

# Protest as Preaching

## The Pneumatic Proclamation of Black Lives Matter<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** — This article explores some of the recent protests in support of Black Lives Matter from a homiletical perspective. Specifically, the author argues that these protests reflect a non-traditional form of pneumatic or Spirit-inspired proclamation that can enrich the church’s preaching in a time of crisis. The article is arranged into three sections. First, a pneumatological framing of proclamation is proffered in order to interpret protest as a mode of Spirit-inspired preaching. Second, drawing on the author’s experience as a participant-observer in select protests in Southern California, three snapshots of proclamation at protests are offered. The article concludes by suggesting that the pneumatic proclamation of recent protests challenges the church in the United States to hold together three key dialectical tensions in its proclamation: lament and celebration, particularity and universality, and word and deed.

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### 1. Introduction

During the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, significant attention has been given to the reconfiguration of Christian proclamation. However, in the United States, in the midst of the coronavirus, the persistent pandemic of racism has served as a catalyst for an often-overlooked form of proclamation: protest.<sup>2</sup> While protests have a long history of erupting in times of crisis throughout the globe, in May 2020, the United States and the world at large saw an unprecedented rise in protests against racial injustice in support of the Black Lives Matter, or BLM, movement. These demonstrations were part of a larger story of struggling for freedom, liberation, and justice – a story that includes the revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a paper presented at the online Societas Homiletica conference “Words in a Time of Crisis,” August 2020. Special thanks to Jerusha Matsen Neal for the phrase “protest as preaching.”

<sup>2</sup> There is a substantial body of literature that reflects on preaching as an act of protest or prophetic resistance. See, for example, *Walter Brueggemann*, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*, Minneapolis (MN) 2012; *Charles L. Campbell*, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, Louisville (KY) 2002; *Kenyatta R. Gilbert*, *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching from the Great Migration to Civil Rights*, Waco (TX) 2016; *Kate Hanch*, “How Can These Things Be?": Zilpha Elaw’s Foolish Ministry, in: *Liturgy*, 35: 1, (2020), 32–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0458063X.2020.1701901>; *Kimberly P. Johnson*, *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, Lanham (MD) 2017; and *Andrew Wymer*, *Punching Nazis? Preaching as Anti-Fascist Resistance*, in *International Journal of Homiletics*, 3, (2018), 81–98:

[https://ul.qucosa.de/landing-page/?tx\\_dlf\[id\]=https%3A%2F%2Ful.qucosa.de%2Fapi%2Fqucosa%253A31549%2Fmets](https://ul.qucosa.de/landing-page/?tx_dlf[id]=https%3A%2F%2Ful.qucosa.de%2Fapi%2Fqucosa%253A31549%2Fmets).

However, to my knowledge, there is little explicit homiletical reflection on protest outside the ecclesial context as a form of proclamation. For one notable exception, see *Donyelle C. McCray*, *The Censored Pulpit. Julian of Norwich as Preacher*, Lanham (MD) 2019, 115–117. McCray offers an insightful interpretation of the preaching of the performance artist Reverend Billy. See also *Jill Lane*, *Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Postindustrial Flânerie*, in: *The Drama Review*, 46, 1, (Spring 2002), 66–84: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1146945?seq=1>.

activism of *Nat Turner*, *Sojourner Truth*, and *Harriet Tubman* in the nineteenth century as well as the defiant declarations of *Fannie Lou Hamer*, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, and *Angela Davis* in the twentieth century. In “When They Call You a Terrorist”, *Patrisse Khan-Cullors*, one of the co-founders of the BLM movement, identifies Black Lives Matter as part of the “progeny” of the many known and unknown Black freedom fighters that have come before.<sup>3</sup> Whether calling for reimagining public safety generally or the prosecution of violent cops<sup>4</sup> specifically, BLM and numerous other decentralized groups have emerged over the last several years in response to the ongoing death-dealing structures that perpetuate the dehumanization of Black and brown people around the world. As BLM’s official website states, their mission is to “eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of the violence that led to the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others, global protests surged to stand against police brutality and anti-Black racism.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I tentatively explore some of these recent protests<sup>7</sup> in support of Black Lives Matter from a homiletical perspective. I should note that I am not officially part of the BLM movement. Neither do I claim to represent the diverse beliefs and perspectives within the movement. However, following George Floyd’s murder, like many others around the world, I participated weekly in various peaceful protests and direct actions against police brutality and anti-Black racism. I also helped organize several small protests in my community in Southern California. As a Christian, an ordained minister, and an African American male, my participation was both an act of embodied lament and an attempt to publicly love my neighbor and myself by calling for justice that reflects the character of God. In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, for me, these multiracial

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<sup>3</sup> *Patrisse Khan-Cullors and asha bandela*, *When They Call You a Terrorist. A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, New York (NY) 2017, 186. For an intriguing intellectual history of the Black Lives Matter movement, see *Christopher J. LeBron*, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*, New York (NY) 2017. For an incisive historical and social analysis of the Black Lives Matter movement, see *Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor*, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago (IL) 2016.

<sup>4</sup> For an intriguing study of how racial trauma affects the bodies of police (along with ethnic minorities and people of European descent), see *Resmaa Menakem*, *My Grandmother’s Hands. Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Las Vegas (NV) 2017. Even if a person advocates a move toward defunding the police in order to invest in alternative forms of community services, I think it is still important to acknowledge the ways in which racial trauma affects those in law enforcement and the unique responsibility they have to deal with that trauma.

<sup>5</sup> “About,” *Black Lives Matter*. Accessed 20 October 2020. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>. Those who accuse BLM of inciting riots and violence fail to understand their mission. Often the rioting that occurs in the context of protests (which is rare in my experience) is from outside influences disrupting peaceful attempts at protesting. Even still, it is important to understand the pain, grief, and anger experienced by those who riot to be heard.

<sup>6</sup> To be clear, while I am convinced of the pervasiveness of racism in the US in general and in US policing in particular, I do not believe that *every* police shooting involving a Black woman or man should be understood in the same way. At least from my perspective, some more clearly evidence the ways that systemic injustice and racial bias contribute to the unjust death of Black folk. I think this is the case, for example, with *Breonna Taylor* and *George Floyd*.

<sup>7</sup> At the time of this writing, BLM protests have significantly subsided in the United States. However, I have deep respect for the many leaders and supporters of BLM who have advocated for systemic justice long before it was fashionable to do so and who continue the work of transforming communities and institutions around the world now that protests have abated. They have inspired me to more faithfully leverage my time, gifts, and resources to advocate for justice in ways that fit my call.

protests were a site for unexpected encounters with God. This article is my provisional attempt to make homiletical sense of these encounters.

Specifically, I argue that the recent protests reflect a non-traditional form of pneumatic or Spirit-inspired proclamation that can enrich the church’s preaching in a time of crisis. The article is arranged into three sections. First, I provide a pneumatological framing of proclamation in order to interpret protest as a mode of Spirit-inspired preaching. Second, drawing on my experience as a participant-observer in select protests, I offer three snapshots of proclamation at protests. Finally, I suggest that the pneumatic proclamation of recent protests challenges the church in the United States to hold together three key dialectical tensions in its proclamation.

## 2. Protest as a Mode of Preaching

While the word protest derives from the Latin word “*protestari*” (which means to testify or witness publicly),<sup>8</sup> protesting is not typically thought of as a form of preaching or proclamation. Following *O.C. Edwards* and other scholars, many students and teachers of preaching have tended to define a sermon as “a speech delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.”<sup>9</sup> This definition seems to assume that preaching involves formal authorization, Scriptural interpretation, and a traditional liturgical context. However, *Donyelle McCray* helpfully suggests that we need a broader understanding of the sermon than Edwards proffers. In her dissertation, published as “The Censored Pulpit”, McCray explores the English anchorite, theologian, and mystic Julian of Norwich as a preacher.<sup>10</sup> In doing so, she argues that proclamation be defined as a “wide range of speech-acts intended to declare the saving work of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> McCray’s definition of proclamation pushes us to recognize non-traditional forms of sermonizing. She suggests that atypical forms of sermonizing include the distribution of tracts, graffiti art, nuns marching for justice, and more. For McCray, what binds these acts of proclamation together is an intent to announce God’s saving work in Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> The Latin word *protestari* is formed by the prefix *pro* (forth, before, publicly) and the verb *testari* (to testify, witness). The word *testari* itself is derived from the noun *testis* (witness).

<sup>9</sup> *O.C. Edwards*, *A History of Preaching*, Nashville (TN) 2003, 3f. For a narrow but helpful examination of the primary Greek terms that constitute preaching in the New Testament, see *Jonathan I. Griffiths*, *Preaching in the New Testament. An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study*, Downer’s Grove (IL) 2017, 17–40.

<sup>10</sup> See *Donyelle McCray*, “The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher.” ThD diss., Duke Divinity School, 2014. See also *McCray*, *The Censored Pulpit*. For the sake of this article, I am focusing on McCray’s dissertation instead of her book because it explicitly offers a fluid definition of preaching that resonates deeply with my work. However, I should note that her book and other work continues to implicitly understand preaching as a wide-range of speech-acts even though she does not use this exact definition. For McCray’s definition of preaching in her book, see *McCray*, *The Censored Pulpit*, 3f.

<sup>11</sup> *McCray*, *The Censored Pulpit* (note 10), xvi. Drawing on *Judith Butler’s* *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York (NY) 1997, *McCray* understands a speech-act as a bodily act that is not reducible to speech and as an act of speaking that is not reducible to the body. In other words, a speech-act is embodied communication that exceeds both body and speech. Of course, the term speech-act was introduced in the seminal work of *J. L. Austin*, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson Eastford [1962] 2018. For *Austin*, a speech-act is an utterance that not only says something but does something.

While I am intrigued by McCray’s definition, from my perspective, its Christological framing eclipses some of the proclamation of recent protests. Though self-identified Christians participate in these protests and sometimes play a key role in leading them, in general, I have found that the protests represent people from a plethora of spiritual backgrounds and beliefs.<sup>12</sup> In short, participants are usually not intending to declare the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. And yet I have found the protests a profound place of divine encounter. Thus, I advance a more expansive framing of proclamation to illuminate the revelatory sermonizing happening on the streets.

Drawing on McCray’s work in conversation with theologian Oscar García-Johnson, I propose that a pneumatological understanding of proclamation may be more useful in detecting forms of sermonizing outside of traditional liturgical contexts—though, of course, the Spirit cannot be divorced from the person and work of Christ. In an essay entitled “In Search of Indigenous Pneumatologies in the Americas,” *Oscar García-Johnson* sets forth a Spirit-led theology of general revelation in order to recognize and affirm God’s revelatory work among indigenous peoples before the conquest in the Americas.<sup>13</sup> In other words, he avers that while Christ may not have been explicitly named in indigenous beliefs and practices before the arrival of Christian missionaries, traces or glimpses of the Spirit’s revelation can be seen in the ancestral traditions of native cultures. For him, this revelation signifies the liberating work of the Spirit outside the prescribed domains of orthodoxy that have been legitimated by white Western hegemonic power. Similarly, I suggest that the recent protests in support of Black Lives Matter, though not explicitly Christian, are a context in which the liberating revelation of the Spirit of Christ is taking place.

While some may scoff at the idea of God speaking through recent protests, *Robert Johnston* reminds us in his book “God’s Wider Presence” that there is a biblical precedent for God speaking to the people of God in unexpected ways.<sup>14</sup> In Genesis 14, God chooses to use the high priest of Salem, Melchizedek, to commission Abram. In Numbers 22, God uses the Transjordan diviner Balaam to bless Israel. In John 4, we encounter God choosing to use the joyful proclamation of a Samaritan woman in a Jewish community. And surely, we cannot overlook the scandal of God’s revelation in the itinerant ministry of the poor, unhoused, first-century rabbi we know as Jesus. God is free. God speaks however God chooses to speak. Thus, I offer a fluid definition of proclamation to explore protests as a mode of preaching. *I propose that preaching or proclamation can refer to a range of Spirit-inspired speech-acts<sup>15</sup> that bear witness to God’s truth, goodness, and beauty inside and outside of the traditional pulpit.*

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<sup>12</sup> Future research might consider the varied forms of proclamation by Christians at BLM related protests. This would yield insight into some creative expressions of theologizing outside of ecclesial contexts that maintain a Christocentric focus.

<sup>13</sup> *Oscar García-Johnson*, In Search of Indigenous Pneumatologies in the Americas, in: Gene L. Green/Stephen T. Pardue/K.K. Yeo (eds.), *The Spirit over the Earth. Pneumatology in the Majority World*, Grand Rapids (MI) 2016. For a more extensive treatment of this proposal, see *García-Johnson’s* newest book *Spirit Outside the Gate: Decolonial Pneumatologies of the American Global South*, Downer’s Grove (IL) 2019.

<sup>14</sup> *Robert K. Johnston*, *God’s Wider Presence. Reconsidering General Revelation*. Grand Rapids (MI) 2014. For what follows, see also *García-Johnson* (note 13), 153.

<sup>15</sup> I follow *McCray’s* understanding of speech-acts based on the work of *Butler* described above.

To be clear, I affirm the unique character of God’s revelation in Scripture, the church, and the person of Christ. Neither do I want to diminish the important call of those set apart to preach in traditional liturgies. And I believe all proclamation must be measured against the Scriptures and the wisdom of the church. Nevertheless, I argue for the existence of Spirit-inspired speech-acts that transgress the boundaries of traditional proclamation. From my viewpoint, the proclamation of the recent protests against police brutality and anti-Black racism is one such example.

### 3. Proclaiming the Gospel of Black Lives Matter

With this in mind, I would like to consider different ways this proclamation occurs at protests. But first, let me briefly highlight what I see as the central theological message that is proclaimed in the BLM related protests. In a widely read account of the origins of the movement, *Alicia Garza*, one of the co-founders of BLM, states: “[Black Lives Matter] is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>16</sup> In theological parlance, we might say that Black Lives Matter is a theological statement that affirms that Black people are made in the *imago Dei*, the image of God.<sup>17</sup> It is a statement that unflinchingly challenges the death-dealing systems that disproportionately dehumanize and destroy Black and brown bodies around the world. To echo activist and artist Andre Henry, the statement might even be considered the “gospel” message of the movement.<sup>18</sup> Now, to be clear, I am not seeking to fully equate the gospel of BLM with the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, I know some strongly disagree with the assumptions, proposals, and practices of BLM. Still, if the Spirit is “the Spirit of life,” can the proclamation of Black Lives Matter be anything but a pneumatological pronouncement?<sup>20</sup> Hence, I argue that the proclamation of the gospel of Black Lives Matter is congruent with the life-affirming and liberating work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It proclaims God’s justice. For, as *Luke Powery* says, “[t]hrough preaching, the Spirit fights for life and seeks to resist any form of power that would aim to destroy humanity.”<sup>21</sup>

Based on my participant-observation at protests, I now offer snapshots of this kind of preaching by focusing on three forms of proclamation: chants, community storytelling, and embodied celebration. Of course, there are many other forms of proclamation that

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<sup>16</sup> *Alicia Garza*, A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, in: The Feminist Wire, <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> [accessed 20 October 2020].

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this is not to say that all people are not made in the image of God. However, the statement Black Lives Matter acknowledges the historic, systematic ways Black lives have not been valued. For an engaging study of the BLM and All Lives Matter social movement, see *Amanda Nell Edgar/Andre E. Johnson*, *The Struggle over Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter*, Lanham (MD) 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Andre Henry*, When Christians won’t acknowledge racism, protest becomes church, in: Religion News Service: <https://religionnews.com/2020/06/08/when-christians-wont-acknowledge-racism-protest-becomes-church/> [accessed 20 October 2020].

<sup>19</sup> At the risk of confusion, I use the phrase “gospel” loosely. As Paul writes in Galatians, in a sense, there is only one gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ (see Gal 1:6–9).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Jürgen Moltmann*, *The Spirit of Life. A Universal Affirmation* (trans. Margaret Kohl), Minneapolis (MN) 2001.

<sup>21</sup> *Luke A. Powery*, Spirit-Driven Theology of Preaching, in: *Sally A. Brown/Luke A. Powery*, *Ways of the Word. Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place*, Minneapolis (MN) 2016, 36.

could be explored.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, it would be worthwhile to give concrete attention to how these acts of proclamation reveal alternative expressions of preaching authority that shape and are shaped by the physical space in which they take place. While I will not be able to explore these important issues, my observations may prove a starting point for further research by others. To begin, one of the most obvious ways I’ve seen the gospel of Black Lives Matter proclaimed is through chants. By chants, I mean the repetition of a phrase or series of sentences. Chants are often proclaimed by multiracial groups marching in public spaces with signs that reinforce the message spoken. I experienced powerful chants at a protest organized the weekend following *George Floyd’s* murder. It was Pentecost weekend, and I couldn’t help but sense the Spirit’s voice through the diverse voices around me proclaiming the dignity, value, and worth of Black people. At one point, the crowd began declaring: “Shout down Babylon, Black people are the bomb. We ready. Yeah. We ready.”<sup>23</sup> Echoing the title of Rastafarian Bob Marley’s 1999 album, “Chant Down Babylon,” I heard the chant as a liberating theological proclamation denouncing the American empire as Babylon, announcing unapologetically the beauty of Black life, and pronouncing a readiness to defy any opposition that says otherwise. Other popular chants reflected what Evans Crawford termed “participant proclamation.”<sup>24</sup> In one, people are invited to lament victims of anti-Black violence when someone declares “Say his name” or “Say her name.” For example, a person will declare “Say her name” and the group may respond *Breonna Taylor, Rekia Boyd*, or one of the myriad other Black women killed by police. I have sensed the Spirit profoundly present in these collective proclamations – grieving and groaning for new creation.

A second way I’ve seen the gospel of Black Lives Matter proclaimed is through community storytelling that provides space for individuals to share their experiences of anti-Black racism. Stories or testimonies have long been recognized as a form of Christian proclamation – at least stories told by the right person, in the right place, and from the right perspective. However, the stories I hear at protests often transgress the politics of respectability that govern many evangelical pulpits. One such story was shared at a protest in Long Beach, California on the 51<sup>st</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots, demonstrations that served as a catalyst for LGBTQ+ rights. The speaker was Ms. *Fatima Shabazz*,<sup>25</sup> a self-identified African American transwoman.<sup>26</sup> Hearing Ms. Shabazz share

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<sup>22</sup> For example, one could study the planned and impromptu speeches that often are delivered at BLM related protests. Moreover, some protests that I attended had a fairly elaborate “liturgy” that included silence, singing, speaking, and calls to action. Much more research could be done to consider the liturgical proclamation of BLM related protest.

<sup>23</sup> I should note that often the wording of this chant is different than what I heard. Typically, it says “Chant down Babylon” instead of “Shout down Babylon.”

<sup>24</sup> *Evans Crawford* with *Thomas H. Troeger*, *The Hum. Call and Response in African American Preaching*, Nashville (TN) 1995, 38.

<sup>25</sup> I am grateful for Ms. *Fatima Shabazz’s* permission to use her name in this paper. To learn more about her advocacy and artistry, see <https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/artists/7859/fatima-malika-shabazz>. It would be worthwhile to offer more extensive analysis of her spoken word poetry as a kind of sermonizing outside the pulpit.

<sup>26</sup> I realize that there are a variety of Christian perspectives on transgender identity and the LGBTQ+ community more broadly. For a conservative “evangelical” Christian perspective on transgender identity, see *Mark A. Yarhouse*, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria. Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*, Downer’s Grove (IL) 2015. For a “mainline” Christian perspective on transgender identity from a transgender Christian, see *Austen Harke*, *Transforming. The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians*,

her story of perseverance in the midst of a society that all-too-often seeks to demean and destroy transgender people,<sup>27</sup> I began to reflect on *Saidiya Hartman’s* “Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments”. Hartman’s award-winning work explores the ingenuity, agency, and boldness of young Black queer women and radicals in the early twentieth century. For her, the “waywardness” of these social outsiders represents “an ongoing exploration of *what might be*; it is an improvisation with the terms of social existence, when the terms have already been dictated, when there is little room to breathe, when you have been sentenced to a life of servitude, when the house of bondage looms in whatever direction you move. It is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive.”<sup>28</sup>

I find myself thinking of Ms. Shabazz as a kind of “wayward” witness – a bold, creative, unapologetic transgressive preacher imagining alternative worlds that are possible in a world in which she was never meant to survive.<sup>29</sup> Standing before hundreds of people, Ms. Shabazz shared about the relentless violence, abuse, and pain she has experienced at the hands of the police as an African American transwoman. She also spoke about her refusal to submit to bullying, threats, or other dehumanizing treatment. At one point, with her body and her voice, she loudly proclaimed: “We’re here, and we’re queer!” While listening to Ms. Shabazz speak, I caught a glimpse of the liberating Spirit fighting for life in her body, resisting any form of power that would destroy human life, any religious leader that would treat her as if she is not fully made in the image of God. She preached a bold and disruptive sermon.

A final way I’ve seen the gospel of Black Lives Matter proclaimed is through embodied celebration. This was seen vividly at a protest I attended in downtown Huntington Beach, California. A little less than 100 of us marched from a local park down to the pier. When the march ended, we listened to several people share experiences of brutal encounters with the police and heard calls for action. And, then, much to my surprise one of the African American women leading the gathering called us to celebrate. She said: “This is a long fight we are in. Even as we struggle for justice, we must take time to celebrate.” Before I knew it, music was playing and people were singing what some have called the anthem of the BLM movement, rapper *Kendrick Lamar’s* “Alright.” The group also did several dances connected to popular rap songs: the Stanky Legg, the Superman, the Dougie. Self-conscious about doing the dances, I confess I observed on the sideline trying not to get caught in anybody’s photos. However, they soon were doing the Cupid Shuffle, and I couldn’t resist. As I joined, I found myself caught up in what I can only describe as the ecstasy of the Spirit. Our dancing did not in any way seek to dismiss or minimize the pain of our protest. But it did refuse to let the pain have the last word. In the words of

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Louisville (KY) 2018. Whatever one’s theological stance on transgender folx and the LGBTQ+ community, I am seeking to present Ms. *Fatima Shabazz* as one whose proclamation reminds us of the dignity and value of all people as made in the image of God.

<sup>27</sup> The disproportionate mistreatment and violence that transgender people face is well-documented. For information and resources on the transgender community, see <https://transequality.org/> and <https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender>.

<sup>28</sup> *Saidiya Hartman*, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, New York (NY) 2019, 228, emphasis original.

<sup>29</sup> When I shared with Ms. *Shabazz* that I experienced her words as a form of preaching, she expressed appreciation, especially since her grandfather was a minister in the American South.

theologian Willie Jennings, the joyous celebration was a refusal to surrender to “the forces of despair.”<sup>30</sup> Every move, every smile, every laugh was congruent with the creed of the Spirit of life—Black Lives Matter.

#### 4. Learning from Preaching outside the Pulpit

While the proclamation of recent protests raises all kinds of challenges that might reorient the life and practices of the church in the world, in this final section, I focus on some its challenges to the practice of preaching. Specifically, I raise the question: what can we learn from the pneumatic proclamation of recent protests that might inform preaching in our pulpits in a time of crisis? In the midst of all their diverse expressions and aims, I suggest the protests challenge the church in the United States to hold together three important dialectical tensions in its proclamation: lament and celebration, particularity and universality, and word and deed.<sup>31</sup>

First, what might it look like to hold together both lament and celebration in our liturgies of proclamation? I imagine it may start with recognizing that both can be strategies of survival in different ways and times. This is seen in the way the protests welcome stories of lament and practice celebration. Additionally, as *Luke Powery* helpfully notes, we must not forget that when we create space for lament and celebration, we are actually making space to attend to the Spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Second, the church has much to learn from the recent protests about holding together the particular and the universal in its proclamation. While maintaining solidarity with indigenous peoples and the Latinx community, most protests I attended foregrounded and named Black lives in their proclamation. In the words of Lisa Thompson, there is a “claiming of body and personhood by naming” the particularity of Black pain.<sup>33</sup> Preachers of the scandalous particularity of the gospel must be particular in our proclamation, for our hope hinges on particularity. The God of Israel is made known in Jesus, and it is through this sun-kissed Savior that the Spirit is poured out upon all flesh. Our preaching cannot speak to the universal unless it honors the particular.

Third and finally, the proclamation of recent protests invites the church to hold together word and deed in its proclamation. I did not have space in this article to elaborate on how I saw protests do this, but, along with chants and speeches, some protests provided opportunities to register to vote, connect with advocacy groups, and write officials to lobby against racist policies. While individuals and churches have unique calls, it is urgent that the church recovers a view of proclamation that is not divorced from Spirit-energized justice in the world. In the words of *Gayle Fisher-Stewart* in “Preaching Black Lives Matter”, “Human beings have created this system of dehumanization and

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<sup>30</sup> *Willie Jennings*, *Theology of Joy*. Willie James Jennings with Miroslav Volf, YouTube Video, 20:28, Yale Center for Faith and Culture. September 19, 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fKD4Msh3rE>.

<sup>31</sup> It would be worthwhile to explore the similarities and differences between how these three dialectical tensions appear in the proclamation of BLM versus Black preaching traditions. I am grateful to *David Stark* for this insight.

<sup>32</sup> *Luke A. Powery*, *Spirit Speech*. Lament and Celebration in Preaching, Nashville (TN) 2010.

<sup>33</sup> *Lisa Thompson*, *Holy Interruptions*, YouTube Video. 42:47. Fuller Studio. November 6, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWD8qmtSLk>.



injustice and it will take human beings to dismantle it.”<sup>34</sup> I believe God will ultimately renew all creation. But might it be that the proclamation of recent protests is a divine summons to join the Spirit in this urgent work now? If so, may we heed the words of the Book of Revelation: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (Rev 3:22, NRSV).

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<sup>34</sup> *Gayle Fisher-Stewart*, Introduction. Is There a Word from the Lord?, in: idem (ed.), *Preaching Black Lives (Matter)*, New York 2020, 17.