

THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The Life and Ministry of
Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.

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C O N T E N T S

Acknowledgments . . .	vii
Preface . . .	x
Introduction . . .	xxi
1 · In the Beginning: Young and Black in America . . .	I
2 · The Country, College, and Contradictions . . .	16
3 · What Then Shall We Say? . . .	26
4 · Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian . . .	38
5 · Removing the Mask . . .	52
6 · Not Here You Won't! . . .	71
7 · Wright and Preacher and Prophet . . .	90
8 · The Peculiar Role of Wright as Prophet/Preacher . . .	104
9 · Teaching a Theology of Freedom . . .	115
10 · Anger Is Not Hate . . .	129
11 · The Oppressor and the Oppressed, United . . .	154
12 · Preaching and Reaching for Liberation . . .	174
13 · Wright and the Would-be President . . .	194
14 · At the End of the Day: Is Wright's Message Relevant Today? . . .	223
15 · A Tragedy of Shakespearean Proportions . . .	250
Notes . . .	261

Preface



I can remember the day the preaching of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright changed my life.

He was preaching about racism, as he often did, and I was only half listening. But it seemed that, out of the blue, I heard something that rattled my soul to its core. He was relating to us that the United States Supreme Court, in its historic *Dred Scott* decision, had made the position of this nation as concerns race unequivocal: Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, Wright said, had written that “there are no rights of a black man that a white man is bound to respect.”

I was stunned. I was too old to be naïve about America or the difference between the myth of a democracy where “all men are created equal,” as Thomas Jefferson had penned, and the reality of a capitalistic society where “the least of these” were too often ignored, but for some reason, I had not thought, or had not studied, the role of government and the justice system in keeping the oppression of African Americans alive and well. I had learned about the *Dred Scott* decision in school but had never been taught that the Chief Justice of the nation’s highest court had said such a thing. I had learned that Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, but only much later did I learn that not even my beloved Lincoln believed African Americans were equal with whites . . . but for some reason, I believed that in the court system, ultimately, there was justice to be had for black people.

I don’t remember what Wright said after I heard those words. I was stuck. When I left church, I went to the library to look up the speech, and, sure enough, there were the dastardly words:

In the opinion of the court, the legislation and histories of the times, and the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show, that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were then acknowledged as part of the people, nor intended to be included in the general words used in that memorable instrument. . . . They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.¹

The words stung . . . and my hunch was that Wright had meant for those words to sting *someone*. This being a Christian was not supposed to be a milquetoast experience. Oppression of people had existed from the beginning of time, and it had not stopped just because Jesus had been dead for more than two thousand years. Wright taught that Jesus knew oppression well; during his lifetime it was the Romans who oppressed . . . and Jesus' firsthand and experiential knowledge of oppression helped shape and define his ministry. Those who followed Jesus had to know that. If we were to "imitate" the Christ, as Paul had written, we had to know what we were imitating.

We were forced to take the blinders off our eyes and look at the world "face to face," and not "through a glass, darkly," as Paul wrote.²

Because of the profound wisdom I gleaned from Wright's preaching, I was disturbed and angry at what happened in 2008. The presidential election of 2008 was as exciting as it was historic. An African American man was running for the highest office of the land in a nation where the color of a person had most often been used to hinder his or her progress and define him or her as inferior to whites. From the time of slavery, and probably some before that, blacks had been relegated to second-class citizenship in America, but now, in spite of the biting words written by Justice Taney in 1857, Barack Hussein Obama was taking the country by storm. It was nothing short of exhilarating for those who said they thought they'd never live to see the day when this would be America's reality.

But Mr. Obama was not the only African American man with whom Americans became familiar in 2008. He was thrust up against his pastor, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., with the force of a deadly and unwelcome tornado. Obama's political opponents were looking for a way to bring him down, and once a couple of clips from sermons Wright had given years ago were found, the two men were pitted against each other, the powers-that-be salivating at the carnage that was sure to result. How would the man who would be president of the United States justify his relationship with a man, his pastor, who had said, "God damn America"? Those words were unconscionable for any American to say; people needed to be patriotic, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. "God Bless America," belted out through the voice of Kate Smith, was a national anthem in its own right. The words and sentiment contained in the song were held sacred. That Jeremiah Wright would say just the opposite, and base it on events that happened in the Bible, with God damning or cursing those who had broken covenant with Yahweh and the laws of God, was unacceptable. That he had likened what was happening in modern-day America to biblical times was doubly unacceptable.

Wright's words were only part of the problem, however. *This was Obama's pastor!* It was widely known and reported that Mr. Obama and his family had attended Trinity UCC for some twenty years; it was also known that Rev. Wright had married Barack and Michelle Obama, and had dedicated their two children, Sasha and Malia. Thus, Wright, it was thought, had had plenty of time to "teach" Obama the anger of a black man. This clip would be Obama's Waterloo, his opponents felt.

While the drama unfolded, those who had been touched and liberated by Wright's sermons writhed in agony and anger. For years, he had preached as powerfully as had prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, who had railed about injustice, specifically the injustice done by government. Rev. Wright had drawn attention to the fact that racism was real and that democracy in America had not been so "democratic" for African Americans nor for other marginalized groups. His message had never changed; for Mr. Obama to have said that he had never heard some of what his pastor had reportedly preached seemed a bit disingenuous.

The fury over Wright's sermons, however, was misplaced. The representation of Wright as incendiary and hate-filled was painfully incor-

rect. Those who had listened to Wright for years knew better. His sermons were informational, instructional, biblically based, and theologically sound. Many of them were critical of American government, for sure, but that criticism served as a source of inspiration to a group of people who had historically been marginalized in this nation. In many churches, the disconnect between what God mandated and what government dished out was ignored. But that was not true of Wright's sermons. His ministry was one that encouraged people to have a religion that was not one merely and solely of personal salvation with Jesus Christ, but to have eyes that saw as did the Christ—to see “the least of these” in spite of having been part of that group themselves. Wright nudged his listeners, whether they were black or white, to move from pat and incomplete opinions about God and government and to study both deeply.

God, he taught, was not one who would be pleased with people who had not a clue about what was going on in the world; part of being a Christian was to “go” into the world and bring good news, but to do that, one would have to know one's world. In addition, he taught his congregants that democracy had a “de facto” and a “de jure” component. Just because Thomas Jefferson had written that “all men were created equal” did not mean that that was the way our democracy worked. People knew that, but it wasn't often talked about in church. Wright, however, would not let his listeners sink into a disinfected reality. God had requirements—of individuals, surely, but also of governments! In order to be a viable Christian, one would have to see God as one who exacted accountability from those who said they loved God, seeing not only their situations but the situations of others as well. He taught that God's people would also have to leave the comfort of their pews and walk into the lion's den called American democracy with eyes wide open, seeing not what had been spoon-fed in lopsided history lessons, but what was actually the case.

What Wright dealt with, and what African American preachers deal with in general, was a group of people who really suffered and still suffer from a sort of post-traumatic stress syndrome caused specifically by racism in America. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is defined by the U.S. National Library of Medicine as “a potentially debilitating anxiety disorder triggered by exposure to a traumatic experience such as an

interpersonal event like physical or sexual assault, exposure to disaster or accidents, combat or witnessing a traumatic event.”³ The *New England Journal of Medicine* states that PTSD comes about from an event that has a “capacity to provoke fear, helplessness, or horror in response to the threat of injury or death.”⁴ Evidence suggested that people exposed to such trauma were, or are, at “increased risk for major depression, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and substance abuse.”⁵

Wright knew that the members of his congregation, members of an oppressed and marginalized group, had all dealt with and were still dealing with emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma caused by racism. Years of discrimination and oppression had deadened the hearts and spirits of many African Americans and lessened their capacity to hope—and they were feeling that in spite of being Christians. William Sloan Coffin said that many of God’s people are victims of “psychosclerosis,” or hardening of the spirit.⁶ The people had God, had Jesus . . . but time had eroded the sharpened edge of a religion that challenged injustice. Instead, it seemed that religion was a tool with which people hammered away at the bleakness of their lives; in all actuality, religion for many African Americans had become a numbing agent. It did not seek to empower people to deal with their daily trauma. Necessarily, religion for African Americans had long been eschatological in nature, encouraging blacks to sing and pray for the afterlife: “Soon-ah-will-be-done-a-wid-de-troubles-ob-de-worl”⁷ is an old Negro spiritual which, not unlike many other spirituals, encouraged African Americans to look for peace and blessings not while they were alive, but after they were dead! Countless spirituals conveyed the thought that “over there,” in “Egypt land,” there would be peace and fairness and, finally, an end to unjust suffering on the part of black people.

Wright’s ministry, however, his teaching and preaching, challenged this eschatological worldview, as well as religion that seemed to have become complacent. His teaching and preaching let people know that their pain was real, that the trauma they experienced was not being imagined, but also let people know that because of their God and God’s son Jesus they were not helpless in the face of oppression and that in fact they had the power to overcome it. There was, in fact, reason to hope for empowerment and release from oppression while they were yet alive.

His teaching and preaching would also not allow those who heard him to be concerned merely with their own circumstances and suffering. There was injustice throughout the world, and a Christian, even one oppressed in America, was simply not allowed to sit and complain about his or her own suffering and not be concerned with the suffering of others. Hence, Wright's ministry broadened the worldview of those who heard him, even as he connected the dots between religion and the political and economic systems in America. He preached about racism in America, but also about apartheid in South Africa and the present-day conflict between the Palestinians and Jews. His "Free South Africa" sign in front of Trinity UCC in the 1970s and beyond offended some, but he was clear in his vision and understanding of Jesus. We were to be brothers and sisters and we were to fight oppression everywhere it existed. He taught that Jesus had fought against exactly what oppressed people were fighting against in the present day.

His preaching and teaching, then, was not unlike that of the Hebrew prophets. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Amos . . . all were men who challenged the government and even the religious elite as they railed against governments that seemingly did not have the best interests of "the least of these" at heart. Though it might not have been called "capitalism" in Jesus' day and before, the agrarian societies common during that time were as guilty as is our society today of allowing way too many "have-nots" compared to the "haves." It seemed that in the days of the prophets, as well as in the time of Jesus, governments and individuals were unable and unwilling to consider the plight of the poor. Wright's preaching followed in the footsteps of not only biblical prophets, but of modern-day preachers as well, including William Sloan Coffin and Martin Luther King Jr.

His work was never about hatred.

Perhaps one of the most powerful components of Wright's ministry was his ability to empower African American men. One former member said, "Rev made it okay to be a black man. He didn't emasculate us." Black men were often criticized and ridiculed by other black men who called Christianity "the white man's religion," but Jeremiah Wright's ministry pulled black men in, affirming them and empowering them. "You could be comfortable being a man," this member said. The black

men who flocked to Wright's ministry appreciated being taught that Jesus was not a white man, kind of effeminate, with curly hair. Jesus, they were taught, was a powerful male, who came from the continent of Africa, and who changed the world.

In order to be a Christian, one didn't have to reject one's maleness. "Rev was a regular guy," this ex-member said. Prior to his coming to Wright's ministry, this former member said he had been taught a "Christian" way to live that was problematic. He didn't fit the mold. Jeremiah Wright, though, a "regular guy," let him and others know that it was okay to smoke or drink; doing those things didn't make one less Christian. By accepting black men "as they were," Jeremiah Wright was able to draw black men into the folds of a religion that, it seemed, they had always wanted to embrace but couldn't because they felt unworthy, and unable to embrace a Jesus who was so not like them. Even men who had been members of the Nation of Islam because it had allowed and encouraged them embrace their "maleness" were drawn to Trinity.

Black men who called themselves a "man's man" felt like they had a place in the world under Jeremiah Wright's tutelage. These were men who had seen, or whose ancestors had seen, American terrorism in the form of lynching, KKK cross burnings, and worse; they had been forced to be quiet while they watched their lives and the lives of their families being destroyed. These were men, or children of men, who had been challenged and punished for speaking up for themselves and their families. They had been prevented from voting because they flunked literacy tests that those giving it could not have passed. They had been told all that they could not do and should not expect to do . . . and their church experience had not offered them anything much different. The Jesus and church experience they knew instructed them to be meek and to back down. Never mind about racism; they were born "unfree" in the land where freedom was supposed to be guaranteed to all its citizens. Some of them had migrated to Chicago from the South; others had been children and grandchildren of those who had migrated, and thus, they had seen and heard much that was painful and troubling to them. They didn't have a way to release the tension they felt within, however. Nowhere had Jesus been presented to them as a symbol of strength. Quite the contrary—the Jesus of their parents and grandparents seemed weak; he was

one who taught people to acquiesce to injustice. Black male preachers, they soon realized, were unable to connect to their pain. To some, black preachers were like roosters in the hen house. They were less interested in teaching sound theology than they were in controlling their flocks. They liked it that their congregations were female-dominated; the females worshiped the pastors as much as (or sometimes more than) they did Jesus and didn't seem to mind being controlled; and men, many of them the husbands of these church members, were often marginalized so much that eventually, many stopped attending church altogether. But under the leadership of Jeremiah Wright, black males who had heretofore rejected church, God, and religion were now eager to worship.

The African origins of the Bible were taught; it was likely that Jesus hadn't had wavy brown or blonde hair and blue eyes after all. Jesus was not meek at all. This Jesus, the Jesus of the Bible, was not the cultural creation of a race that needed to remain dominant. The Jesus they learned about under Wright was bold and revolutionary in the way he challenged injustice. He was *masculine*. The former member interviewed said, "There was no shame attached to that image. . . . Rev made being a black man okay. That reality made us empowered, spiritually. It was safe to be in the world and not have to reject being Christian."

This book is going to examine the work, words, and ministry of Jeremiah Wright. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of 2008 is that what Wright was working to achieve—for African Americans to rise above racism, discrimination and oppression, was ultimately realized and then crushed in the person and candidacy and ultimate victory of Barack Obama. The thirty-second sound bites of Wright's sermons—taken and presented out of context to have exactly the effect that they did—were effective in an effort to feed enough fear into people about Barack Obama, but they did not derail Obama's victory. They did a terrible disservice, however, to the life-work of Wright, skewed the perception of his work by people who knew little to nothing about him, and caused some who had previously supported him to back away.

The sound bites damaged Wright's ministry from the outside; Wright perhaps damaged his own ministry somewhat by his appearance at the National Press Club, but his anger at that event was justified, even if his presentation was troubling to some. He had given a brilliant presentation

on the black church, a topic about which he has lectured much, but the questions presented to him afterward ignored his presentation altogether. All the moderator of that event wanted to do was grill him on the sound bites that had caused so much of a stir, and Wright reacted.

However the damage came about, it was sad to see; it was truly a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions. The world grabbed onto the sound bites and labeled Wright a man who spewed hatred, an observation that cannot be supported from listening to and/or reading his sermons, including the ones from which the sound bites were taken. Following the National Press Club event, Obama the politician had to distance himself from Wright the pastor/preacher/prophet as the fear of Wright being a racist bubbled and brewed and threatened Obama's chance for victory. It was not only whites who turned against Wright; many African Americans, some of whom he had helped much in their ministries, turned against him as well. It was sad and painful to see, because anybody who knew Jeremiah Wright and who had learned under him knew that the charge of him being a hater was an outright lie; nothing could have been further from the truth.

Because of the tragedy that lay underneath the amazing victory of Barack Obama in 2008, the jubilation of some was tainted. It seemed that one great man had been elevated at the expense of another. It should never have been that way.

The experience with the media in 2008 profoundly affected Wright, his family, and his then congregation. The media was brutal in trying to prove or uncover proof that Wright was a racist and that consequently the nation was in jeopardy because one of his protégés was headed to the White House. The strategy failed; Obama won, but not without great cost to both men. There was carnage, and it has not yet all been cleaned up.

This book is not a biography of Jeremiah Wright. In fact, Wright refused to grant interviews for this book, and so the biographical information has been pieced together from sermons and conversations with people who knew him and who were willing to talk. As with any of us, Wright's childhood and early life experiences profoundly affected his work and ministry; I have tried to show what some of those effects were.

Neither is this book a history of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ. Although Wright had an amazing and powerful ministry in

the church he built from eighty-seven members to more than five thousand, there will be others who can and will write that story. Wright himself has written its history in a book called *A Sankofa Moment: The History of Trinity United Church of Christ*. The history of the transformation of lives that took place inside the walls of Trinity is yet to be written.

This book also is not a book about the relationship between Barack Obama and Jeremiah Wright; that story will be told, I am sure, by expert biographers and historians. This book is, however, an attempt to show what the ministry of Jeremiah Wright was, by showing what he preached and why, by relating and connecting his words to the historical and cultural context out of which he and those to whom he preached came. The book will compare and relate his prophetic voice with the prophetic voices of biblical and modern-day prophets, and it will attempt to show how powerfully his theology impacted the way he perceived and taught about the inequities of our socioeconomic system in juxtaposition to the words of the Bible and the precepts of the United States Constitution.

It will drive home the point that there is a difference between anger, or passionate anger, about a system and hatred for people. It will try to describe the unique and peculiar struggles around theodicy faced by people of color and, in fact, anyone who is oppressed and living in a Christian nation, and it will examine how Wright's words and work addressed that issue.

In the course of this book we will examine some of the sermons of Wright, including the ones that were so infamously used to try to discredit him, and we will look at the sermons of other prophets, ancient and modern-day. We will examine some of the reasons why a message of liberation is vital, even now, almost 150 years after the Civil War. At the heart of the assault against Jeremiah Wright was the elephant in the room: racism. Hopefully, by the time one has read this book, the elephant will have been moved over, just a bit, toward the door. It is far past time for racism to stop being the seedbed of oppression it has been for far too long. And it is time for the truth of Jeremiah Wright's ministry to gain some discussion. In fact, it is past time.

This work will not be exhaustive, by any means, but hopefully it will whet curiosity about the work and ministry of Jeremiah Wright in the hearts of those who did and did not decide, on the basis of two thirty-

second sound bites, who Jeremiah Wright is and what he stands for and has in fact always stood for. Jeremiah Wright's ministry impacted people from all over the world. This book will not even begin to touch on his international legacy.

How did that day that I heard Wright quote the words of Chief Justice Taney change my life? It made me aware of the historical lack of justice in this country, aware of the breadth and the depth of it, and it made me understand that the struggle to work for "the least of these" can never really end. It gave me a deeper appreciation for the words of the biblical prophets and for the work and the struggle that Jesus had while he was on earth. It made me understand that to be a Christian is a dynamic and not a static experience, and that what Jesus taught, though controversial, was life-changing and life-saving. It made me want to know history a little more, and not be content with the very limited knowledge I had. It made me want to know Truth.

Someone said to me that Jeremiah Wright is so hated as a result of the 2008 election that nobody will read this book. My prayer is that person is wrong, and that perhaps some of the pieces of truth that shattered in 2008 will be picked up and put back together. Politics is brutal, and racial politics is the most brutal of all. That is but one of the messages Wright taught throughout his life. Sadly, the truth of his teaching raised its ugly head at the moment when a great victory should have been savored. That the moment was stolen from history is a sad fact indeed.

Introduction



Had Shakespeare been alive during the 2008 presidential election, he would have relished the making of a true American tragedy.

At the heart of the drama was Barack Obama, running a hard campaign against Hillary Clinton, and Obama's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., who was the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Obama had met the minister during his days as an organizer in Chicago and had noted Wright's talent "to hold together, if not reconcile, the conflicting strains of black experience—upon which Trinity's success had ultimately been built."¹ Young Obama, the son of an African father and a white mother, was doing work which, it seems, immersed him in parts of African American culture that were fairly new to him. Obama found out from his first meeting with Wright that he, Wright, and his church, had at best mixed reviews from fellow clergy and churches; "Some of my fellow clergy don't appreciate what we're about," Obama recalled Wright sharing. "They feel like we're too radical. Others, though, feel we ain't radical enough."² Obama heard Wright shrug off the criticism that the church was "too upwardly mobile," and also heard from Wright his opinion that the life of an African American man was perilous: "Life's not safe for a black man in this country, Barack. Never has been. Probably never will be."³

The future president wrote that he studied the vision of Trinity, the "Black Value System," which contained ten points that Wright wanted Trinity to address and be involved in, and at the top of that list was "commitment to God." The vision clearly stated that the members of Trinity

would be committed to God, “who would give them the strength to give up ‘prayerful passivism.’”⁴ The Black Value System was written in 1981 by a member of Trinity, Manford Byrd, who was an educator who became the superintendent of Chicago Public Schools. He was committed to teaching children to aspire to excellence, and he saw adherence to the principles contained in the Black Value System as necessary for those aspirations to take place.

Obama grew to respect Wright for his vision, for his dedication to “the least of these” with whom Obama was working and organizing for social change. In spite of the criticism that Trinity was too upwardly mobile, Obama quickly noticed that “the bulk of its membership was solidly working class,” and that the church had programs designed to meet the needs of working class families, everything from legal aid to tutoring to drug and HIV/AIDS programs.⁵ This was a church that welcomed all, including and especially “the least of these.”

But Obama also noticed something else: in spite of the church’s mixed socioeconomic membership, there was a sadness, a feeling of a “spiritual dead end.”⁶ It was as though he were seeing Coffin’s “psychosclerosis,” or a hardening of the spirit, something that happens when one is disappointed in God and tired of trying to make sense out of an unkind world. Obama had seen it before among the people he worked with, good church people working hard to change an unbending system, and he found in Trinity that that it was not uncommon among African Americans. It seemed that God was in some regards woefully insufficient, and oppression—racial, economic, sexual, and otherwise—was one of those areas. People went to church and “did” church but often with a sense of hopelessness.

That is perhaps one of the reasons Wright’s ministry influenced Obama. Wright was able to identify the sadness; he was able to meld different socioeconomic classes of African Americans into a more or less working whole, and he was able to infuse and inject them with a sense of hope. In his book *Dreams from My Father*, Obama recalls a sermon, “The Audacity to Hope” preached by Wright, which brought him to tears. In that sermon, recalls Obama, Wright preached about a harpist who was sitting atop a mountain. Wright shared that one cannot see until looking closer that the woman sitting there is tattered and worn and

bruised. In the world upon which she sits, there is famine and destitution and poverty and things that make no sense, like cruise ships “throwing away more food in one day than most residents of Port-au-Prince see in a year, where white folks’ greed runs a world in need, apartheid in one hemisphere, apathy in another hemisphere. That’s the world! On which hope sits!”⁷

As Wright continued his description of life in a world filled with contradictions, where the “haves” ruled and manipulated the “have-nots,” Obama was moved. This was something he knew about; he saw the lack of fairness and opportunity in the lives of the people with whom he worked every day. He saw the contradictions between the ideals and the reality of American democracy. And yet, if there was still hope—if people could and would have the audacity to hope—in spite of that, then perhaps his work was not in vain.

He joined Trinity United Church of Christ and continued to be influenced by his pastor, a man who encouraged him and reminded him that in all things, because there was God, there was hope.

But nothing prepared Obama for the attack against his pastor when the presidential election got into full gear. He knew that, though Wright’s sermons criticized the government, and rightly so in most instances, Wright’s messages were not about hate. He had heard hate-filled sermons before, sometimes obvious and sometimes more muted, and nothing in Wright’s sermons approached that. But those running his campaign understood the nexus of fear and distrust among American whites, and some blacks as well. Obama’s handlers knew politics, and how words and phrases were used and manipulated in order to bring an opponent down. Wright was trouble, and Obama’s people knew it. And so it began, this “tempering” and isolating of Jeremiah Wright. Right at the beginning of his campaign, when Obama was in Springfield, Illinois, to announce that he was running for president, Wright, who had been invited by Obama to give the invocation, was “dis-invited.”⁸ According to Wright, he traveled to Springfield and was prepared to give the invocation, when, at the last moment, he was told it might be better that he not do it, and so, as one black man stood on the steps of the State Capitol Building to announce his candidacy for president of the United States, another black man, the man who had probably most helped him get there by helping

him to develop his spirituality and understand his place as an African American man in a hostile country, stood in the basement of the capitol building, alone.

It was only the beginning. As it became apparent that Obama was not going to go away, Obama's handlers' fear seemed to increase. In lieu of any record of national policy with which to beat Obama down, there had to be something else that his opponents would use, and Wright, they feared (correctly), would be that "something." Wright was known nationally and internationally; his critique of America's racism was no secret, and he made no secret of respecting and being friends with Louis Farrakhan, though not always agreeing with him. Just the mention of Farrakhan's name in the same sentence as Wright's would be enough to make people wary, Obama's handlers knew, and they began to brace themselves for the certain storm that was to come.

And come it did. Like an EF-5 tornado came sound bites with Jeremiah Wright, "Obama's pastor," preaching a sermon in which were the words, "no, no, no . . . not God bless America. God damn America!" The clip was devastating to the Obama campaign and devastating for Wright as well. There was Wright, full of passion and fury at a nation that had done its share of oppressing people, saying words that Obama's handlers knew would enrage voters they desperately needed in order for Obama to win. The Obama camp knew that Americans, especially white Americans, were and are very protective of their country. No warm-blooded American gives a darn about misdeeds this country has done or political, moral, or ethical things it has not done. At the end of the day, one is to remain faithful, loyal, and patriotic, no matter how he or she has been treated, and to be patriotic one had better not talk poorly about the "land of the free and the home of the brave." Although America celebrates the Constitutional right of free speech, it is a fact that sometimes speech here is not all that free, especially if that speech includes scathing criticism of the government. In other words, there is an unspoken culture of censorship. The censorship cannot be blatant; we have, after all, the First Amendment, guaranteeing freedom of speech. But it is clear that one does not talk badly about America, especially not publicly. To do so is to be unpatriotic, and to be unpatriotic is almost worse than being agnostic or atheist. The United States Constitution is a sacred document

to many Americans, probably more sacred for some than the Bible. One can get away with disputing much or some of the Bible in this country, but few people can get away with criticizing America, freedom of speech notwithstanding.

Thus, when Wright was heard saying, “God damn America,” though the words were taken completely out of context, the move to use him to get rid of Obama was on. How could anyone be trusted to be president of the United States when his pastor, of all people, had said such awful words? It didn’t matter what that sermon was about. What mattered is that Wright had presented himself as an enemy of American democracy. Not only had Wright said “God damn America,” but it was brought up that he had also had the audacity to declare that he would not disown Louis Farrakhan, because Farrakhan was not his enemy. Here was a black man who was as honest as he was clear that he was not so enamored with America’s legacy of democracy and freedom that he was unable to see or willing to ignore how America had historically treated “the least of these.” Wright, an American who had served his country as a United States Marine, had not been taken in by the romantic myth contained in the words penned by Thomas Jefferson, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” History had shown otherwise, and Wright knew it.

Americans were furious that Wright would say that “America’s chickens had come home to roost.” The words seemed traitorous. In his sermon “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” written and delivered after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Wright clearly expressed his pain at what had happened in America on that fateful day, and at the end of that sermon, he shared how the 9/11 debacle had pulled into focus his need to live and to preach the love of God more than he had ever done before. That sentiment was lost, however. The words “America’s chickens have come home to roost” sounded sacrilegious to many. From their perspective, it was a horrible thing to say, and they were not about to let him off the hook, no matter what else Wright had expressed in that sermon. If many more of Wright’s sermons had been scrutinized, it was not clear that that had happened in the 2008 campaign; had there been more scrutiny, perhaps the venom against him and Obama would have been lessened. That didn’t matter, though. With these two clips, the move

against Wright was on; it was like a political necrotizing bacteria; it even caused many who had previously fully embraced Wright and his message to question everything he might have preached.

The goal of African Americans was to get Obama in the White House, and many probably hoped they would be able to connect with the would-be president in ways they had not been able to connect with the federal government in the past. African Americans were caught up in the profound symbolism and history that was being made; no matter what, they wanted Obama to win. It seemed that they were completely forgetting that should Obama win, he wouldn't be "America's black president," suggesting that perhaps he would do more for black people than previous presidents had done. No, Obama would be the president of the American people, of whom black people were a part. Prior to this election, there was a sort of drunken ecstasy, it seemed, among black people, and mounting unrealistic fears among white people. A different type of emotion than ever before—caused by race, not reality—swirled around this election. Obama's race made both African Americans and whites giddy with unrealistic expectations; blacks, it seemed, were expecting that Obama's election would mean relief for the race economically, socially, and politically; whites, it seemed, expected that his election would cause America's slow descent into hell. The unrealistic expectations of both races, exacerbated by the fears of many whites, made people distance themselves from Wright, and made some whites distance themselves from Obama. African Americans were angry at Wright for possibly "messing up" the opportunity for a black man to win the presidency; whites were angry at Wright for being less than nobly patriotic. Both blacks and whites wanted Wright to go away. This writer heard some say that Wright was "hurting the black race" and they were clearly irritated at the thought. If whites were frightened by the clips, blacks were mortified. Both blacks and whites felt the pull of this historical moment, but neither group knew quite what to do with it. The country was in disarray.

The clips were bad enough, but when Wright spoke at the National Press Club, a milestone was placed solidly in American political tradition. A line was drawn in the sand: if Obama could not and would not disown his pastor, then Obama was not right for the job of President of the United States. Period. End of discussion.

It had to be hard for Obama because he knew this man. Obama had heard his sermons and knew that the character assassination that being done on Wright was wrong, but the movement to use Wright to destroy Obama had garnered momentum and would not stop. The infamous sound bites were played over and over again, on Fox News and on the so-called “mainline” news stations, including the major networks and CNN. There seemed to be no attempt to find out and expose the context of Wright’s words. Instead, the clips were aired with little more than a brief “this is Obama’s pastor,” over and over, playing into the fears of people who wanted to believe they were past their fear of black people and the way black people think, but who realized, upon hearing Wright, that they were not quite as far along as they had thought. Obama tried to ignore the ruckus; prior to Wright’s National Press Club speech, he compared Wright to an old uncle or relative who is a mainstay in all families, prone to beliefs that younger family members consider outdated and with which they do not agree. The president even compared Wright to his own grandmother, a white woman, who had obviously had her share of racist thoughts and beliefs and whom Obama had heard spout off a few times on the subject of race.

But those who would be riled would not be quieted. Wright came off as an angry black man, and people shuddered. Was Obama as angry as was his pastor? Anger was not permitted. If Obama was as angry as Wright seemed to be, what did that mean for America? Obama’s political opponents were gleeful that they had apparently found “the thing” that was going to push this man out of contention for the nation’s highest office, and his supporters were nervous. Obama’s explanation of Wright being like “an old uncle” didn’t cut it for them. Too much was at stake. America couldn’t afford to have an angry black man in the White House. Obama was going to have to be the president of all of the people, not just of black people who felt they had been wronged by America’s policies for too long. His agenda would have to be inclusive to a fault. No favoritism; the presidency was no place to make up for lost time or blatantly unfair policies and practices. White people had to feel like they would not be punished by this black man, and Wright was making it hard for them to feel that type of reassurance. Wright might not be what the media was playing him up to be, but nobody really cared about that.

This was politics and the stakes were high. Obama was going to have to choose: his pastor or the presidency. The distancing that had begun in Springfield increased and intensified; it was solidified at the National Press Club. Wright's words that day in April of 2008 changed everything for Obama. Some say that following the National Press Club event Obama threw Wright under the bus; others say that Wright, in that same appearance, threw the young presidential hopeful under the bus first by not being more careful about what he said and how he said it.



Contrary to what some have said, Wright did not schedule his appearance at the National Press Club during the height of the 2008 election. His appearance had been planned and confirmed long before Barack Obama announced that he would run for president. Wright is a co-founder and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Inc., a group dedicated to helping African American churches form and implement social justice agendas by providing them capacity to do so and the necessary resources. It was named after the late Samuel DeWitt Proctor, a well-loved and well-respected preacher known to African Americans and others, who had a special gift and affinity for getting people to see the need for the church to be engaged in social justice ministry.

On that day, April 28, 2008, Wright gave a brilliant presentation on the black church. This was not new for him; he has a love for the black church and knowledge of how it has helped African Americans survive racism in America. His presentation that day was typical, vintage Wright: sweeping, yet detailed in its historical scope; illustrative on the role of the black church in history; and intense in its message that the black church must never cease to be. He told the gathered group that for the two days that the SDPC conference would be meeting beginning later that day, the “various streams of the black religious experience” would be addressed,

streams which require full courses at the university and graduate school level, and cannot be fully addressed in a two-day symposium, and streams which tragically remain invisible in a dominant culture which knows nothing about those whom Langston

Hughes calls “the darker brother and sister.” It is all those streams that make up this multilayered and rich tapestry of the black religious experience. And I stand before you to open up this two-day symposium with the hope that this most recent attack on the black church is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright; it is an attack on the black church. . . . The most recent attack on the black church; it is our hope that this just might mean that the reality of the African American church may no longer be invisible.⁹

Wright was concerned about the black church; by this time, the infamous sound bites had been played ad nauseum, and he was afraid that the purpose and historical power of the black church was being compromised.

In that speech, Wright stayed away from politics, from Obama, from mentioning the sound bites; he talked in depth about the black church, about liberation theology having started “from the vantage point of the oppressed”:

I call our faith tradition . . . the prophetic tradition of the black church because I take its origins back past Jim Cone, past the sermons and songs of Africans in bondage in the transatlantic slave trade. I take it back past the problem of Western ideology and notions of white supremacy. I take and trace the theology of the black church back to the prophets in the Hebrew Bible and to its last prophet, in my tradition, Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰

Wright, the scholar, was on a roll, and his audience, made up primarily of African American preachers, sat spellbound. He reminded everyone there how Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week; he told of how the black church had survived becoming an invisible church because of the Black Codes of America (legal statutes and amendments passed by ex-Confederate states after the Civil War designed to limit the freedom of black people and make it legal to use black labor cheaply) and later racist policies. The black church was to be respected and admired because it had endured, he said; the meetings that the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference would have over the next two days would serve to preserve and enrich the black church.

Wright spoke of the elephant ever present “in the room” in America: race.

Now, as an honest dialogue about race in this country begins, a dialogue called for by Senator Obama and a dialogue about to begin in the United Church of Christ among 5,700 congregations in just a few weeks . . . maybe now, as that dialogue begins, the religious tradition that has kept hope alive for people struggling to survive in countless hopeless situations, maybe that religious tradition will be understood, celebrated, and even embraced by a nation that seems not to have noticed why 11 o’clock on Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour in America.¹¹

Wright laid it out that the black church had been a cloth that, for many African Americans, served as a shield from the sharp winds of oppression. He talked about God’s desire being for a “positive, meaningful and permanent change.”¹² He cited Luke 4:18, where Jesus quotes Isaiah 61: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Wright showed his passion for what he believed to be the will of God. Oppression, racial or otherwise, was not, could not be pleasing to a God who had created us all. This God, who embraced us all, also embraced liberation theology, said Wright. This God wanted reconciliation:

God does not desire us, as children of God, to be at war with each other, to see each other as superior, inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other or put each other down.

God wants us reconciled, one to another. And that third principle in the prophetic theology of the black church is also and has always been at the heart of the black church experience in North America. . . . The prophetic theology of the black church is a theology of liberation; it is a theology of transformation, and it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation.¹³

Because God had made us all in God's image, Wright continued, regardless of religion or color, God wanted us reconciled, and he acknowledged that reconciliation "is where the hardest work is found for those of us in the Christian faith . . . because it means some critical thinking and some re-examination of faulty assumptions" that we had, all of us, carried for far too long.

The speech was brilliant, hitting all the points that Wright felt that concerned theologians, pastors, and preachers should be seriously considering, but it wasn't what the press wanted. When the questions from the National Press Club moderator began, it was as though she had not heard a word that he had just said. Her first question was about Wright's statement that "America's chickens have come home to roost," something that had been played in the sound bites. She and the gathered press didn't want to hear about the black church, about liberation theology or reconciliation of God's people. Wright hadn't been controversial at all in this presentation; though he had been hurt and, frankly, angered by the way the sound bites had been used to malign him and his ministry, mischaracterizing him as a man who preached hatred, he clearly wanted to move on. The press, however, was after ratings; they wanted to see and hear the man who had been labeled "incendiary," the one who it was said used "divisive" language. Wright's presentation had been anything but that, and the press might have been disappointed.

Wright wanted to move on, to do the work he had been doing for years. His message was about people being liberated, not held prisoner by a hostile culture. That was one of the things about which he had preached for years—a culture that had no interest in including all of America's citizens in reach of true liberation and freedom. To be manipulated and controlled by the dominant culture was just another way of being enslaved, something Wright knew all too well. As he had preached to his congregants to recognize this manipulation and to not be ensnared by it, he now had to do the same himself, as he had, undoubtedly, done many times before.

But the press tasted blood; there was Wright, in their midst. They could "have at him" and, they thought, expose this man who had been Obama's pastor, for who he was. So, it was not surprising that the moderator of the National Press Club was not interested in the speech Wright had just given about the black church and the important role the black

church had at this time in history, but it was certainly annoying to the embattled preacher and pastor. Immediately upon the completion of his remarks, the moderator began her questioning, making it obvious that whatever Wright had just said was unimportant.

“You have said that the media have taken you out of context,” she began. “Can you explain what you meant in a sermon shortly after 9/11 when you said that the United States had brought the terrorist attacks on itself? Quote, ‘America’s chickens are coming home to roost?’”¹⁴

Clearly irritated, Wright asked her, “Have you heard the whole sermon?”

The moderator replied, “I heard most of it,” to which Wright responded sharply, “No, no the whole sermon, yes or no? No, you haven’t heard the whole sermon? That nullifies the question.”¹⁵

It seemed clear to all who had heard the whole sermon that Wright had caught the moderator in a bad place, which Wright illumined.

“Well, let me try to respond in a nonbombastic way,” he said quietly, yet decisively. “If you heard the whole sermon, first of all, you heard that I was quoting the ambassador from Iraq. That’s number one. But, number two, to quote the Bible, “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. For whatsoever you sow, that you also shall reap. Jesus said, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”

“You cannot do terrorism on other people and expect it never to come back on you. Those are biblical principles, not Jeremiah Wright bombastic, divisive principles.”¹⁶

We will examine that sermon, entitled “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” in a later chapter, but Wright’s points were well-taken. Neither this woman, nor the press, which had latched onto the sound bites, had heard or read the sermon in its entirety. This was a political battle, a manufactured creation of and about an “angry black man” who also happened to be the long-time pastor of the man who might be president. Truth did not matter, and that bothered Wright, who, though he had criticized the government for its socioeconomic oppression of black, brown, and poor people from the beginning of his ministry, had never preached hatred. If anything, he preached awareness so that people could be empowered to fight the oppression they faced. That, it seemed, was the basis of his liberation theology message. That he was being characterized as a

hatemonger was particularly offensive. All he had ever done was preach that the “good news” was good for blacks and others as well as for the dominant culture. He had taught his listeners to become aware of the self-hatred they had internalized as the result of having been hated by this same dominant culture, and had taught them that it had kept them in a dark place.

He wanted anyone who would listen to know that slavery in America had not been of God or from God, in spite of theologians having used the “Ham Doctrine” for years to justify their theology of oppression.¹⁷ There had been something wrong with a religion that allowed oppression and the claim that the oppression was biblically sanctioned. Wright had been a careful teacher, not relying on opinion, but rather on careful biblical and historical scholarship. Wright wanted black people to stop being in pain because they were, in fact, black. He wanted them to know that God loved them as much as God loved everyone else. He needed black people to know that they had a place in God’s world and in God’s heart. And in the midst of all this, he also wanted them to know that God did not sanction hatred against anyone, even against those who had been so unfair to others.

Did he hate racism as an American anomaly? Yes. Did he hate economic and social oppression? Yes! But although racism in all its ugliness had been the work of white people in America, he did not hate white people. He would preach, “Everyone who is white ain’t your enemy, and everybody black ain’t your friend.” Hatred for anyone was out of the will of God. More than anything, Jeremiah Wright grasped the essence of God’s will: that in the midst of all things, good or bad, there must be love. That the moderator seemed not to have the slightest interest in who Jeremiah Wright was, or what his message was, or what those sound bites were about, was particularly painful for the man in the eye of the storm. The situation was all the more maddening because it felt so contrived, so political, an effort to shift the course of history, which, even after all of this, would not be shifted. As Wright addressed the moderator’s questions, those in the room who knew how this was going to sound to the millions watching and listening, cringed in pain. A tear rolled down the cheek of one of Wright’s “daughters” in the ministry. This was going so badly! This was supposed to be a glorious time for the pastor who

had helped nurture a young African American man to the point where he was today. This was supposed to be a time to celebrate what Wright's ministry had been about from the beginning, and instead, his work, his ministry, his message, all seemed to be crashing and burning.

After the National Press Club event, which was followed the day after by then-Senator Barack Obama officially distancing himself from his pastor, it was hard to hear anything positive about Jeremiah Wright. People in his own denomination, people who had supported him, now turned against him, angry because they believed he had ruined the chance for the first African American to become president of the United States. Instant arguments could be ignited just by mentioning Wright's name—and the description of him always came out as a hateful man. Over and over, he was called “incendiary” and “divisive.” Some churches that had extended invitations to him withdrew those invitations; some people whom he had nurtured in his ministry shunned him, saying, he had “undone” the work done by blacks over the years.

Some people in his own denomination turned against him, in spite of the fact that his church, Trinity UCC, had been one of the largest contributors to that denomination's “Our Church's Wider Ministry” fund for years¹⁸ and that he had been one of the most sought-after preachers at the denomination's events. All his life he had worked to teach about how to use religion to combat a society that had little regard for “the least of these”; all his life he had worked to teach an oppressed people how to thrive in spite of that oppression, and now the oppression was swallowing him up.

The comforting thing, if there is to be any comfort, is that Jeremiah Wright remained and remains a prophet, preaching with the same point and purpose as did the biblical prophets, as did people like William Sloan Coffin and Martin Luther King Jr. He remained and remains committed to preaching a message that challenges injustice, in spite of opposition from the powers that be. Jesus said that a prophet is without honor in his own country (Matt. 13:57; Mark 6:4). The 2008 presidential election thrust Wright into that category—a prophet without honor—but yet, he has held onto his understanding of “the good news.” The late Rev. Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard University at the time of his death, said, “The good news for some people is bad news for others.”¹⁹ He

talked about the “reticence of the pulpit,” characterized by clergy who are more interested in maintaining the status quo than in confronting that which is out of alignment with what Jesus would have us do.²⁰ Jeremiah Wright was never reticent, not even after the assault upon his ministry was launched. He preached and still does preach in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who riled feathers and threatened kings with their words of warning against those who “forsake God.”

And so some watched in horror as what should have been a glorious moment of triumph for Jeremiah Wright turned into a debacle. It is and was a tragedy of Shakespearean proportion. More importantly, it is a tragedy that should never have been.