

**Mar, 2018**

**Otis Moss III, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.**

This book is based on Moss' Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School in 2014. It is one of the most prestigious lectureships in the North America. And Moss brought a different formation in preaching to the lectures than most, a formation rooted in the wisdom of the blues. He describes it this way:

*The preaching I heard as a boy and studied as an adult was not confined or ratified by seminaries or western gatekeepers. The preaching I witnessed danced with Lorraine Hansberry, did sets with John Coltrane, flowed with Maya Angelou, and was inspired by Langston Hughes. The preaching I heard seemed to know Amos personally, conversed with Isaiah weekly, and painted a picture of Jesus with such power that the aroma of wine at the wedding of Cana would saturate the air. (xii)*

Rooted in the reality of the Black experience in America, this take on sharing the Word of God in the midst of the congregation contains some provocative insights and inspiration. I can't do justice to the richness of this book in a short book note, but here are some of the considerations that provoked me most.

Moss clearly identifies with the prophetic wing of the church and wonders why it has disappeared in many of America's churches. Why, he asks, have we emphasized a personal ethic congruent with current structures and not a public theology steeped in the struggle and weeping that infuses the blues? The blues are a unique and enduring American art form. That music gives expression to tragedy but refuses to fall into despair. It's about personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. It's about seeing America from the underside. It's about pain and praise. It's about lament and celebration. It stares into the darkness and finds God at work there. In this context, Jesus is the saviour and liberator of the marginalized, formed in and fulfilling the promise of the prophets. He empowers men and women to refuse to be categorized by puny, inadequate definitions of the image of God that we all bear.

The blues draws upon and generates anew a poetic imagination in the midst the prosaic machinations of human power and the pain it often inflicts. A blues inspired preaching refuses to edit sermons for acceptability and dares to speak tragedy to a people who want to forget. This is because we must remember before we can heal. And that healing comes from the God who refuses to let the rebellion of generations of human beings define the future.

The blues is most often heard in music. Moss wants our preaching to be musical, but he has a profound respect for what music itself can do in worship and beyond that words alone cannot. He plays around with Christopher Small's idea of 'musicking' in which a whole community participates in the act of making music. He draws on Oliver Sacks exploration of how music engages the whole of human consciousness in ways that transforms our lives. He celebrates the way this reality shapes the black church:

*The call-and-response narrative found in the Black church is a part of a rich cultural and musical heritage of communication. Musical practice is socially and culturally embedded. It's not just people talking back to each other. There is theology going on. In the talking back is a new message that's being created. A canvas is being put up by the preacher that allows the people to join that moment. (41)*

As Moss sees it, jazz taught America democracy through its invitation to everyone to collaborate with respect and resilience. Jazz says everybody has the right to contribute their own God-given gifts. The drums don't have to be the bass. The bass doesn't have to be the sax. The sax doesn't have to be the piano. All have their unique characteristics to contribute to the performance. And they are all invited to play with the Trinity Trio as new possibilities are composed for doing justice, being kind, and walking humbly with the triune God.

I don't preach like Moss, but I pray that we preach for the same purpose, viz. to inspire and inform our friends in Christ to walk with Jesus into the justice, kindness, and humility that shapes the coming Commonwealth of God. My ancestors came from Scotland and Ireland. They were farmers seeking more compassion, prosperity, and safety than they had in their homelands. They found in their faith a strength and inspiration that carried them through the traumas of immigration. That hope still informs my work and witness in service with Brentwood.

It's an act of hope to contribute your gifts, to play your unique part in the musicking of God. I pray and work every day to make that possible at Brentwood. I invite you to see if there is a place for you in our mission of nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ.