

Liberating voice: First African American Preaching Conference at Truett

September 26, 2019

More than 300 registrants from 21 states gathered at Truett Theological Seminary September 24-26 for the first annual African American Preaching Conference.

Rev. Josh Scott, associate pastor to youth and families, college students and young adults at Second-Ponce De Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta, learned about the conference from preaching professor Joel Gregory's Facebook page. Seeing the list of preachers and presenters, Scott decided he had to travel to Waco to hear and learn from so many important ministers in the African American church community. He currently is pursuing a Ph.D. in preaching from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The conference grew out of the vision of Joel Gregory, who holds the George W. Truett Endowed Chair in Preaching at Evangelism at Truett Theological Seminary. It took shape over three years with the help of Texas Baptists' African American Ministries. Speakers and preachers included nine noted African American pastors, preachers and professors.

Faculty from Truett Seminary and Baylor University presented workshops on topics ranging from laws affecting churches to business concerns for the church, Christian social work and how preaching is taught in the academy.

In remembrance of the arrival of the first African slaves on American soil in 1619, the conference focused on the liberating voice of black preaching.

‘Standing in John’s shoes’

Dr. Phillip Pointer, senior pastor of St. Mark Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., a fourth-generation preacher on both sides of his family, delivered a sermon titled “Standing in John’s Shoes.” He preached from Matthew 3:1-6, which recounts John the Baptist’s ministry of preaching and baptizing in preparation for the Messiah.



Dr. Phillip Pointer preaching at the first African American Preaching Conference at Truett Theological Seminary (Photo by Eric Black)

Pointer spoke to the nature of the liberating voice as the “heritage of those who stand, have stood in John’s shoes.” He described John as leaving the comfort of maintenance ministry at the temple in Jerusalem to go out into the “wilderness,” going to a dry place in a spiritually dry time to bring a “fresh word in a stale age.”

Using the phrase “in those days” from Matthew 3:1, Pointer noted that “to stand in John’s shoes is to stand in your times.” It is to be aware of what is happening in the world and to speak the needed message in response to those circumstances. “The times demand it,” Pointer said.

Likewise, “the terrain demands it,” he continued. “Maintenance ministry can be done through mimicry,” but the liberating ministry called for by the times requires preachers to leave the safety of comfortable ministries. The temple—with all its structures—“dampens the voice,” but the natural amphitheater of the wilderness amplifies the voice.

Not only do the times and the terrain demand such preaching, “the truth demands it,” as does the term “repent,” Pointer said. Explaining why black

preaching often is loud, Pointer said: “When truth is under attack, we must increase the volume. The truth deserves to be shouted.”

Finishing with a word of hope, Pointer noted that repentance is a corrective signaling “a turn is possible for you.” “All good preaching should have correction and hope,” he said.

As a liberating voice, black preaching should not shy away from either the social or sinful ills of the times, Pointer said. Likening liberating ministry to medicine, Pointer concluded that the gospel is not a topical treatment but is internal medicine meant to be taken in and digested.

Living, singing and preaching the blues

Rev. Dr. J. Lawrence Turner, senior pastor of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church in Memphis, Tenn., delivered a lecture about the liberating voice in Memphis and beyond. Recounting the history of the church he serves, Turner said it “stands as a testament that white supremacy” nor “the gates of hell will stand against it.”



Rev. Dr. J. Lawrence Turner lecturing at the first African American Preaching Conference at Truett Theological Seminary (Photo by Eric Black)

Basing his lecture on Lamentations 3:21-24, Turner spoke of “blues and hope,” characterizing Jeremiah as a “blues preacher” and the book of Lamentations as “poems of pain.”

Despite the common idea that blues originated in American culture as an

outgrowth of slave spirituals—or “sorrow songs”—Turner asserted that blues actually starts in the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah is just one example of poetic expressions of lived pain captured in the ancient Jewish prophetic and wisdom writings.

Like the Old Testament prophets, American blues tells of a people’s lived experience, Turned said. It tells of West Africans taken into centuries of slavery in the Americas, the so-called progress of emancipation and the Reconstruction era following the American Civil War, Jim Crow laws and the struggle for civil rights, and the ongoing fight for freedom from prejudice and discrimination.

“To be black in America is to live with the burden of bias every day,” Turner said, listing several examples. When black people come to church in Memphis—and elsewhere—they are not only singing the blues, they are living them, he said.

Black preaching is important because it is hopeful, “naming present suffering” while also naming the “future glory to be revealed,” Turner noted. It is “preaching about tragedy while refusing to fall into despair.”

He defined hope as the anticipation of something better and as “forward moving ... despite one’s existential circumstances.”

Referring back to Lamentations, Turner said black preaching often hinges on “but,” as in the verse: “But this I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope” (Lamentations 3:21). “The African American preacher is called to give hope in the midst of a blues situation,” he said.

Turner concluded with a story about a mother and father being awoken by a thumping in their house in the middle of the night. The father grabbed a baseball bat and went around the house until discovering the thumping was coming from his daughter’s bedroom. He opened the door to a dark room and a loud thumping. Turning the light on, he found his daughter dancing

and told her to go back to sleep.

As the father left his daughter's room, it occurred to him that despite the darkness all around her, she could still dance.

"Preacher," Turner said, "Don't let the darkness around you get into you."

The second African American Preaching Conference is scheduled Sept. 30-Oct. 1, 2020.

The National Preaching Conference, hosted by Truett Theological Seminary and held at the First Baptist Church of Waco, is scheduled Nov. 19-21, 2019, and features Dr. Ralph D. West and Dr. Tony Evans, among other noted preachers and presenters. [Online registration](#) currently is open.