called unconscious with a unique clarity and intensity.[10]

Black preaching in many ways has to function in a transformational manner that far exceeds the expectations of their white church counterparts because Black Church pastors have historically been and continue to be seen as the most important leaders in the Black community. This view is more strongly held by Gen Z and Millennials than Gen X and Boomers.[11]

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[10] Henry H. Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977), 12–13.
[11] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 100, 101.

Historically, not only has the Black preacher had to exegete the Biblical text, but then the text has to be applicable to the specifics of the Black lived experience in America. The Black preacher was not allowed to speak to a head that was distanced from the issues of the heart. The Black preacher needed to find ways to connect both head and heart in a way that made the Biblical text connect the spiritual dots, to the dots of lived experience.

This unique form of preaching has evolved over generations. Cleophus LaRue says, "…there are four essentials that come together in the best of black preaching. They are God, the Scriptures, the preacher, and black lived experience."[12] This quartet has served as the building blocks of Black preaching for centuries. The congregation has historically viewed the four building blocks in a symbiotic manner and integral parts of the Black Christian experience in America. Their merit and value towards having a healthy relationship with God were seen as essential.

However, there has been a shift that has been impacting Black faith perspective and thus Black preaching. While Scripture is one of the foundations of Black preaching, the view amongst Black adults that the Bible is inerrant has declined significantly from 64% in 2009 to 42% in 2021. A slight decline has also occurred amongst Black Christians as it dropped from 75% in 2015 to 70% in 2021.[13]

In fact, God is even losing preferential status amongst Black Americans. While 72% of Boomers and 68% of Gen X believe God is the "all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the

[12] Cleophus James LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 58.
[13] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 30.

universe," that number drops to 55% for Millennials and 49% for Gen Z.[14] The Black adult Gen Z percentage of 49% is lower than the Gen Z percentage for non-Black adults (50%).[15]

Black adults are also almost equally divided over the need for religion to be a part of personal fulfillment (51% agree, 49% disagree).[16]

In the book, *The Altars Where We Worship*, the author states, "In the American consciousness, religion and spirituality are increasingly divorced from one another… a quarter of Americans think of themselves as 'spiritual but not religious."[17] Meanwhile 30% of Black adults also describe themselves in the same manner.[18]

Individuals aren't as wedded to traditional Black Church faith ideals or the pillars that comprise Black preaching. This shift in Christian beliefs and behaviors is not exclusive to the Black church and Black preaching; however, this is the context of my project. [19] So we are left to wrestle with a question, why is the listener not beholden to the four building blocks of Black preaching?

Why is the Listener No Longer Beholden?

The Person of the Preacher

Black preachers are grappling with the reality that congregants no longer consider weekly worship attendance a requirement. Amongst Black churchgoers, 49% attend worship service less than weekly, with 22% attending 2-3 times monthly, 9% once per month and 11% once every 2-3

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[14] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 27.
[15] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 27.
[16] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 22.
[17] Juan Marcial Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and Mark Toulouse, *The Altars Where We Worship : The Religious Significance of Popular Culture*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 3.
[18] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 23.
[19] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 24,25.

months.[20] Some church members view attendance one or two times per month as acceptable. This is especially true in a post-COVID worship environment. Inconsistent attendance can create a quandary for preachers, because members who attend church weekly report higher satisfaction with the style of preaching in comparison to monthly attendees (61% vs. 50%).[21]

Another factor that has impacted connectivity and the relationship between the congregant and the preacher is online worship. According to the Deloitte Insights' *2023 Digital Media Trends Survey*, "Around one-third of people in the US consider online experiences to be meaningful replacements for in-person experiences–but half of all Gen Zs and Millennials feel this way."[22] The lack of shared physical space alters the nature of the preacher/ listener relationship. Call and response[23] does not work in the same way for the preacher because they are unable to receive feedback in real-time. A listener commenting in the chat or responding at home is primarily a one-way dialogue beginning with the listener, but rarely getting to the preacher, let alone allowing an avenue for the preacher to receive and then respond to the listener.

The online dynamic also means the listener is no longer a part of a captive in-person audience. In an online setting, the preacher is no different than any other form of programming because the listener is free during the sermon to multitask, walk around, pause or turn off the preacher at either the whim or necessity of the listener.[24]

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[20] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 14.
[21] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 106.
[22] "2023 Digital Media Trends Survey," Deloitte Insights, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/technology/digital-media-trends-consumption-habits-survey.html.
[23] Frank A. Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 88.
[24] "2023 Digital Media Trends Survey."

Beyond these concerns, "young Americans have grown skeptical about traditional faith due to corruption and scandal amongst sacred and secular leaders."[25] This skepticism is echoed by unchurched Black adults where more than one-quarter (27%) believe there's corruption in the Church.

The position of the preacher no longer commands unconditional respect, rapt attention or unwavering support. The word of the preacher no longer goes unchallenged, but instead can be freely met with suspicion, opposition, or indifference. This shift in attitude towards the position of the preacher goes far beyond the walls of the church.

The Emergence of the Post-Modern Listener

Individuals have been changing and that change has been occurring not only inside, but outside the walls of the church. There has been a shift in the society's approach to systems, structures, and the very idea of truth. In their book, *Preaching and the Thirty-Second Commercial*, O. Wesley Allen and Carrie La Ferle identify postmodernism as a cultural factor that impacts the receptivity of modern-day preaching.[26] David Lose in *Preaching at the Crossroads* says postmodernism is one of the changes that has shaped and influences our culture.[27] Lose provides some insight into how we have arrived at this postmodern moment:

> [T]he modern era came to be dominated by a pervasive optimism that through the diligent application of reason, humans could solve most of the world's problems… modernist confidence has waned, if not extinguished, and there has arisen in its place a distinct skepticism about claims of the sufficiency of human reason to solve all problems and meet every need. It is this skepticism, in fact, that marks the current age as *post*modern. Postmodernists seek to move beyond what

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[25] Floyd-Thomas, Floyd-Thomas, and Toulouse, *The Altars Where We Worship*, 4.

[26] O. Wesley Allen and Carrie La Ferle, *Preaching and the Thirty-Second Commercial: Lessons from Advertising for the Pulpit*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 2–6.

[27] David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 6.

they believe was the naïve, self-serving, and ultimately destructive optimism of modernity.[28]

Lose presents a question the is critical in postmodernist thought, "How do we know for certain whether anything is true?"[29] Consequently if nothing is true, how does a society determine what is authoritative or controlling? Instead of claims of absolute truth, "In our postmodern culture, authority has shifted from reason to experience. People are less persuaded by truthful facts than they are by meaningful experiences."[30] So we end up in a society where like beauty, truth is in the eye of the beholder. Allen and LaFerle state:

> In the young, postmodern era, however, truth is viewed as local, relative to perception. "That may be true for you, but this is true for me." People *choose* what is true for them. In a sense, what has happened is that meaning has replaced truth as the category by which people align their lives, even though they continue to use the word "truth" to describe what they consider meaningful.[31] With the shift from public reason as the authority for discovering truth to individual experience as the authority for making meaning has come a shift from affiliation with and dedication to communal religious institutions to greater emphasis on individualized spirituality.[32]

This postmodern point-of-departure regarding truth not as public reason but individual experience, sits in contradiction to a fundamental aspect of any faith system, namely the absolute truth and authority associated with the sacred text and by extension the deity associated with that faith system. This ability to claim certain truths is central to the Christian faith system as well.

As Christians, there are certain assumptions that can be draw based on faith claims that have been determined as truths. These claims are based on presuppositions about either the infallibility and/or inerrancy of the Biblical text. For example, there are certain assumptions that

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[28] Lose, 16.
[29] Lose, 7.
[30] Allen and La Ferle, *Preaching and the Thirty-Second Commercial*, 3.
[31] Allen and La Ferle, 3.a
[32] Allen and La Ferle, 4.

are considered fact and not hyperbole, namely the Holy Trinity is comprised of God, Son and Holy Spirit; Jesus Christ was the only begotten Son; and, Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead. Within the preaching moment, we may not feel the need to prove our truths as truths, because we assume our listeners either already agree with the truth claims or are open to the possibility of their truth. This assumption is supported by the fact forty-five percent of Black Church churchgoers strongly agree that the Bible has authority over what they say and do.[33]

Yet the postmodern listener may not follow the line of reasoning that begins with words:

- Because the Bible says…
- The Bible said it, that settles it.
- The Bible is the inerrant word of God.

Given their inherent skepticism to absolute truths, the postmodern listener might follow the above Biblical authority statements with some probing questions of their own. "If the Bible is without error, why are there two creation stories and two flood accounts?" For the postmodern listener who is already suspect of absolutes and questions authoritative claims, that perceived contradiction might affirm their perspective that there are no real truths. The impact of postmodern thought may be present in the decline of Black adults who believe the Bible's teachings are totally accurate (2009 – 64% vs. 2021 – 42%).[34]

The postmodern listener isn't looking for absolute truths, but points of truth that resonate with their experiences. They are as Lose stated above, "looking at individual experience as the authority for making meaning."[35]

This convergence of factors creates a quandary for the preacher in the Black church context. The efficacy of the four building blocks of Black preaching is being challenged on

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[33] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 34.
[34] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 30.
[35] Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 4.

multiple sides. The person of the preacher is no longer viewed with the same deference and reverence. The sermonic moment, while still a central part of the Black church worship experience, is not guaranteed to command the listeners' undivided attention, especially those viewing worship service online. Lastly, with the emergence of postmodern thought, the preacher in the Black church context must find ways to preach a Gospel of eternal certainty to an audience that rejects absolute truths. This is where Imagineer Preaching comes into play.

Imagineer Preaching

Imagineering – the blending of creative imagination and technical know-how.[36]

"Imagineering" is a portmanteau created by combining the words "imagination" and "engineering." The use of the word "Imagineer" is an homage to the methodology made popular by the late Walt Disney, in the development of his first theme park, Disneyland.[37] Walt Disney wanted to expand beyond the two-dimensional confines of his movie storytelling into the three-dimensional world of a theme park. In order to achieve this result, he selected employees from his movie studio who had expertise in story development, visual effects, animation, directing, writing, art and set-design so they could marry their collective movie making expertise into the development of a theme park.[38] Louis Prosperi states in *The Imagineering Pyramid*, "Imagineering is a craft based on adapting skills, knowledge, and expertise from one medium and applying them to another."[39]

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[36] Louis J. Prosperi and Jeffrey A. Barnes, *The Imagineering Pyramid: Using Disney Theme Park Design Principles to Develop and Promote Your Creative Ideas*, ed. Bob McLain (Theme Park Press, 2016), 4.
[37] Imagineers (Group) and Walt Disney Company, eds., *Walt Disney Imagineering: A behind the Dreams Look at Making the Magic Real*, 1st ed (New York: Hyperion, 1996).
[38] Imagineers (Group) and Walt Disney Company, 11.
[39] Prosperi and Barnes, *The Imagineering Pyramid*, 6.

Imagineer Preaching is a philosophical and methodological system of preaching that provides the preacher with the tools needed to redefine the relationship between the preacher and listener, by creating a multi-dimensional preaching experience for the listener centered around a reimagining of Imagination, Mystery, Authority, and Prosperity.

Imagineer Preaching is grounded in marrying the process of Imagineering with the craft of preaching. Imagineer Preaching will allow the preacher in the Black Church context to reimagine the art of storytelling in narrative preaching as a means of connecting with a post-modern audience.

Imagineer Preaching encourages preachers to embrace, adopt, and blend skills, knowledge and expertise from mediums and subject areas outside of theology, including, literature, audio broadcasting, rhetoric, visual and performing arts, marketing, film, ethics, law, sociology, emotional intelligence and leadership.

4 Pillars of Imagineer Preaching

Imagineer Preaching has four pillars that shape its focus on the post-modern audience. Those pillars are Imagination, Mystery, Authority, and Prosperity (I.M.A.P).

Imagination – Envisioning What is Not There

> Around Imagineering, the spark of an idea ignites, gains momentum, and consumes us in everything we do. The tiniest spark of an idea is no small thing. Even if born upon the tattered edge of a paper napkin, it may very well grow up to be the size of something special. Each and every spark gets its chance. Here *what if* actually means *why not*. "Everyone starts with a blank sheet of paper," says Marty Sklar, President of Imagineering.[40]

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[40] Imagineers (Group) and Walt Disney Company, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 21.

Imagination is defined as, "the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of external objects not present to the senses. The ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful. The part of the mind that imagines things."[41]

An important aspect of imagination that is critical for the task of preaching is the process of being open to hearing, seeing, reading and/ or experiencing God in new ways. Imagination has been a stalwart aspect of preaching in the Black Church context for centuries. This sermonic Imagination honed the narrative style of preaching that placed the Black preacher within the Biblical text to serve as an eyewitness and sometimes tour guide for the congregation. This vantage point gave and still gives the preacher the freedom to "paint the picture" as he/she envisioned it.

This experiential style, derived from folk sermon traditions, activates the listeners' five senses and places them within the Biblical text and/or places the Biblical text amongst the listeners.[42] Examples of this imaginative, immersive, narrative style include iconic sermons such as "The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest" by C.L. Franklin,[43] "His Own Clothes" by Gardner C. Taylor,[44] and the "I Have a Dream" riff by Prathia Hall,[45] made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his speech by the same name.[46]

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[41] Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg, eds., *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 3rd ed (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[42] Thomas, *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*, 87.

[43] Martha J Simmons and Frank A Thomas (Frank Anthony), *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, 1st ed. (New York: WWNorton, 2010), 511–14.

[44] Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor, Volume 3: Quintessential Classics, 1980-Present*, vol. 3, The Words of Gardner Taylor (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000), 116–21.

[45] *The Black Church | Prathia Hall's Inspires MLK's "I Have A Dream" | PBS*, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/video/prathia-halls-inspires-mlks-i-have-a-dream/.

[46] Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr*, 1 pbk (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 217–20.

Black churches have seen a shift away from the use of narrative preaching, which has historically been at the heart of Black homiletics.[47] 78% of Black Church churchgoers report attending churches where the preaching is primarily expository, focused on explanation of Biblical passages, rather than mostly on stories of application (22%). Black church preachers affirm their typical preaching style leans towards explaining passages, especially in Pentecostal/charismatic (85%) and Baptist (88%) churches. [48] Given this disparity in adoption and frequency of preaching style, it is worth noting the difference in the effectiveness in conveying "fresh knowledge" to Black Church churchgoers is minimal (Expository 64%, Narrative 59%).[49] Imagineer Preaching is not making the claim that expository preaching lacks imagination. All preaching forms and styles require imagination. Instead, Imagineer Preaching is focused on utilizing Imagination in the art of sermonic storytelling in narrative preaching.

When examining imagination through a homiletical lens, Cleophus LaRue says,

Imagination helps us to see and to say what often lies dormant within us… Imagination is a process within itself…. Imagination is not static; it is dynamic. It does not have a "place" in the process; it permeates the entire exercise… The only thing that should take precedence over openness to the imagination is our openness to the Spirit.[50]

Imagination is process driven and can be cultivated. It's important to develop an understanding and a healthy relationship with the act of fostering imagination. Developing a process for cultivating a Biblically informed imagination is an important aspect of Imagineer Preaching. Imagination will at times require a new reading of a text that moves away from "traditional" interpretations and creates room for expanded and more inclusive perspectives.

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[47] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 106.
[48] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 106.
[49] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 107.
[50] LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify*, 72, 73.

Imagination can be seen as a bad word when used in relation to anything spiritual or religious. Christians can be fiercely protective of the efficacy of the Biblical text, so when confronted with the word, "imagination" it can incorrectly be associated with "fiction." However, imagination is not solely the act of creating fiction. Instead, imagination is a process of exploring and examining what else is possible and as LaRue said, being open to what the Spirit has to say.

One type of imagination is called "moral imagination." The formulation of a moral imagination is essential to counter the impact of more destructive forms of imagination impacting society. Frank Thomas defines moral imagination as,

> … the ability of the preacher, intuitive or otherwise, in the midst of the chaotic experiences of human life and existence, to grasp and share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity."[51]

Moral imagination serves as the process of exploring how God's wisdom and ethics can help us in our quest to examine the things that impact humanity. Moral imagination is one of the imagination tools in the Imagineer Preaching toolkit.

As a preacher develops their imagination toolkit, they may discover other types of imagination that can inform their preaching. Some additional types of imagination that are a part of Imagineer Preaching include:

- **Empathetic Imagination**: Empathetic Imagination is the process of not only reading but experiencing the Biblical text from the vantage point of individual(s) within the text. The preacher becomes emotionally transported into the text and takes on the feelings, emotions and responses present in the text. This process of Empathetic Imagination

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[51] Frank A. (Frank Anthony) Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon Preaching and Moral Imagination* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), xxiii, xxiv.

allows the preacher to better convey to the listener the possibility of shared feelings and experiences between the listener and individuals within the Biblical text.

- **Fearless Imagination**: Fearless Imagination, which includes both Persistent Imagination and Courageous Imagination, is the process of looking at Biblical characters through a lens of the determination needed in order to either follow or find favor with God. When examining a text for Fearless Imagination, the preacher must engage the text to examine the depths to which the Biblical character either overcome obstacles or left behind familiar or comfortable environs, in order to be in relationship with God. In Fearless Imagination, there is a willingness to engage the human emotions involved in the decisions, in order to make it relatable for the listener.

- **Just Imagination**: Just Imagination is the process of viewing the text through various lenses of justice. This would require the preacher to examine a text for instances and themes related to((. This approach would require an exploration of justice in relation to systems, people and God. A Just Imagination serves as a comparative lens between Biblical ideas of justice and contemporary applications, themes and motifs.

- **Aural Imagination**: Aural Imagination is the process of exploring the text aurally and examining the text from the perspective of sound. The preacher allows herself/ himself to hear what is happening in the text. Beyond just the words being spoken, but to hear their tone, inflection, pitch and cadence. Aural imagination also includes the sounds that are occurring within a Biblical scene, whether its nature, the crowds or simply the sound of feet travelling along dirt roads.

- **Visual Imagination**: Visual Imagination is the process of examining a Biblical passage for colors, shapes, facial and body features, architecture, furniture, landscapes and other aspects that comprise a scene. The preacher allows a reconstruction of the Biblical text to occur within the visual imagination. The visual imagination can be supported or even grounded in archeological research; however, it still must then be translated into words that can be conveyed to the listener. Visual imagination leaves the mind of the preacher and paints the proverbial picture that establishes the sermonic scene.

- **Tactile Imagination**: Tactile Imagination is the process of probing touch and feel within a Biblical passage. The preacher goes beyond the visual and seeks more detail into the feel of the things that are uncovered visually. Tactile Imagination expresses things not only from the perceptive of being sticky, coarse, slippery, dense, prickly or soothing, but also the affect this may have on either the individual(s) in the Biblical passage or that relationship to the listener.

Empathetic and Fearless Imagination help to provide a window into the individuals in the Biblical text. Just Imagination seeks to frame aspects of the political and ethical context of the Biblical text. While Aural, Visual and Tactile Imagination are important in setting the scene of the Biblical story. Applying various aspect of Imagination into the sermonic moment is integral in developing the multi-dimensional preaching experience. There is no limit to the number of ways imagination can be cultivated by the preacher to enhance the art of storytelling. To paraphrase Marty Sklar, "Everyone [preacher] starts with a blank sheet of paper."[52]

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[52] Imagineers (Group) and Walt Disney Company, *Walt Disney Imagineering*, 21.

Mystery - Embrace the Unexplainable

Imagineer Preaching requires the preacher to embrace the unknown, or perhaps better stated, the unknowable. As stated above, one of the points of disconnect between the postmodern listener and the preacher is the definition of truth and the place of absolute truth.

In Imagineer Preaching, the phrase "absolute certainty" might be used instead of "absolute truth" when dealing with points of contention. Why this distinction? Because the Imagineer Preacher leaves room for the possibility that there is another answer, perspective or point of departure for the listener. They also acknowledge the possibility of future discovery or revelation. The door is left open for new hermeneutics, nuanced readings and transformed hearings. Lose in *Preaching at the Crossroads* says this about approaching the varied and sometimes hard to discern, decipher, categorize, or define nature of the Biblical text:

> Sometimes the rules of the very game we are playing change, and in this situation, more information not only doesn't help us but may actually confuse us by inducing us to operate by rules of the old context rather than take seriously the foreign terrain in which we find ourselves. These type of challenges are better termed *mysteries*. …mysteries , other than the whodunit type, can't be solved. Rather, mysteries can only be embraced. They don't require more information, but rather a curious mind and a willingness to suspend past assumptions and judgements in order to be surprised by what manifests itself in the new context and world.[53]

We will often read a passage of Scripture and then revisit that passage many years later and see that same passage in a completely different light, based on our life experiences during that passage of time. At the time of our initial exposure to the text, we were certain that was all there was to the passage; however, sitting within that same passage of text were other lessons that simply had not revealed themselves to the reader.

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[53] Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads*, 4,5.

The awareness and acceptance of the Preacher of this perspective embraces the importance of experience in finding meaning in the Biblical text. As discussed above, lived experience is important to postmodern audiences and a pillar of Black preaching.[54] This is why mystery can play an important role in impacting postmodern listeners.

Imagineer Preaching's approach is to embrace mysteries yet to be revealed in our initial reading of a text. Honoring the presence of mysteries allows us to acknowledge the vast nature of God's power within every passage. This posture reminds us that the reading we bring to a passage is not the only potential reading and our exegetical work or the work of those who have come before us isn't the only understanding of a text, but inherent within the Biblical text are mysteries and it's important to embrace that reality.

Acknowledging the mysteries within the Biblical text also keeps the Imagineer Preacher from making false claims about the text. Preachers have to be willing to acknowledge amongst other things that there are two creation stories and two flood accounts and the fact they don't have an answer to the mystery behind either origins or why and how both accounts made it into the Biblical text.

Preachers often feel the pressure to have absolute answers to every Biblical question by virtue of ministerial calling. Unfortunately, preachers can then succumb to the pressure, real or perceived, of attempting to answer every question with a measure of certitude that is not in alignment with the Biblical text. In these cases, the preacher can find him/herself in trouble. Ellen Davis provides wise counsel for how to deal with Biblical mysteries, "…the preacher's role is not to explain what cannot be explained; true mystery does not dissolve so easily, and we

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[54] LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify*, 58.

would be lost if it did. It is the privilege of the preacher to orient people toward mystery, to lead

them close enough to be touched by it."[55]

Imagineer Preaching embraces mysteries within the text that can only truly be defined

and understood with the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Embracing mystery within the Biblical

text allows us to keep room for God to speak to us regarding God's Word.

Authority – Re-defining the Position of the Preacher

Leadership has great power to shape experiences for churchgoers. When asked what

aspects of church are enjoyable, attendees of all ages in Black churches look to the stage, naming

leadership, preaching and worship styles as top factors.[56]

Despite the preference for strong leadership, the person or position of the preacher does

not hold the same cache in the Black church context as it once did.[57] The challenges to the

position and its relationship to the congregation both relationally and physically creates tension

when it comes to the idea of authority.

During the ordination service in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, there is a

laying on of hands ritual. The Bishops, Officers, Presiding Elders, and other ordained clergy lay

their hands on the ordinate and implore her/him to, "Take thine authority." How does a preacher

take their authority when their position and/or perspectives are either not assumed to be

authoritative or embody a harmful authority the listener rejects?

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[55] Ellen F. Davis, *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 11.

[56] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 46.

[57] Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor, Volume 5: Lectures, Essays and Interviews*, vol. 5, The Words of Gardner Taylor (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2001), 234.

Ted Smith engages the work of Hannah Arendt as he explores the concept of authority in the compilation, *Questions Preachers Ask*.[58] Smith provides an interesting comparison between authority and tyranny.

> A truly authoritative claim can win assent without threat of punishment or promises of reward. It calls instead on our sense of what we *ought* to do. And that sense of obligation cannot be reduced to mere coercion. This is the difference between authority and tyranny, as Arendt sees them. Authority sustains the kind of shared beliefs that give rise to community and make social actions possible.[59]

Smith acknowledges the difficulty in re-defining authority because of past harms associated with the concept when he says, "Even when authority operates without force in the present moment, it often depends on past violence that established it as authoritative."[60]

Perhaps a re-imagining of authority is more instructive to preachers who have been trained to view their position as not only authoritative, but authoritarian. A reimagined authority that relieves the preacher of not only expecting but in some cases demanding assent and one that acknowledges the power of free will. Authority in Imagineer Preaching is viewed as a privilege that is bestowed upon the preacher not because of human elevation above the listener, but solely as a result of God's gracious revelation to the preacher.

Henry Mitchell said, "….when a Black preacher is most persuasive logically, he is likely to seem more to probe the depths than to argue. Symbolically, he guides his seekers rather than arguing with his opponents."[61] Arendt ultimately defines authority as, "an obedience in which people retain their freedom."[62]

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[58] Thomas G. Long, Scott Black Johnston, and Leonara Tubbs Tisdale, *Questions Preachers Ask: Essays in Honor of Thomas G. Long*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).
[59] Long, Johnston, and Tisdale, 59.
[60] Long, Johnston, and Tisdale, 60.
[61] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 179.
[62] Long, Johnston, and Tisdale, *Questions Preachers Ask*, 60.

Imagineer Preaching can look to the work of Womanists and Feminists regarding effective ways of re-imagining authority and how that evolved approach can impact receptivity. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale, in her work *How Women Transform Preaching*, states,

> One of the gifts women have brought to the pulpit is to challenge top-down notions of authority, and to redefine authority in a way that stresses both authenticity on the part of the preacher, and a more shared and conversational style of preaching in relation to the congregation. As a consequence, preaching has become a far more communal endeavor than it used to be in the days when it was the congregation's task to remember and appropriate the three points of the sermon the pastor delivered to them.[63]

Imagineer Preaching allows preachers to reclaim their position of authority not through force, coercion, or manipulation, but as one who leads the way towards spiritual discovery. The person of the preacher evolves. No longer does the preacher embody the persona of someone who sits above and looks down upon the congregation, but instead is journeying with the congregation. While the preacher retains within their preaching the spiritual and Biblical truths that gird their faith and informs their preaching, they acknowledge and accept that each person will discover and experience those truths in their own time informed by their own experiences.

> This approach is further validated by Tubbs when she writes,

> "Rather than viewing authority in a hierarchical way – with the preacher being the ordained person sent by God who brings divine truths to bear in as persuasive a way as possible in preaching – Rose revisioned preaching as *a conversational event* in which the preacher brings to the congregation a tentative interpretation of scripture "that acknowledges, as best as it can, its limitations and biases." The sermon's content, Rose writes, "is a *wager* on the part of the preacher: a new insight that has brought comfort or challenge … that is then submitted to the community of faith through the sermon for their answering meanings."[64]

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[63] Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *How Women Transform Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 66,67.
[64] Tisdale, 65.

Imagineer Preaching acknowledges everyone will not have the same spiritual revelations at the same time and therefore it's not necessary to demean, dissuade or belittle listeners in frustration because the preacher feels a spiritual/ Biblical claim has not been understood or accepted. Instead, the preacher serves as a guide who keeps the lines of communication and discovery open because they adhere to the words of 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 that one plants, one waters, but God gets the increase.[65]

This revised approach to the idea of authority works to remove a barrier between the preacher and the post-modern listener without lessening the efficacy of the Biblical text. The embrace of the process of mystery and discovery provides opportunities for the postmodern listener to find Biblically grounded meaning in their personal experience, whether discovered at the time of hearing the sermon or at a later date based on personal revelation or new experiences. The impact of the shift of authority may not be felt in the individual sermonic moments, but moreso in the development of a trusting, long-term relationship between the preacher and postmodern listener: the guide and the seeker.

Prosperity - What motivates the listener?

Imagineer Preaching is concerned about the things that concern the listener, the factors that motivate the listener to action. When composing a sermon, there is usually a call to action at the conclusion. The effectiveness of that call to action depends on several things; however, one of the most important is the way it resonates with the listener, after the worship service has concluded. Not merely from a stylistic or linguistic perspective, but more so whether or not the

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[65] Harold W. Attridge, *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance*, Revised and updated; 1st edition. (San Francisco, Calif: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 1937.

preacher was able to tap into, unearth or place a desire within the listener. When that desire morphs into action, there is an outcome the listener is seeking. In Imagineer Preaching, that outcome is associated with the word, "prosperity."

In the past it's been referred to as the "health and wellness gospel" or "name it and claim it," and this theology centered around the belief that wealth and material and financial blessings are the result of being faithful to God. Conversely, if someone wasn't being financially blessed, then that corresponded to curses and a lack of faith.

Unfortunately within the Black Church context, the word "prosperity" or the topic of finances and money within the church are often viewed in a negative manner. When Black Churchgoers were asked about things they wished were different at their church, 16% said the "approach to money," which placed first on the list of concerns for both Gen X and Boomers and second for Millennials.[66] The Unchurched also placed "approach to money" as their top concern; however, the number balloons to 30%.[67] This distrust of the approach to money by the Unchurched is in line with the view of more than one-quarter that there is corruption in the Church.[68]

When asked about the things they wanted for their lives, Black Adults identified fourteen outcomes.[69] If proceeding through the traditional lens of prosperity and its emphasis on material wealth, the assumption would be the top of the list would be dominated with items associated with wealth accumulation; however, that was not the case. While "good health" topped the list, other hallmarks of the prosperity gospel, "comfortable lifestyle" (6th), "high-paying job" (11th) and "owning a large home" (14th), lagged behind other outcomes Black Adults desired more.

[66] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 47.
[67] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 47.
[68] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 57.
[69] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 64.

1) Good Health

2) Providing for my family

3) Clear purpose for living

4) A close relationship with God

5) Education

6) Comfortable lifestyle

7) To make a difference in the world

8) Close personal friendships

9) To help change values and attitudes in America

10) To live close to family/ relatives

11) A high-paying job

12) Active involvement in a church

13) Influence in people's lives

14) Owning a large home[70]

I believe the concept of "prosperity" is worth reclaiming in relation to religion and more specifically in relation to preaching. There are a cadre of outcomes which Black Americans and Black Churchgoers are seeking spiritual guidance and expanding the definition of prosperity would allow the preacher to meet both Black Church churchgoers and the Unchurched at their place of apprehension and suspicion.

In her book *Colored Television*, Marla Frederick does a masterful job of defining prosperity.[71] I believe Frederick's approach to prosperity is informative in the ways we can reimagine what motivates people towards action. She creates three categories in which prosperity is relative in the lives of believers.

First, Frederick presents "Constitutionally Relative," which, "consists of much more than the physical health and wealth concerns popularly contributed to prosperity teaching. It often

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[70] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 64.

[71] Marla Faye Frederick, *Colored Television : American Religion Gone Global* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 61–85.

includes much less tangible things like peace of mind, joy, family harmony and growth, a

relationship with God, and good marital relationships."[72] When comparing the category of

"constitutionally relative prosperity," with the things Black Adults want we would identify items

such as: Good health (1); Providing for my family (2); A close relationship with God (4); Close

personal friendships (8); and, To live close to family/ relatives (10).[73]

The second category of prosperity is "Temporally Relative." "It is based on an

individual's understanding of his or her past and present or future circumstances… The passing

of time itself operates as a metric for prosperity, encouraging one to measure changes over

time."[74] When placing Temporally Relative Prosperity in conversation with the things Black

Adults find most desirable, attention is turned to items such as: Clear purpose for living (3);

Education (5); and, To make a difference in the world (7).[75]

Finally, Fredrick says, "notions of prosperity are spatially relative, because they are

situated within particular community and geographic concerns."[76] When viewed through the lens

of things Black Adults want to pursue, "Spatially Relative Prosperity" would include: To help

change values and attitudes in America (9); To live close to family/ relatives (10); Active

involvement in an church (12); and, Influence in people's lives (13);

Imagineer Preaching looks at the three forms of relative prosperity and examines them as

possible sermonic landing points. It provides an ability to relate to the deeper, more meaningful

needs of connection and relevance that extend beyond someone's current socio-economic reality.

This deemphasis from traditional notions of prosperity will allow the preacher in the Black

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[72] Frederick, 71.
[73] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 64.
[74] Frederick, *Colored Television*, 71–72, 80.
[75] "Trends in the Black Church - Celebrating Its Legacy and Investing in a Hopeful Future," 64.
[76] Frederick, *Colored Television*, 72.

Church context to craft sermons that speak more directly to the real needs of the congregation as well as to the unchurched.

Imagineer Preaching believes whether constitutional, temporal, or spatial, each category of prosperity speaks to a form of human flourishing that when coupled with the Good News of Jesus Christ has the ability to reach each person, in every seat, in the same sermon.

Conclusion

Imagineer Preaching was developed to assist the preachers in the Black Church context by providing them with tools for creating impactful and memorable sermonic experiences for post-modern listeners. These experiences draw listeners into the sermonic moment by reorienting their relationship with authority, redefining prosperity and embracing spiritual mystery. Imagineer Preaching helps preachers achieve these results by embracing the process of imagination in its many forms, to weave the art of storytelling into sermon construction and delivery for a multi-dimensional preaching experience.

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