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WOMANIST JESUS AND THE MUTUAL
STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION
AND
ON CONTAINING GOD (MATTHEW
17:1-5 WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS
ON MATTHEW 17:4)

Introduction

The movements that made the men, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, (who, in fact, remade The Black Power and Civil Rights Movements), were the contexts in which we find the emergence of the theological/religious discipline of Black Theology. This represented the empowerment of African-American peoples in the arena of theology/religion. Black theologians, utilizing the Black Power/Civil Rights Movements as one of the sources for doing theology, and interpreting religion, began challenging many of the assumptions and presuppositions of people of the dominant culture as they forged ahead towards constructive Black religious thought or Black Theology.

Black Theology, using the contradiction of racism in our church and society, provided a cogently argued case for the eradication of racism and the liberation of Black people, and the bib-

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Editor's note: The essay, "Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation," first appeared in Randall Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant, *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), and is reprinted with permission. The sermon "On Containing God" first appeared in *The African American Pulpit*, 3 (2000), and is reprinted with permission. The works are edited to meet the style specifications of *The Journal of the ITC*.

lio-theological mandate for this to happen. Because initially Black Theology did not equally address sexism as a critical issue, or even as a problem at all, women—African-American women—began to do critical theological reflections themselves. These reflections over the years have led to the development to one of the latest expressions of liberation theology—Womanist Theology or Womanist religious thought. Here we, African-American Women religious thinkers, with deliberate intent, have brought forth the lived realities of people who have existed on the “underside of her-story” and “under the underside of history.” African-American women have contributed to the richness of our religious heritage; yet they have been silenced and ignored. What have Black women to do with theology? What have Black women to do with constructive religious thought? Historically, it was Black women who were treated as though they were merely consumers of religious interpretations, and not definers of religion.

Womanist Theology examines the lived realities of African-American women as the primary source of theology and the context in which theology is done. It seeks to discern the meaning of God’s revelatory activities in that context and beyond. Using liberation as the primary hermeneutical principle, Womanist Theology addresses issues which speak to the role, status, and empowerment of Black women in both the Church and the larger society. It has begun to “en-voice” the historically silenced; it attempts to empower the historically impotent; and to make visible the theologically invisible.

Womanist Theology challenges both the sexism of the Black (Church) community and the racism of the larger communities. In fact, oppression of any kind is a contradiction to the dignity and rights of any human. As such then, Womanist Theology speaks to the real (and full) situation of Black women in the Church and society.

How far-reaching is this theology? Is it merely academic

gymnastics—theology for the sake of theology itself, or does it make a difference in the lives of Black women and others. Actually, this is not a question peculiar to Womanist Theology. In reality, in the seminary context, we often are faced with some variations of this question. Is the study of theology for the sake of scholarship itself, or is it for the sake of a more effective ministry? Are we educating scholars for the purpose of reproducing scholars or clergypersons for the leadership of the church?

Further, in what sense does what we learn in the seminary relevant and useful in the church context? Speaking in the vernacular of some church oriented persons in the seminary, we routinely hear, “will it preach?” or “that’ll preach.” Though “preachability” is quite a narrow basis for determining relevancy, it may be included among the many items which contribute to the criteria for such. Nonetheless, the contents of theology must be translated in and among the community of believers. This is done through teaching, preaching, and all other aspects of the ministry of the church.

What follows are a paper and a sermon on the same theme, presented in both the seminary and church contexts. They provide for both audiences the opportunity to wrestle with some of the key issues significant for the continued development of Womanist Theology and for the liberation of humanity.

WOMANIST JESUS AND THE MUTUAL STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

I looked at my hands, to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.

I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dream-

ing. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom, I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also; I would bring them all there. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp ground; 'Oh, dear Lord,' I said, 'I ain't got no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I'm in trouble!'

"I'm in trouble," Harriett Tubman said. What was the source of her trouble? She was finally free. Her prayers had been answered; her dream had come true. She had reached the "state" which she perceived to be like heaven—freedom—the long awaited reality. Freedom, in her understanding, was the essence of the good news of the gospel. What happens when we encounter the good news of the gospel? We are taught that the Christian response is to go forth in all the world and "spread the gospel" to others. Even from a Christian point of view, then, it is not difficult to understand the yearnings of Harriett Tubman. The gospel experienced, must be shared; freedom experienced, must be shared. However, it is not uncommon that the gospel, when encountered, creates dilemmas which are not easily resolved. The gospel keeps us in a perpetual cycle of decision making. We must say yes to the gospel, and that yes is manifested in life as lived daily; or we can say no even by our inactivity. The dilemma for Tubman meant trouble. Just as life in general for Black people was a perpetual state of "trouble," certainly for an escaped slave, the thought of going back into the den of iniquity was a source for grave concern. For there were both political and

¹Bert Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds., *Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 220.

social (negative) consequences, even possible death.

But for Tubman, the challenge was both a personal one and a religious one (though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive). The will for her family members and others to have the "heaven-like" experience was matched only by her Christian beliefs. The nature of her Christian belief was of such that, as sung in the old-time gospel song, she "just couldn't keep it to herself." Yes, freedom experienced is indeed freedom shared. What happens when the nature of the gospel and the nature of the existential situation render one in direct conflict with the "human principalities and powers that be"? Isn't that often what being a Christian means—challenging unjust and evil powers?

In the experiences of Black women, Jesus was ever-present; he has commonly been perceived and experienced as being present in "times of trouble." Ntozake Shange in her choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, commented through one of her characters that to speak of Black women's existence as "colored and sorry" is to be redundant.² Sadness or sorrow (the pain, the sufferings) are perpetually a part of the African-American woman's reality; so much so that, whatever else the consideration, these components are always present in the lives of Black women. Consequently, to be "colored and sorry" is to be redundant. In the same way, one could say that to speak of Black women's existence as being in trouble, or more to the point, having trouble, is to be redundant. The multi-dimensional nature of Black women's oppression means that "trouble" is always "in the way." Contrary to another old gospel song, "Trouble in My Way, We Have to Hide Sometimes," it is literally impossible to hide. The pervasiveness and interconnect-

²Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 43.

edness of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression which define a good portion of the lives of Black women, make "trouble" inescapable. Jesus, for many Black women, has been the consistent force which has enabled them not only to survive the "troubles" of the world, but to move beyond them and in spite of them. In essence, there is data to suggest that Jesus has served as the catalyst for the empowerment of Black women to continue to wave the banner of freedom and liberation.

In this essay, I will explore three sources of the troubles of African-American women, with special reference to the problem of Christology.³ This exploration enables us to understand the context which gives rise to the empowerment and the liberation efforts of Black women. Essentially, I argue that the central christological problem rests in the fact that Jesus Christ historically has been and remains imprisoned by the socio-political interests of those who have historically been the keepers of principalities and powers. This Jesus has been a primary tool for undergirding oppressive structures. I, therefore, wish to discuss the "troubles" of African-American women by exploring three ways in which Jesus has been imprisoned: 1) The imprisonment of Jesus Christ by patriarchy; 2) The imprisonment of Jesus Christ by white supremacy; and 3) The imprisonment of Jesus Christ by the privileged class. Then, in conclusion, I wish to explore the implications for the liberation or the redemption of Jesus Christ based on the lived realities of African-American women.

³Jesus Christ is the focus of this paper; however, it should be noted that the arguments being made are applicable to other topics and doctrines of Christian theology as well, e.g., God, humanity, the Bible, religion, life, etc. In fact, the same arguments can be made of Christianity itself.

The Historical Imprisonment of Jesus Christ by Patriarchy

It is no accident that in the course of Christian history, men have defined Jesus Christ so as to undergird their own privileged positions in the church and society. This is evidenced by the fact that Jesus Christ is so often used to justify the subordination of women in the church. An understanding of the context in which this kind of interpretation emerges, provides explanations of the interpretation itself.

An aspect of the social context in which Christianity, as we know it, developed, and in which we now live, is "patriarchy." Defined in the male consciousness, patriarchy assumes male dominance and control, making normative the centrality of men and the marginality of women. The primary roles of men and the secondary roles of women, effectively ensure a hierarchy in sex or gender roles. Moreover, patriarchy embraces "the whole complex of sentiments, the patterns of cognition and behavior, and the assumptions about human nature and the nature of the cosmos that have grown out of a culture in which men have dominated women."⁴ That is to say, patriarchalism is a way of looking at reality so that role assignments are not arbitrarily given, but they are a part of the rational and systematic structures of perceived reality itself. Patriarchy has been called a "conceptual trap" which ensnares its victims and keeps them in place through the constant reinforcements of society which cooperate to keep the male status quo in place. It's like being in a room, and unable to imagine anything in the world outside of it.⁵ It becomes difficult

⁴Sheila Collins, *A Different Heaven and Earth* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1974), 51.

⁵Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy As a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1982), 17.

then for either men or women to imagine themselves outside of their prescribed roles; and when this does happen, in the case of women, they are treated as "exceptions," as long as the system remains in place. "Exceptions" are always acceptable, for even when they are not controllable, or when they defy oppressive structures, the masses are still held in check. They are then either treated as renegades, or coopted as "one of the boys."

Living within these parameters means living with dualisms which effectively keep men in superior and women in inferior positions, thus rendering men as authority figures over women. Just as Jesus has power and authority over men and women, men have power and authority over women and children. The christological import of these effects of patriarchy, of course, is that the divine is generally associated with what it means to be male in this society. In another place, I have explored the specific correlation between patriarchal assumptions about gender roles and the issue of women's leadership in the church.⁶ However, suffice it to say here that the lingering controversies regarding leadership/ordination/placement of women in the church are overwhelmingly and distordedly christological.

Women have been denied humanity, personhood, leadership, and equality because of the church's history of negative Christology. This aspect of the negative Christology has resulted primarily from over-emphasis on the maleness of Jesus. The maleness, in actuality, has become idolatrous: the maleness of Jesus has been so central to our understanding of Jesus Christ that even the personality of Jesus, and interpretations of Christ have been consistently distorted. In effect, Jesus has been imprisoned by patriarchy's obsession with the supremacy of maleness.

⁶See Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

Feminists have sought to break the prison of patriarchy. Using gender analysis, many of the historical, biblical and theological interpretations have been challenged. Feminist theologians have been working diligently to overcome the sin of patriarchy. They have been able to break from the conceptual trap by taking seriously women's experiences as the context and one of the sources of biblical interpretations. Seeing reality through the eyes of women has led to the rereading of biblical texts and the revising of biblical and theological interpretations. In other words, feminists have uncovered the fact that the presence of women in the Bible was important, and that Jesus was not only not anti-woman but in fact was always affirming of women. In many instances of biblical interpretations, feminists have tried either to reform Jesus or to liberate Jesus and women by suggesting that though Jesus can be seen in relation to the male physical reality, Christ transforms maleness and may take on female or feminine forms. Other feminists have argued the uselessness of these revisionist approaches, for in their views, to speak of Christianity and patriarchy, is to be redundant. What is being said here simply is that whereas men have, heretofore, defined religion, Christianity, Christ, and so forth, women must now be empowered to become participant definers of these matters. Only then will we be able to free Jesus from the prison of patriarchy.

As victims of sexism, African-American women, along with other women, are *once* removed from the image of God.

The Historical Imprisonment of Jesus Christ by White Supremacy Ideology

As I explore the problem of Christology from the perspective of an African-American woman, the question of sexism and its

function in the historic oppression of women must be adequately addressed. Feminists have provided some significant analyses that have helped in breaking the prison of patriarchy, pointing directions for eliminating the sin of sexism from our lives, our churches, and societies. For African-American women, however, the question is much broader than the sin of sexism. Racism, in the view of many, has been the basic defining character in the lives of African-American women in North America. Recent publications continue to document the contemporary manifestations of racism in our everyday lives.

Unfortunately, the church has not escaped this sinful reality. On the contrary, the church has been a bastion of the sin of racism. This is reflected not only in the practice of much of its populace, but in the structures and in the theologies of the churches. Studies on church leadership (including present patterns), religious (and educational) institutions, and the history of theology would confirm this. For example, even though "open itineracy"⁷ is claimed by some predominantly white churches, it is more likely that white men would be placed in leadership in Black and integrated churches, than others, especially Black men and Black women to be so placed. In the university and seminary settings, though the claim of being an equal opportunity employer is made, minorities are consistently underrepresented in the administrations, faculties, and staff of predominantly white institutions in North America. And when the minority presence is there, it is overwhelmingly located in service/servant positions.

Theologically, perhaps this is nowhere more apparent than in the christological issue, wherein negative color symbolism has been institutionalized in Christian theology. The constant battle

⁷This phrase is particularly familiar in Methodist structures; however, here it refers to the claim of any church to being an "equal opportunity employer."

between light and dark, good and evil (God and the devil), white and black, is played out daily in racial politics of the dominant culture (Euro-Americans), and at the same time, theologically legitimated and institutionalized in the racial imageries of the divine. The racism is reflected in the fact that the white imagery is presented as normative and to the exclusion of any other possible imagery of Jesus or God.

These oppressive ideologies and theologies have been developed in the context of racial/white supremacy. The ideology of white supremacy produces the kind of racism with which we have been afflicted throughout most of the history of this continent as we know it. Racism, according to Joel Kovel, "is the tendency of a society to degrade and do violence to people on the basis of race, and by whatever mediations may exist for this purpose."⁸ These mediations are manifested in different forms, and are carried on through various disciplines: psychology, sociology, history, economics, art and symbolism of the dominant (white) group. Racism is the domination of a people which is justified by the dominant group on the basis of racial distinctions. It is not only individual acts, but a collective, institutionalized activity. As C. Eric Lincoln observed:

For racism to flourish with the vigor it enjoys in America, there must be an extensive climate of acceptance and participation by large numbers of people who constitute its power base. It is the consensus of private persons that gives racism its derivative power. . . . The power of racism is the power conceded by those respectable citizens who by their

⁸Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychobiography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), x, quoted in Grant, *White Women's Christ*, 199, n. 10.

actions or inaction communicate the consensus which directs and empowers the overt bigot to act on their behalf.⁹

Racism, then, is not only measurable by individual actions, but by institutional structures, and theoretical precepts. Its presence is guaranteed even in the absence of any particular human carriers.

Now, theological and specifically, christological expressions of this racism are represented in our common imaging of Jesus Christ and of God. The irrationality used here is similar to that used in the sin of sexism. For example, even though we insist that God is a spirit and Jesus died for us all, we persist in deifying the maleness of both God and Jesus, certainly giving men a social, political, and theological advantage over women. With regard to the sin of racism, though we claim God as spirit and Jesus as being for all, we have consistently and historically represented God and Jesus as white. We have in fact deified "whiteness."

Even in popular culture, God, as reflected in Hollywood (for example, in the movie "Oh God!"), has been given to us as residing in the midst of pure whiteness, and being represented by "an old white man." (Perhaps the only thing approximating accuracy in the image of God presented here is "old"; if eternity implies anything, perhaps it implies old, even though the concept of "eternity" defies all such human categorizations. The "eternal nowness" of God can be perceived to be ageless.) In other words, Christian consensus, based upon and grounded in the history of theology, enables "respectable Christians" to accept without question, the destructive negative color symbolism of Christian theology. No wonder some Black folks are still singing and praying "Lord Wash Me Whiter Than Snow," in spite of the prob-

⁹C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 11-12, quoted in Grant, *White Women's Christ*, 199, n. 11.

lematic nature (at best) of the related biblical texts.¹⁰

In the white church tradition, Jesus Christ has functioned as a status quo figure. Because, historically speaking, Christology was constructed in the context of white supremacy ideology and domination, Christ has functioned to legitimize these social and political realities. Essentially, Christ has been white. This is evidenced not only in the theological imagery, but also in the physical imagery of Jesus himself. In a society in which "white is right and black stays back," and white is symbolized as good and black evil, certainly there would be socio-political ramifications of color with respect to Jesus. The implication that white/light is good and black/dark is evil functions, not only with respect to humanity, but also with respect to humanity's concept of their deity. The late Bishop Joseph Johnson put the point strongly this way:

Jesus Christ has become for the white church establishment 'the white Christ,' blue eyes, sharp nose, straight hair, and in the image of the Black [person's] oppressor. The tragedy of this presentation of Jesus Christ by the white church establishment is that he has been too often identified with the repressive and oppressive forces of prevailing society. The teachings of the white Christ have been used to justify wars, discrimination, segregation, prejudice, and exploitation of the poor and the oppressed people of the world. . . [this] form of racism has been. . . supported.¹¹

¹⁰Cf. Randall Bailey, "Beyond Identification: The Use of Africans in Old Testament Poetry and Narratives," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African-American Biblical Interpretations*, ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 180; and Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 42.

¹¹Joseph Johnson, "The Need for a Black Christian Theology," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center II* (1974): 25.

To counteract this historical and theological trend, Black theologians have called not only for a new departure in theology, but even more specifically, for a new christological interpretation. The white Christ must be eliminated from the Black Experience and the concept of a Black Christ must emerge. Theologians like Cone, Wilmore, Cleage, and others have argued this point from various perspectives. Some argue for literal blackness, some for symbolic blackness. The point is to uplift the oppressive ways in which the negative images have functioned for Black and white people; it is a question of images in relation to human beings. We have been given to believe that Blacks are not in the image of God. For this reason many still harbor beliefs, strong feelings, and attitudes about the inferiority of Blacks even when our intellect tells us otherwise.

African-American women as women and Black persons are thus *twice* removed from the image of God. Racism and white supremacy ideology have functioned to keep Blacks and Jesus imprisoned. Black Theology advocates liberation for Black people and for Jesus.

The Historical Imprisonment of Jesus Christ by the Privileged Class

What for some have been called theological paradoxes and dialectical tensions, have been for others in actuality historical contradictions, which have led to social, economic, and political imprisonment. Take, for example, the notion of "servanthood," both in the Christian and the secular contexts. Explorations into the area of domestic servanthood illustrate my point. In particular, a look at the relationship between whites and Blacks vis-à-vis slavery and domestic service demonstrates that the Christian

notion of servanthood has historically been used to reinforce a servant, subservient and obedient mentality in politically oppressed people.¹² The catechisms which were taught to slaves were designed to clearly identify the earthly slavemaster as the god of the slave. One such catechism, Jones's Catechism, admonished the slave to respond to the master

with all fear,' they are to be 'subject to them'
and obey them in all things, possible and lawful,
with good will and endeavour to please them well, . . .
God is present to see, if their masters are not.¹³

Even after slavery it appears that the attitude survived, for Black people in general and Black women in particular have always been disproportionately relegated to being servants of white people. Still, they were given to believe that it was not only their civil duty, but their Christian or heavenly duty to obey. In other words, Christian servanthood and socio-political servanthood were taught to be the same. In spite of this, however, Black people recognized the contradictions. So they sang:

I got-a shoes
You got-a shoes
All o' God's chillun got-a shoes.
When I get to heab'n,

¹²This theme is explored in the writer's essay entitled "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), chap. 12, 199-218. Suffice it to say here, the institution of domestic service and the relationship between Black and white women clearly demonstrate a problematic with the servanthood language and imagery.

¹³Mason Crum, *Gullah: Negro Life in the Carolina Sea Islands* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1940), 204-205; quoted in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 162-163, n. 21.

goin' to put on my shoes,
I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's heab'n.

Even though people outside of the culture may interpret this message as mere concern for shouting, or the ecstasy that comes with various forms of spirituality, it in fact was a challenge to the contradictions under which they lived. The refrain took an interesting twist:

Heab'n, heab'n,
Everybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere;
Heab'n, heab'n,
I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's heab'n.¹⁴

Those Christian servants who have (had) the power to define the politically oppressed servants ought not to assume that their earthly political and social powers controlled divine things. They may be forced into dehumanized forms of servanthood, but divine retribution was to come.

Interestingly, even though we use the servanthood language with respect to Jesus, we have in effect made him a part of the bourgeoisie. He has become a privileged person, not unlike the so-called "Christian servants" of the culture of oppressors. They specialize in maintaining their privileged positions in the church and society, while the real "servants" of the world are structurally and systematically disenfranchised. The real servants are the economically deprived, the socially ill, the politically impotent, and the spiritually irrelevant, if in fact not spiritually empty, according to those in the culture of oppressors.

¹⁴Thomas R. Frazier, ed., *Afro-American History: Primary Sources* (Atlanta: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 93.

Jesus has been made to escape all of these realities. Though he was born in a stable, he has been made royal—he's King of Kings; though he was a Jew, all traces of his Jewishness have been effectively erased for all intents and purposes; though he died the common death of a criminal, we've erased the agony, suffering and pain, in the interest of creating a "comfortable Jesus." In an interview with a Black pastor in which he interpreted the images on the stained glass windows just recently installed in his church, he commented: "The White Church has erased the pain from the face of Jesus. He does not suffer. The crucifixion is a painful experience. We show the pain, the agony, the suffering. It's the face of the Black Man—the face of Black People."¹⁵ It's the face of the real servants of the world.

I am arguing that our servanthood language, existentially functions essentially as a deceptive tactic for keeping complacent non-dominant culture peoples and the non-privileged of the dominant culture. Thus, our white Jesus, the Jesus of the dominant culture, escapes the real tragedy of servanthood, but oppressed peoples do not. Christian theology and history have ensured the embourgeoisment of this Jesus. I am arguing (as others have done) that Jesus has been conveniently made into the image of white oppressors. William Jones some years ago asked the question "Is God a white Racist"? Feminists have asked "Is God/Jesus a male chauvanist pig"? When poor people ask, "Why Lord?" one could interpret this question to be, "Is God/Jesus for the rich and against the poor"? All of these oppressive conceptions about God/Jesus are reinforced by the imagery and symbols including language of the dominant culture. What is needed is a challenging of Christian theology at the points of its racist, sexist and servant languages, all of which are contrary to the real

¹⁵Matthew Johnson, pastor of the United Institutional Baptist Church, interview by Jacquelyn Grant, 10 April 1992, Greensboro, North Carolina.

message of Jesus Christ.

Being among neither the dominant culture or the privileged class, again, Black women and other non-white women, because of their triple jeopardy, are *three* times removed from the image of God.

Womanist Jesus: The Mutual Struggle for Liberation

African-American women's understandings of Jesus help us to see how Black women are empowered in appropriating Jesus, even in spite of the historical oppressive presentations of him. What we find in the experiences of African-American women is a process of mutual liberation: Jesus was liberating or redeeming African-American women, as African-American women were liberating or redeeming Jesus. The Jesus of African-American women has suffered a triple bondage of imprisonment as well. Jesus has been held captive to the sin of patriarchy (sexism), the sin of white supremacy (racism) and the sin of privilege (classism). As such, Jesus has been used to keep women in their "proper place"; to keep Blacks meek, mild and docile in the face of brutal forms of dehumanization; and to ensure the servility of servants. African-American women heard twice (and sometimes three times) the mandate "Be subject. . .for it is sanctioned by Jesus and ordained by God. . . ." Consequently, both (African-American women and Jesus) have suffered from the sins of racism, sexism, and classism.

However, in spite of this oppressive indoctrination, Jesus Christ has been a central figure in the lives of African-American women. They obviously experienced Jesus in ways different from what was intended by the teachings and preachings by white oppressors (and other oppressors). Five experiences demonstrate how African-American women were able to liberate Jesus as Jesus liberated them: 1) Jesus as Co-Sufferer; 2) Jesus as Equalizer; 3) Jesus as Freedom; 4)

Jesus as Sustainer, and (5) Jesus as Liberator.

Jesus As Co-Sufferer

Chief among Black people's experiences of Jesus was that he was a divine co-sufferer, who empowered them in situations of oppression. For Christian African-American women of the past, Jesus was a central point of reference. For in spite of what was taught them, they were able to identify with Jesus, because they felt that Jesus identified with them in their sufferings. There was mutual suffering. Just like them, Jesus suffered and was persecuted undeservedly. Jesus' suffering culminated on the cross. African-American women's cross experiences were constant in their daily lives—the abuses physical and verbal, the acts of dehumanization, the pains, the sufferings, the loss of families and friends and the disruption of communities. But because Jesus Christ was not a mere man, but God incarnate, they, in fact, connected with the Divine. This connection was maintained through their religious life—their prayer tradition and their song tradition. Their prayers were conversations with one who “walked dat hard walk up Calvary and ain't weary but to think about we all dat way.”¹⁶ The connection was also evidenced by the song tradition in which one could lament, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I See. . .but Jesus. . .”

Jesus As Equalizer

African-American women had been told twice that their inferiority and inequality were a part of the nature of things.

¹⁶Harold Carter, *The Prayer Tradition of Black People* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1976), 49.

They, along with African-American men, were taught that they were created to be the servant class for those in control. They were not to preach (in the case of women, and Black men in some traditions), and they were to acknowledge their place as a part of God's providence. But African-American women experienced Jesus as a great equalizer, not only in the white world, but in the Black world as well. And so they would argue that the crucifixion was for universal salvation in its truest sense, not just for male salvation, or for white salvation. Because of this, Jesus came and died, no less for the woman as for the man, no less for Blacks as for whites. Jarena Lee, in the last century said: "If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman? See he died for her also. Is he not a whole saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear."¹⁷ Because Jesus Christ was for all, he in fact equalizes them and renders human oppressive limitations invalid.

Jesus As Freedom

Fannie Lou Hamer articulates, perhaps better than anyone, Black women's understanding of Jesus in relation to freedom. She takes us a bit further than the equality language by challenging our understanding of and desire for mere equality: "I couldn't tell nobody with my head up I'm fighting for equal right[s] with a white man, because I don't want it. Because if what I get, got to come through lynching, mobbing, raping, murdering, stealing and killing, I didn't want it, because it was a

¹⁷Jarena Lee, *Religious Experiences and Journals of Mrs. Jarena Lee* (Philadelphia: Printed and published for the author, 1849), 15-16.

shocking thing to me, I couldn't hardly sit down."¹⁸

We are challenged to move beyond mere equality to freedom. Hamer inspires us to raise the question, "Equal to whom"? Do we merely seek to be equal with those who practice oppression against others? Is the goal simply that we not be among the oppressed? Freedom is the central message of Jesus Christ and the gospel, and is concisely summarized in Luke 4:18. Based upon her reading of this text her consistent challenge to the American public was that to be a follower of Jesus Christ was to be committed to the struggle for freedom.

Jesus As Sustainer

The oppression under which the masses of Black people have lived has provided them with few support systems. Even in the aftermath of slavery continuing still today, Blacks have had to depend on alternative ways of getting their needs met. In addition to the various social service agencies, organizations, and clubs established, churches and religion provided a significant sustaining support for them. This was reflected in and through the song and preaching traditions of Black people. In those contexts one would (and still does) hear the refrain exclaiming Jesus (Lord) "as a shelter in times of storm, a doctor in the sick room, a lawyer in the court house, and one who in fact makes a way out of no way. . . ." The notion of Jesus functioning as family is significant in contexts in which the family system has been thoroughly assaulted and insulted. So they proclaimed—"You're my

¹⁸Fannie Lou Hamer, interview by Robert Wright, 9 August 1968, Howard University, Washington, District of Columbia. The text of the "Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer" is located in the Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center.

father when I'm fatherless, my mother when I'm motherless, my sister when I'm sisterless, my brother when I'm brotherless, and my friend when I'm friendless." One could argue that the Divine could function in anyone's life in these ways, for people often find themselves in situations in which they are without family members. However, in regard to Black people, the family system has been systematically violated and sometimes rendered unstable. The fact that they experienced Jesus in this way then meant that Jesus was not only a sustainer in the normal vicissitudes of life, but also during times of greatest crisis.

Jesus As Liberator

The liberation activities of Jesus empowers African-American women to be significantly engaged in the process of liberation. Sojourner Truth was empowered, so much so that when she was asked by a preacher if the source of her preaching was the Bible, she responded, "No honey, can't preach from de Bible—can't read a letter." Then she explained, "When I preaches, I has jest one text to preach from, an' I always preaches from this one. My text is 'When I found Jesus!' " In this sermon Sojourner Truth talks about her life, from the time her parents were brought from Africa and sold, to the time that she met Jesus within the context of her struggles for dignity and liberation for Black people and women. The liberation message of Jesus provided grounding for the liberation and protest activities of such persons as Sojourner Truth and many other women activists.

Womanist Theology minimally calls for a tri-dimensional analysis, but more accurately pushes us toward a multi-dimensional analysis, as we move towards liberation. In other words, we must construct a world which is free of oppression in whatever form(s). Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of reminding us that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The embodiment of Black womanhood challenges us to move beyond single issue analyses which leaves many faces of injustice unchallenged. A holistic analysis is needed which paves the way for the ushering in of a liberating and liberated society. Black women cannot be asked to split their being. To do so would be ontologically impossible, existentially catastrophic, psychologically depressing, politically unwise, socially alienating (even from the self) and spiritually devastatingly dichotomous. King's "beloved community" certainly will never become a reality as long as Black (African-American) women remain on "the underside of herstory" and "under the underside of history." The various prisons which have been built and which are perpetuated to hold us must be destroyed. Womanist theology points us in that direction.

Both white women and Black women have re-thought their understandings of Jesus Christ. They have done so against all odds. For they (both) live in the context of patriarchy, which has enabled men to dominate theological thinking and church leadership. Black women continue to suffer from the sin of white supremacy, wherein it is believed that the theological task belongs to whites. Black and other minority women must continue to struggle against the conditions of racism, sexism, and classism which persist in rendering them "servants of the servants of servants," and to insist that the experiences of all women—African-American women, Hispanic women, Native American women, Asian women, and White women—must be taken seriously.

Some years ago while serving as the assistant minister of a large metropolitan church (Flipper Temple AME Church, Atlanta, Georgia), I often did the children's sermon and the regular adult sermon as well. In perusing a book of children's sermons, I came across an excellent object children's message entitled "God in a Box." The message was quite poignant and challenging and so I decided to preach it as a children's sermon and the adult sermon in the same Sunday morning worship service. The feedback demonstrated that it was effective in lifting up our proclivities toward spiritual convenience. Several years later, the sermon was developed under the title, "On Containing God."

As I continued to teach in the seminary context, it became increasingly clear that a basic problem in general is the tendency to control God and to make God fit into our comfort zone. The comfort zone, most often acquired through traditioning processes, is nonetheless manifestations of human limitations imposed upon God. Three ideological comfort zones often challenged in my ecclesiastical and academic work are white supremacy, patriarchy, and class bias. This sermon is designed to demonstrate how we place ideological limitations upon God, ever under the guise of tradition. It is intended to involve thinking and to inspire change in attitude about and actions towards marginalized people who historically have been prevented from participating in the image of God.

“ON CONTAINING GOD” (MATTHEW 17:1-5 WITH
SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON MATTHEW 17:4)

I'm always fascinated by the way(s) we conceive of and talk about God. At times, we speak of God in broad absolute categories. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. These descriptions encompass both our broad and narrow understandings of them. God's knowledge and wisdom encompass not only things of the universe—out there, but God also knows me and you; God's power is not just an abstract power, but it impacts our lives as well. The “everywhereness” of God means that God is with me even as God is with others across the world. But in spite of these infinite qualities which we give to God, we often find ourselves trying to “contain God.” Though God is infinite, perfect and eternal, we finite, impotent, and temporal creatures sometimes believe that we can totally comprehend and in fact control God.

God can only do what we say God can do; God can only go where we say God can go; God can only be concerned about those things and those people about whom we say that God should be concerned; God can only look like what we say God looks like; God can only be spoken of as we say. We even try to determine who God saves. God can only save certain people—those of the right color or race, economic class, gender, sexual preference, nationality, or faith/denomination.

But God is bigger than you and I. Our children used to sing, “God is so high you can't go over, so low, you can't get under, so wide you can't get around; you must come in at the door.” That is you must meet God for yourself face to face. Children are taught early that you can't put God in a box. God's too big for that. Sojourner Truth, in her autobiography when she came face

to face with the inexhaustibleness of God, declared "God, I didn't know that you were so BIG."

In our text, Jesus became transfigured before the eyes of the disciples who accompanied him on a high mountain. The face of Jesus was shining like the sun and his garment became bright as light. It appeared to them that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus. In this phenomenal experience, Peter responded with an offer to build three booths (tabernacles)—one for Moses, Elijah, and one for Jesus.

Scholars have suggested that this transfiguration was a sign of the eschaton. Matthew records just before this passage, in the sixteenth chapter, Jesus foretelling his own death: that he shall suffer at the hands of elders, chief priests, and scribes, and that he will be killed and raised up on the third day. So having seen the transfiguration over on the mountain top, they were stunned; they were dazzled by this incredulous happening. In the midst of this experience, the disciples' first thought was building a tabernacle—a booth—a box.

Our response to experiencing Jesus is sometimes only to build boxes (churches/church buildings), when in fact Jesus calls us to build (up) people too. Our response is sometimes to found churches and denominations rather than finding people. We sometimes become very good at delivering our brand of God, rather than allowing God to deliver us—so that we can help people.

If we contain God, put God in a box, we will miss the mark of salvation: we will fail as a people; we will fail as a church. If we continue to contain God, we will continue to limit ourselves. So all of us need to examine how we put God in boxes.

There are various reasons for our attempts to contain God. Some admirable, some not so. Let me suggest just two of them:

(1) We try to contain God because we want to **PROTECT GOD**. Perhaps Peter was concerned about protecting Jesus from

the suffering which he was to endure. Maybe he felt that if Jesus were to stay on the mountain, he would escape the predicted persecution and death. Maybe they felt that a booth on the mountain would protect Jesus from human evil and sin. Perhaps they wanted to keep him away from the problems of life in the valley, the problems of daily life. Peter and the others misunderstood the revelation which they were receiving. In seeing Jesus in all his splendor and magnificence, they wanted to keep Jesus up in the mountain top, perhaps because they wanted to stay there too. It appears that they misunderstood Jesus' ministry. In various biblical scenes, the disciples and the people often tried to protect Jesus from sinners, tax collectors, women, poor folk, and other outcasts.

Today, some think that Jesus is not concerned with unemployment, hunger, and starvation in this country and across the world; they think that God is not concerned about the problems of women, particularly when they speak of such things as women's rights, equality, and liberation. Some folks think that when God blesses us, God forgets about others who are unfortunate or less privileged. That's why they often say with ease, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

They did not understand that Jesus had come for the poor, the prisoner, the enslaved, the brokenhearted, the weak, the bruised, the blind, the deaf, the despised, the depressed, the frustrated, the hungry, the unloved, the hated, the cursed. . . . Jesus came that they might have life and have it more abundantly. The mountaintop experience was good, but he could not be contained there.

(2) We try to contain God because we want to **PROTECT OURSELVES**. The God-in-a-box concept is a very convenient God. We can open and close the box at our convenience. We can leave the tabernacle, the booth, the sanctuary, the church at any desired time.

We use the church as a big box for God—to be opened once a week. It becomes a place from which we may vacation. We want to make things comfortable for ourselves. However, following Jesus means that we are sometimes shaken out of our comfort. Zachaeus had to learn that we must give up some of our resources. Jesus' response to Nicodemus' question about eternal life reflects the fact that there must be change in our lives, not just the lives of others or the church collectively, but our lives as well. When Jesus says that he came to bring a sword, we get uncomfortable because we don't know exactly what the "Prince of Peace" means by that statement. Being a real Christian sometimes makes us uncomfortable because we can't control God/Jesus—we can't contain God, for God is everywhere—and cannot be contained.

The Psalmist reminds us that we cannot escape God's Spirit:

If I go up to the heavens, you are there,
If I make my bed in the depths, you are there;
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
If I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hands will guide me,
Your right hand will hold me fast (Psalm 139).

You see, you can't put God in a box or a container, as Sojourner Truth intimates, God is too BIG. In spite of the reality which we all preach, we insist on trying to protect God and ourselves by putting God in various boxes:

(1) **THE CHURCH BOX:** There are some particular Christians who think that God speaks only through "our" church; everything centers around that one church, as though nothing else in the world matters. But, we can't contain God in a church building, attractive though it may be. We can't even

contain God in the people of the church, faithful though they may be. We come to the church to meet God, to worship, to fellowship, to sistership, to commune, to serve, to praise, to glorify, to magnify, to be refueled, and to be revitalized. We come to church to be lifted up when we are feeling down, to be inspired when we're discouraged, to rejoice when we're happy, and to share the love of Jesus.

(2) **THE CLASS BOX:** God is locked up into prosperity. One of the most difficult things to get people (who have "made it") to see is that we are all interconnected. We may have made it out of the ghetto, but we're still connected. God is not a God of the rich and famous, but of all of creation.

(3) **THE RACE BOX:** In some communities across this country, even as we move into another millennium, crosses are still being burned in people's yards, property is still being defaced; derogatory words are still being painted on people's homes; churches are still being burned. Some people have put God in a Race Box, in fact not only does God favor them, but God is only in their image.

(4) We even put God in a **MALE BOX** (not "m-a-i-l", but "m-a-l-e"). It appears that we do this to protect the egos of men who think that they have something in common with God that women do not have. The Bible tells us that God is more than just Father, but we insist on putting God in a male/Father box.

The text reminds us that you can't put God in a box. . . .

Just as Peter, James and John had to learn that they could not contain Jesus on the mountain top, we must learn that we cannot contain God-in-the-church-box, home-box, class-box, or male-box. We need a transfiguration experience today.

God is not just a part-time God. But God is a beyond-the-clock, all-time God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps. God is not a God of convenience, a God for a political and/or social con-

venience. On the mountaintop, God told Peter, James and John, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him." God is saying here, listen to Jesus, do what Jesus has instructed you to do. Feed the hungry in the projects (not just on Thanksgiving or Christmas, but every day of the week), clothe the naked (not just during back-to-school season, but all year round). We can't stop at praying for the sick and afflicted, but we must attend them. Don't rest with putting the elderly away in boxes—but care for them.

The Christian challenge goes much further. We've got to develop effective and constructive ways of dealing with "principalities and powers that be"—those in control of oppressive systems that keep people poor, that withhold good health care from minority peoples, that refuse to provide adequate jobs, but yet want welfare reform. . . .

Yes, we must all have our mountaintop experiences for that spiritual revitalization. But don't think that God is only there. I think that Martin Luther King said in 1968 what Jesus was saying to the disciples on the mountaintop. "We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I won't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." You've got to go into the valley to do God's will. You've got to go into the valley, where the dry bones are. The dry bones of racism/anti-affirmative action, poverty/welfare reform, sexism/gender, second class citizenship, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, and other oppressive realities. We must come off of the Sunday morning mountaintop experience and go into the valley of the shadow of death [to do God's will] where, with God, evil is not to be feared.

What kinds of booths do we build for God? When we limit God in the various ways that we do, we're actually limiting our-

selves. We limit God and ourselves when we put God in the many boxes: *Church box*—*Denominational-box*—*Home-box*—*Belief-box*—*Class-box*—*School-box*—*Race-box*—*Gender-box*—*Personal-box*—*Doctrine-box*—*Prayer-Closet box*—*Hat-box*!

When we take God out of our boxes, it frees us up to be all that God created us to be. When we spend less time trying to control God, we are able to blossom into the flower that God has created us to be. God cannot be boxed into our life styles; we do not have God enclosed in our hands/minds, but God's got us enclosed in God's hands. For God's got the whole world in God's hand. The world does not have God, but God has got the world. God sent Jesus to show us that even the powerful elders, chief priests and scribes could not keep God, in Jesus, in a box called a coffin (or a tomb). The imagination of the songster puts these words in the mouth of Jesus:

Go ahead, drive the nails in my hands,
Laugh at me, where you stand,
Go ahead and say it isn't me,
The day will come, when you will see.
Cause I'll rise again,
Ain't no power on earth can tie me down.
Yes, I'll rise again—Death can't keep me in the ground.

We can't contain God—we can't keep God in a box. . . .

