

THE CROSS  
*and*  
THE LYNCHING TREE

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"NOBODY KNOWS DE TROUBLE I SEE"

*The Cross and the Lynching Tree  
in the Black Experience*

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.

—Acts 10:39

Hundreds of kodaks clicked all morning at the scene of the lynching. People in automobiles and carriages came from miles around to view the corpse dangling from the end of a rope. . . . Picture card photographers installed a portable printing plant at the bridge and reaped a harvest in selling the postcard showing a photograph of the lynched Negro. Women and children were there by the score. At a number of country schools the day's routine was delayed until boy and girl pupils could get back from viewing the lynched man.

—*The Crisis* 10, no. 2, June 1915,  
on the lynching of Thomas Brooks  
in Fayette County, Tennessee

The paradox of a crucified savior lies at the heart of the Christian story. That paradox was particularly evident in the first century when crucifixion was recognized as the particular form of execution reserved by the Roman Empire for insurrectionists and rebels. It was a public spectacle accompanied by torture and shame—one of the most humiliating and painful deaths ever

devised by human beings. That Jesus died this way required special explanation. It made no rational or even spiritual sense to say that hope came out of "a place called Golgotha . . . a place of the skull." For the Jews of Jesus' time the punishment of crucifixion held special opprobrium, given their belief that "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut 21:23). Thus, St. Paul said that the "word of the cross is foolishness" to the intellect and a stumbling block to established religion. The cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it *inverts* the world's value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last.

That God could "make a way out of no way" in Jesus' cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God's loving and liberating presence in the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that *ultimately*, in God's eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the "troubles of this world," no matter how great and painful their suffering. Believing this paradox, this absurd claim of faith, was only possible through God's "amazing grace" and the gift of faith, grounded in humility and repentance. There was no place for the proud and the mighty, for people who think that God called them to rule over others. The cross was God's critique of power—white power—with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.

The sufferings of black people during slavery are too deep for words. That suffering did not end with emancipation. The violence and oppression of white supremacy took different forms and employed different means to achieve the same end: the subjugation of black people. And Christian theology, for African Americans, maintained the same great challenge: to explain

from the perspective of history and faith how life could be made meaningful in the face of death, how hope could remain alive in the world of Jim Crow segregation. These were the challenges that shaped black religious life in the United States.

At no time was the struggle to keep such hope alive more difficult than during the lynching era (1880-1940). The lynching tree is the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk about because the pain of remembering—visions of black bodies dangling from southern trees, surrounded by jeering white mobs—is almost too excruciating to recall.

In that era, the lynching tree joined the cross as the most emotionally charged symbols in the African American community—symbols that represented both death and the promise of redemption, judgment and the offer of mercy, suffering and the power of hope. Both the cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in human beings and at the same time "an unquenchable ontological thirst"<sup>1</sup> for life that refuses to let the worst determine our final meaning.

Lynching has a complicated and dynamic meaning in American history. Since the publication of Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's *Revolt against Chivalry* (1979), many historians have been investigating lynching, and have even discovered most of the names of the nearly five thousand African American victims.<sup>2</sup> Initially, lynching was not directed primarily against blacks nor did it always mean death to the victim. Mexicans, Indians, Chinese, and whites were lynched—a term that could apply to whipping, shooting, stabbing, as well as hanging. Lynching was an extra-legal punishment sanctioned by the community. Many scholars date its origin in Virginia during the Revolutionary War when Charles Lynch or William Lynch (both were called the original "Judge Lynch"), with the support of the community, punished Tory sympathizers. As communities moved westward out of reach of the courts, Judge Lynch was invoked to punish

rustlers, robbers, wife abusers, and others who committed what a community perceived as outrageous deeds. Lynching was not regarded as an evil thing but a necessity—the only way a community could protect itself from bad people out of reach of the law.<sup>3</sup> Many western movies show a romanticized view of lynching as hanging rustlers or bank robbers and murderers.

During nearly two-and-half centuries of slavery, blacks were considered valuable property. Their owners usually protected their investment as they would their cows, horses, and other articles of value. Slaveholders whipped and raped slaves, violating them in any way they thought necessary, but they did not lynch them, except in the case of those who threatened the slave system itself, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and other insurrectionists.

The lynching of black America marked an important turning point in the history and meaning of lynching, as the racial component of lynching changed its meaning for both whites and blacks. Lynching as primarily mob violence and torture directed against blacks began to increase after the Civil War and the end of slavery, when the 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act granting black men the franchise and citizenship rights of participation in the affairs of government. Most southern whites were furious at the very idea of granting ex-slaves social, political, and economic freedom. The Ku Klux Klan, initially organized as a social club in Pulaski, Tennessee (1866), soon transformed itself into a vigilante group whose primary purpose was to redeem the South and thereby ensure that America remained a white man's country. Many felt that it was one thing to lose the war to the North but quite another to allow ignorant, uncivilized "niggers" to rule over whites or even participate with them in the political process. White supremacists felt insulted by the suggestion that whites and blacks might work together as equals. Whether in the churches, colleges, and universities, or in the political and social life of the nation, southern whites, who were not going to

allow their ex-slaves to associate with them as equals, felt that if lynching were the only way to keep ex-slaves subservient, then it was necessary.

During the Reconstruction era, the South was divided into military districts, which provided blacks some protection from mob violence, so that the Klan had to do its violent work against blacks and their white northern sympathizers in secret, at night, wearing hoods to hide its members' identity. When KKK members were tried in courts, they could usually count on their neighbors and friends to find them "not guilty," since all-white male juries almost never found white men guilty of lynching a black man.

The white South's perspective on the Reconstruction was told in Thomas Dixon's enormously popular novel *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), which sold over one million copies. It was followed by *The Clansman* (1905). Both novels portrayed the Klan as redeemers of the South. D. W. Griffith transformed Dixon's novels into that cinematic masterpiece of racist propaganda *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), first seen at the White House and praised enthusiastically by President Woodrow Wilson. Whites, especially in the South, loved *Birth* and regarded seeing it as a "religious experience." It "rendered lynching an efficient and honorable act of justice" and served to help reunite the North and South as a white Christian nation, at the expense of African Americans. After seeing *Birth*, one white man in Kentucky left the theater so excited that he shot and killed a fifteen-year-old African American high school student. By 1930, according to one report, 90 percent of white southerners had seen *Birth*.<sup>4</sup>

Following Reconstruction and the removal of federal troops from the South (1877), the black dream of freedom turned into a nightmare "worse than slavery,"<sup>5</sup> initiating what black historian Rayford Logan called the "nadir"<sup>6</sup> in black history and what journalist Douglas A. Blackmon appropriately called "slavery by another name."<sup>7</sup> Assured of no federal interference, southern

whites were now free to take back the South, to redeem it from what they called "Negro domination," through mob violence—excluding blacks from politics, arresting them for vagrancy, forcing them to work as sharecroppers who never got out of debt, and creating a rigid segregated society in which being black was a badge of shame with no meaningful future. A black person could be lynched for any perceived insult to whites. A white from Florida told a northern critic, "The people of the South don't think any more of killing the black fellows than you would think of killing a flea. . . ." A black Mississippian recalled lynching with these words: "Back in them days, to kill a Negro wasn't nothing. It was like killing a chicken or killing a snake. The whites would say, 'Niggers jest supposed to die, ain't no damn good anyway—so jest go an' kill 'em.'"<sup>8</sup> A firm advocate of white supremacy and even lynching in cases of rape, Bishop Atticus G. Haygood of the Methodist Church complained in 1893 that "Now-a-days, it seems the killing of Negroes is not so extraordinary an occurrence as to need explanation; it has become so common that it no longer surprises. We read such things as we read of fires that burn a cabin or a town."<sup>9</sup> "Their blackness alone," writes historian Joel Williamson in his influential text *The Crucible of Race*, "was license enough to line them up against walls, to menace them with guns, to search them roughly, beat them, and rob them of every vestige of dignity."<sup>10</sup>

Although white southerners lost the Civil War, they did not lose the cultural war—the struggle to define America as a white nation and blacks as a subordinate race unfit for governing and therefore incapable of political and social equality. In the white imagination, the image of black men was transformed from docile slaves and harmless "Sambos," to menacing "black beast rapists," the most serious threat to the virtue of white women and the sanctity of the white home. The image of black women was changed from nurturing "Negro mammies" to salacious Jezebels, nearly as corrupting to white civilization as black men.

The claim that whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence was grounded in the religious belief that America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of "white over black."<sup>11</sup> Even prominent religious scholars in the North, like the highly regarded Swiss-born church historian Philip Schaff of Union Theological Seminary in New York (1870–1893), believed that "The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American, of all modern races, possess the strongest national character and the one best fitted for universal dominion."<sup>12</sup> Such beliefs made lynching defensible and even necessary for many whites. Cole Blease, the two-time governor and U.S. senator from South Carolina, proclaimed that lynching is a "divine right of the Caucasian race to dispose of the offending blackamoor without the benefit of jury."<sup>13</sup> Lynching was the white community's way of forcibly reminding blacks of their inferiority and powerlessness. To be black meant that whites could do anything to you and your people, and that neither you nor anyone else could do anything about it. The Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney had said clearly in the Dred Scott Decision (1857): "[blacks] had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."<sup>14</sup> For many whites, whether in the North or the South, that conviction was unaffected by the end of slavery.

But now, without slavery to control blacks, new means had to be devised, and even a new rationale for control. This was supplied by black men's imagined insatiable lust for white women. Because of their threat to white womanhood, black men must be carefully watched and violently kept in their place, segregated and subordinated. Sexual intercourse between black men and white women was regarded as the worst crime blacks could commit against Anglo-Saxon civilization. Even when sexual relations were consensual, "race-mixing," mockingly called "mongrelization," was always translated to mean rape, and it was used as the primary justification of lynching. It was the moral and

Christian responsibility of white men to protect the purity of their race by any means necessary. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it would have been difficult to find white persons who would *openly* object to the right of white men to protect white women from sexual union with black men by means of lynching. William Van Amberg Sullivan, a former U.S. senator from Mississippi, boasted, "I led the mob which lynched Nelse Patton, and I am proud of it. I directed every movement of the mob and I did everything I could to see that he was lynched." Even presidents refused to oppose lynching publicly, and some even supported it. As Theodore Roosevelt said, "the greatest existing cause of lynching is the perpetration, especially by black men, of the hideous crime of rape—the most abominable in all the category of crimes, even worse than murder." On the other hand, black men's assertion of their right to protect their daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and other women from unwelcome advances from white men could bring down the full weight of Judge Lynch.<sup>15</sup>

Threats of lynching were often more effective than the act itself. In his autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, Benjamin E. Mays, the great president of Morehouse College in Atlanta and teacher of Martin Luther King Jr., recalled the occasion when a white mob confronted him and his father when he was just a child.

A crowd of white men . . . rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. Then they rode away. I was five years old, but I've never forgotten them.<sup>16</sup>

While white mob violence against African Americans was an obsession in the South, it was not limited to that region. White supremacy was and is an American reality. Whites lynched blacks in nearly every state, including New York, Minnesota,

and California. Wherever blacks were present in significant numbers, the threat of being lynched was always real. Blacks had to "watch their step," no matter where they were in America. A black man could be walking down the road, minding his business, and his life could suddenly change by meeting a white man or a group of white men or boys who on a whim decided to have some fun with a Negro; and this could happen in Mississippi or New York, Arkansas, or Illinois.

By the 1890s, lynching fever gripped the South, spreading like cholera, as white communities made blacks their primary target, and torture their focus. Burning the black victim slowly for hours was the chief method of torture. Lynching became a white media spectacle, in which prominent newspapers, like the *Atlanta Constitution*, announced to the public the place, date, and time of the expected hanging and burning of black victims. Often as many as ten to twenty thousand men, women, and children attended the event. It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black victims—burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera. They were sold for ten to twenty-five cents to members of the crowd, who then mailed them to relatives and friends, often with a note saying something like this: "This is the barbeque we had last night."<sup>17</sup>

Spectacle lynchings attracted people from nearby cities and towns. They could not have happened without widespread knowledge and the explicit sanction of local and state authorities and with tacit approval from the federal government, members of the white media, churches, and universities. Lynching became so prevalent that the Boston branch of the Colored National League sent a letter to President William McKinley demanding action.

We have suffered, sir . . . since your accession to office . . . from the hate and violence of people claiming to be civilized, but who are not civilized, and you have seen our sufferings. . . . Yet you have at no time and on no occasion opened your lips on our behalf. . . . Is there no help in the federal arm for us, or even one word of audible pity, protest, and remonstrance? Black indeed we are, sir, but we are also men and citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Like others in his office, McKinley refused to condemn lynching publicly, even after the infamous Wilmington, North Carolina, race riot of 1898, during which eleven blacks were killed and thousands were driven from the city in order to prevent them from participating in politics.<sup>19</sup>

When the anti-lynching Dyer Bill was passed in the House of Representatives, January 26, 1922, many blacks hoped that President Warren G. Harding, a Republican, the party of Lincoln, would urge the Senate to do the same. Ara Lee Settle of Armstrong Technical High School, Washington, DC, wrote to him (June 18, 1922), calling his attention to the importance of an anti-lynching law for the black community. "Mr. President," she wrote,

imagine yourself about to be lynched for something of which you know nothing about. Men seize you from some place of refuge, carry you to the heart of town, place a rope around you and burn you, while men, women and children are jeering you amidst all your pain and agony. It is enough to make one ashamed not to use his full influence against this horrible crime.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Harding, like most whites, was unmoved by black suffering. No one in America could claim that they did not know that whites were lynching blacks, nor could legal authorities claim ignorance, since lynchers made no effort to hide their identity or their deeds. Bishop Henry M. Turner of the A.M.E. Church

mocked the euphemism, "At the hands of persons unknown," the typical designation for lynchers that often appeared in newspaper accounts after the fact:

Strange . . . that the men who constitute these [mobs] can never be identified by . . . governors or the law officers, but the newspapers know all about them—can advance what they are going to do, how and when it was done, how the rope broke, how many balls entered the Negro's body, how loud he prayed, how piteously he begged, what he said, how long he was left hanging, how many composed the mob, the number that were masked, whether they were prominent citizens or not, how the fire was built that burnt the raper, how the Negro was tied, how he was thrown into the fire, and the whole transaction; but still the fiendish work was done by a set of "unknown men."<sup>21</sup>

Unlike Bishop Turner, however, few blacks in the South could fight back with pen or gun and survive. "You couldn't do nothing about those things," Mississippi bluesman Willie Dixon said, as he reflected back on the lynching era in his autobiography. "The black man had to be a complete coward."<sup>22</sup> Yet cowardice is not the right word to describe the black response to lynching and white mob violence; even Willie Dixon had the courage to leave Mississippi for Chicago, where he joined other bluesmen and women, like Muddy Waters, Howlin Wolf, and Etta James, together creating a musical response to lynching that told the world about the cultural power of blacks to preserve and protect their humanity.

Blacks knew that violent self-defense was tantamount to suicide; even affirming blackness in a world defined by white power took great courage. Whites acted in a superior manner for so long that it was difficult for them to even recognize their cultural and spiritual arrogance, blatant as it was to African Americans. Their law was not designed to protect blacks from

lynching, especially when blacks acted as if they were socially equal to whites. Should a black in the South lift his hand or raise his voice to reprimand a white person, he would incur the full weight of the law and the mob. Even to look at white people in a manner regarded as disrespectful could get a black lynched. Whites often lynched blacks simply to remind the black community of their powerlessness. Unemployed blacks passing through an area with no white man to vouch for them could easily find themselves on a prison chain gang or swinging from a lynching tree. There were many "sundown towns" in the South and the North—some with signs warning, "Nigger, don't let the sun set on your head,"<sup>23</sup> and others with no signs but which could be fatal to blacks who *happened* to be passing through.

How did southern rural blacks survive the terrors of this era? Self-defense and protest were out of the question, but there were other forms of resistance. For most blacks it was the blues and religion that offered the chief weapons of resistance. At the juke joints on Friday and Saturday nights and at churches on Sunday mornings and evening week nights blacks affirmed their humanity and fought back against dehumanization. Both black religion and the blues offered sources of hope that there was more to life than what one encountered daily in the white man's world.

At the Saturday night juke joint, bluesmen like Robert Johnson, often called the most influential bluesman, spoke back in defiance, refusing to be defined by death's brutal reality—the constant threat of the lynching tree.

I got to keep movinnnn', I got to keep movinnnn',  
Blues fallin' like hail  
And the day keeps on worryin' me,  
There's a hellhound on my trail.<sup>24</sup>

Blues singers lifted African Americans above their troubles by offering them an opportunity to experience "love and loss" as a liberating catharsis.

Blues grabbed me at midnight and didn't turn me  
loose 'til day  
Blues grabbed me at midnight, didn't turn me loose  
'til day,  
I didn't have no mama to drive these blues away.<sup>25</sup>

Blacks found hope in the music itself—a collective self-transcendent meaning in the singing, dancing, loving, and laughing. They found hope in the stoic determination not to be defeated by the pain and suffering in their lives. James Baldwin called this hope an "ironic tenacity"! "I've got the blues and I'm too damn mean to cry." "The blues," as Ralph Ellison put it, "is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."<sup>26</sup>

Good morning, blues.  
Blues how do you do?  
Blues say, "I feel all right but I come to worry you."

On the one hand, African Americans spoke of how they "cried and moaned, about 'feel[ing] like nothin', somethin' th'owed away." Yet, in the next line they balanced despair with hope: "Then I get my guitar and play the blues all day." As long as African Americans could sing and play the blues, they had some hope that one day their humanity would be acknowledged.

I remember blacks in Arkansas trying to cope with despair—bad crops, terrible winter, and troublesome white folks—yet they still believed they could make it through the "storm of life" and not be defeated in this "mean old world." "Hard times" were real and concrete, an everyday struggle to survive with dignity in a society that did not recognize their humanity. The dialectic of sorrow and joy, despair and hope was central in the black experience.

My burden's so heavy, I can't hardly see,  
Seems like everybody down on me.

Despair was real; but it was not ultimate, not the last word. In the closing line, the bluesman reached for hope:

An' that's all right, I don't worry, oh, there will be a  
better day.  
The sun's gonna shine on my back door some day.

In the black experience, there was what novelist Richard Wright called the "endemic capacity to live."<sup>27</sup>

Goin' down to de railroad track,  
Lay ma head on de track.  
Goin' down to de railroad track,  
Lay ma head on de track—

Despair seems to close down the future. But the bluesman stubbornly clings to hope.

But if I see de train a-comin'  
I'm gonna jerk it back!

This dialectic of despair and hope defined black existence.

Pocket book was empty,  
My heart was full of pain.

Yet African Americans did not let economic distress and mental anguish have the final say on their existence.

When you lose your money,  
don't lose your mind.

To be able to speak back to the tragedy of lynching in the blues song was partly to overcome its terror. But the singing of the blues was also a way for ordinary working class and poor blacks to assert loudly and exuberantly their somebodiness, twisting and turning their sweaty bodies to the "low down dirty blues."

"You've never heard a mule sing, have you?" intoned a bluesman, asserting his humanity.

Hope in black possibility, in the dream of a new world, had to be carved out of wretched conditions, out of a world where the possibility of violent death was always imminent. African Americans knew what it meant to "make the best of a bad situation"—to live "under a kind of sentence of death," "not know[ing] when [their] time will come, it may never come, but it may also be any time."<sup>28</sup> "They'd lynch you in a minute,"<sup>29</sup> said Skip James. Charlie Patton of Sunflower, Mississippi, agreed and sang about what he saw:

Everyday seems like murder here,  
Everyday seems like murder here.  
I'm gonna leave tomorrow,  
I know you don't want me here.

In his study of Richard Wright, Abdul JanMohamed speaks about black subjectivity as "the death-bound-subject"—"the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death."<sup>30</sup> African Americans did not have to see black bodies swinging on southern trees or personally experience mob violence to know that they daily risked death. "I had never in my life been abused by whites," wrote Richard Wright in *Black Boy*, as he reflected back on his boyhood in Mississippi, "but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings."<sup>31</sup>

The lynching tree was the most horrifying symbol of white supremacy in black life. It was a shameful and painful way to die. The fear of lynching was so deep and widespread that most blacks were too scared even to talk publicly about it. When they heard of a person being lynched in their vicinity, they often ran home, pulled down shades, and turned out lights—hoping the terror moment would pass without taking the lives of their relatives and friends.

Despite such terror, however, blacks did not let lynching completely squeeze the joy out of their lives. There was always a lot of excitement and joy at the juke joints, a people swinging with sexual passion on Friday and Saturday nights because then they could express themselves fully, let themselves go with no thought of tomorrow and the white man's dehumanizing disregard of their humanity. They could have fun, get angry, talk dirty and loud to and about each other, and sometimes even get violent—knowing that the limits of proper behavior were what they set among themselves. At the juke, blacks could even talk back to "The Man" (in black idiom a pejorative term—the white man), telling him in his absence what they could not say to his face. Alabama bluesman Cow Cow Davenport sang about the "Jim Crow Blues":

I'm tired of being Jim Crowed,  
Gonna leave this Jim Crow town.

Blind Lemon Jefferson moaned the "Hangman's Blues," one of a few songs that confronted directly the reality and fear of lynching.

Mean ole hangman is waitin' to tighten up that noose,  
Lord, I'm so scared I'm trembling in my shoes.<sup>32</sup>

Blacks enjoyed Friday and Saturday nights so much that they nearly forgot, at least for a few hours, whatever humiliations they endured during the week. As a child growing up in Bearden, Arkansas, during the 1940s and 50s, I remember hearing the blues erupt from the juke joints, especially at "Sam's Place." It sounded so good that one had to move to the sound of B. B. King's "Rock Me Baby," accompanied by "Lucille" (his guitar). But I will never forget the voice of Bo Diddley declaring "I'm A Man"—"M-A-N," spelling it out for emphasis, referring overtly to his sexual prowess and covertly speaking back to the denial of his masculinity and humanity in white society. Bluesman Big

Bill Broonzy was bolder and more explicit, asking, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man?"

When I was born in this world, this is what happened  
to me:

I was never called a man and now I'm fifty-three . . .

I wonder when I will be called a man.

Or do I have to wait 'till I get ninety-three?<sup>33</sup>

When an adult black male is treated like a child in a patriarchal society—with whites calling him "boy," "uncle," and "nigger"—proclaiming oneself a "man" is a bold and necessary affirmation of black resistance. (It was analogous to the Memphis garbage workers carrying large signs saying "I'M A MAN" in defiance of white city government during Martin Luther King Jr.'s last march in 1968.) But it was risky for blacks to assert their humanity overtly during those times; it often had to be camouflaged in blues songs about sexuality at the juke joint.

Although my mother never let her sons go to the juke, one did not have to go there to know what a good time black folks had. The drinking was heavy, people were laughing, and the music was so loud that one could hear it miles away. The people jumped at the juke like there was no tomorrow, "letting it all hang out." That was why one Negro joked with a white man that "he would never want to be white if he could just once be a 'nigger' on Saturday night."

To be able to laugh, to say what's on one's mind, expressing feelings of disgust and rage, was liberating for blacks, who usually remained silent, hat in hand and head bowed in the presence of whites. As Albert Murray put it, the blues was nothing but "a disposition to confront the most unpromising circumstances and make the most of what little there is to go on, regardless of the odds."<sup>34</sup> The blues expressed a feeling, an existential affirmation of joy in the midst of extreme suffering, especially the ever-present threat of death by lynching. B. B. King, who saw a

lynching as a child in Mississippi, gave a powerful interview on the meaning of the blues:

If you live under that system for so long, then it don't bother you openly, but mentally, way back in your mind it bugs you. . . . Later on you sometime will think about this and you wonder why, so that's where your blues come in, you really bluesy then, y'see, because you hurt deep down, believe me, I've lived through it, I know. I'm still trying to say what the blues means to me. So I sing about it.<sup>35</sup>

If the blues offered an affirmation of humanity, religion offered a way for black people to find hope. "Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope," wrote Richard Wright in *Twelve Million Voices*, "where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death. . . ."<sup>36</sup> On Sunday morning at church, black Christians spoke back in song, sermon, and prayer against the "faceless, merciless, apocalyptic vengefulness of the massed white mob,"<sup>37</sup> to show that trouble and sorrow would not determine our final meaning. African Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ, whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life, just as God resurrected him in the life of the earliest Christian community. While the lynching tree symbolized white power and "black death," the cross symbolized divine power and "black life"—God overcoming the power of sin and death.

"It is only when we are within the walls of our churches that we can wholly be ourselves," Wright correctly said, "that we keep alive a sense of our personalities in relation to the total world in which we live, that we maintain a quiet and constant communion with all that is deepest in us."<sup>38</sup> At church black people sang of having "been in the storm so long," "crossed and driv'n," "buked an' scorned," and "talked about sho's you born," "sometimes up," "sometimes down," and "sometimes almost level to the groun'." "Our going to church on Sunday is like placing our ear to another's

chest to hear the unquenchable murmur of the human heart."<sup>39</sup> African Americans sang of having traveled a "lonesome journey," through slavery and segregation, often tired, hungry and homeless, "rambling and running," not knowing where to "roam"—not knowing where to "make my getaway" to find a safe place, free of the "noise of the bloodhounds on my trail." Blacks have been "tore down," "broken-hearted," "troubled in de mind," "way down yonder" where "I couldn't hear nobody pray," in a valley so deep and dark where death is like "a hammer ringin' on a coffin," "a pale horse an' rider," "a chariot swingin' low," and "a train blowin' at the station." Blacks have tasted "sorrow's kitchen"—that "burden of woe" that compelled them to sing a haunting, mournful sound:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,  
Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,  
A long ways from home.

Dread and powerlessness in the face of the ever-present threat of death on the lynching tree impelled blacks to cry out from the depth of their spiritual being:

Oh, Lord, Oh, My Lord!  
Oh, My Good Lord!  
Keep me f'om sinkin' down!

To sink down was to give up on life and embrace hopelessness, like the words of an old bluesman: "Been down so long, down don't bother me." It was to go way down into a pit of despair, of nothingness, what Søren Kierkegaard called "sickness unto death," a "sickness in the self"—the loss of hope that life could have meaning in a world full of trouble. The story of Job is the classic expression of utter despair in the face of life's great contradictions:

Why is light given to the one in misery,  
and life to the bitter in soul,

Who long for death, but it does not come,  
 and dig for it more than for hidden treasures;  
 Who rejoice exceedingly,  
 and are glad when they find the grave? (Job 3:20-22)

Unlike Kierkegaard and Job, however, blacks often refused to go down into that "loathsome void," that "torment of despair," where one "struggles with death but cannot die."<sup>40</sup> No matter what trouble they encountered, they kept on believing and hoping that "a change is gonna come." They did not transcend "hard living" but faced it head-on, refusing to be silent in the midst of adversity.

Great gawdamighty, folks feelin' bad,  
 Lost everything they ever had.

A classic expression of the dialectic of despair and hope in black life is found in the spiritual "Nobody Knows." The first three lines accent despair:

Nobody knows de trouble I've seen,  
 Nobody knows my sorrow.  
 Nobody knows de trouble I've seen,

But the last line accents hope with an exclamation:

Glory Hallelujah!

"Nobody Knows" reaches the peak of despair in its repetition of the first line in the third.

African Americans did not doubt that their lives were filled with trouble: how could one be black in America during the lynching era and not know about the existential agony that trouble created for black people? Trouble followed them everywhere, like a shadow they could not shake. But the "Glory Hallelujah" in the last line speaks of hope that trouble would not sink them

down into permanent despair—what Kierkegaard described as "not willing to be oneself" or even "a self; or lowest of all in despair at willing to be another than himself."<sup>41</sup> When people do not want to be themselves, but somebody else, that is utter despair.

In another version of "Nobody Knows," the dialectic of doubt and faith is expressed with a focus on Jesus' solidarity with the one in trouble.

Nobody knows the trouble I see,  
 Nobody knows but Jesus,  
 Nobody knows the trouble I see,  
 Glory Hallelujah!

In the first version of "Nobody Knows," hope is carved out of a tenacious spirit, the stubborn refusal to be defeated by tragedy. The source of the hope carved out of "trouble" and "sorrow," expressed in the "Glory Hallelujah," although not clearly identified, is assumed. In the second version of "Nobody Knows," the source of the hope is Jesus, for he is a friend who knows about the trouble of the little ones, and he is the reason for their "Hallelujah." His divine presence is the most important message about black existence.

During my childhood, I heard a lot about the cross at Macedonia A.M.E. Church, where faith in Jesus was defined and celebrated. We sang about "Calvary," and asked, "Were you there?," "down at the cross," "when they crucified my Lord." "Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." The spirituals, gospel songs, and hymns focused on how Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his *solidarity* with them even unto death. There were more songs, sermons, prayers, and testimonies about the cross than any other theme. The cross was the foundation on which their faith was built.

In the mystery of God's revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God

was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross.

Poor little Jesus boy, made him be born in a manger,  
World treated him so mean,  
Treats me mean too . . .

Dey whipped Him up an' dey whipped Him down,  
Dey whipped dat man all ovah town.

Look-a how they done muh Lawd.

I was there when they nailed him to the cross,  
Oh! How it makes me sadder, sadder,  
When I think how they nailed him to the cross.

I was there when they took him down . . .  
Oh! How it makes my spirit tremble,  
When I recalls how they took him down.

The more black people struggled against white supremacy, the more they found in the cross the spiritual power to resist the violence they so often suffered. They came to know, as the black historian Lerone Bennett wrote, "at the deepest level . . . what it was like to be crucified. . . . And more: that there were some things in this world that are worth being crucified for."<sup>42</sup> Just as Jesus did not deserve to suffer, they knew they did not deserve it; yet faith was the one thing white people could not control or take away. "In our collective outpourings of song and prayer, the fluid emotions of others make us feel the strength in ourselves. . . ."<sup>43</sup> They shouted, danced, clapped their hands and stomped their feet as they bore witness to the power of Jesus' cross which had given them an identity far more meaningful than the harm that white supremacy could do them. No matter whose songs they sang or what church they belonged to, they infused them with their own experience of suffering and transformed what they received into their own. "Jesus Keep Me near the Cross," "Must Jesus Bear the

Cross Alone?" and other white Protestant evangelical hymns did not sound or feel the same when blacks and whites sang them because their life experiences were so different. When black people were challenged by white supremacy, with the lynching tree staring down at them, where else could they turn for hope that their resistance would ultimately succeed?

Penniless, landless, jobless, and with no political and social power in the society, what could black people do except to fight with cultural and religious power and pray that God would support them in their struggle for freedom? Black people "stretched their hands to God," because they had nowhere else to turn. Because of their experience of arbitrary violence, the cross was and is a redeeming and comforting image for many black Christians. If the God of Jesus' cross is found among the least, the crucified people of the world, then God is also found among those lynched in American history.

To keep hope alive was not easy for African Americans, facing state-endorsed terrorism nearly everywhere in America. Trouble followed them wherever they went—in the morning, at night, and all day long—keeping them awake and stalking them in nightmares, like a wild beast, waiting to attack its prey.

Although church people, like the blues people, could not escape trouble, they sang "trouble don't last always." The final word about black life is not death on a lynching tree but redemption in the cross—a miraculously transformed life found in the God of the gallows. This faith empowered blacks to wrestle with trouble as Jacob wrestled with his divine opponent till daybreak, refusing to let go until he was "blessed" with meaning and purpose. "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince has thou power with God and with men, and hath prevailed" (Gen 32:28 KJV). The spirituals "Wrestling Jacob," "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder," and "Wake Up, Jacob" are black people expressing their solidarity with Jacob and his struggle for a new identity. Their identification with Jacob stretches back deep into slavery.

In his book *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869), Thomas Wentworth Higginson, called "Wrestling Jacob" "one of the wildest and most striking" of the spirituals he heard during the Civil War.

O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';  
 I will not let thee go!  
 O wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob, day's a-breakin';  
 He will not let me go!  
 O, I hold my brudder wid a tremblin' hand;  
 I would not let him go!  
 I hold my sister wid a tremblin' hand;  
 I would not let her go!  
 O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb,  
 He would not let him go!  
 O, Jacob do hang from a tremblin' limb;  
 De Lord will bless my soul.  
 O, wrestlin' Jacob, Jacob . . . .<sup>44</sup>

The "tremblin' limb" could be the lynching tree since the lynching terror directed specifically at blacks began during the Civil War.

A similar wrestling occurs in "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder."

We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,  
 We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,  
 We are climbing Jacob's Ladder,  
 Soldier of the Cross.

Every round goes higher higher,  
 Every round goes higher higher,  
 Every round goes higher higher,  
 Soldier of the Cross.

Although Jacob was left with a limp, he won his struggle with God.

Wake up, Jacob, day is a-breaking, I'm on my way;  
 O, wake up Jacob, day is a-breaking, I'm on my way.  
 I want to go to heaven when I die,  
 Do love de Lord!  
 I want to go to heaven when I die,  
 Do love the Lord!<sup>45</sup>

As Jacob, the God-wrestler, received a new name to reflect his new self, black people's struggle with God in white America also left a deep and lasting wound. Yet they too expressed their hope for a new life in God: "Ah tol' Jesus it would be all right, if He changed mah name," another spiritual that connects with Jacob's experience. The change of name initiates a new conflict, a new struggle. "Jesus tol' me the world would be 'gainst me if He changed mah name."

W. E. B. Du Bois called black faith "a pythian madness" and "a demoniac possession"—"sprung from the African forests," "mad with supernatural joy."<sup>46</sup> One has to be a little mad, kind of crazy, to find salvation in the cross, victory in defeat, and life in death. This is why the meaning of the cross is intensely debated today, especially by secular and religious intellectuals who reject the absurd idea that a shameful, despicable death could "reveal" anything.

Yet the German scholar Martin Kahler has said that the Passion story in the Gospels forms the center of the Jesus story, and everything else in his life and teachings is only a prologue to his death on the cross. Black Christians could agree: they sang more songs and preached more sermons about the cross than any other aspect of Jesus' ministry. To be sure, Jesus' life and teachings are important for the black church community to understand his meaning, especially seeing him in complete solidarity with the oppressed. The classic expression of this aspect of Jesus' ministry is found in the Gospel of Luke. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus said

at the beginning of his ministry in a Nazareth synagogue, as he read from "the scroll of the prophet Isaiah," "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" (4:18). Black people sang and preached about Jesus being with the poor—healing and feeding them. The resurrection of Jesus is God giving people meaning beyond history, when such violence as slavery and lynching seemed to close off any future.

But the cross speaks to oppressed people in ways that Jesus' life, teachings, and even his resurrection do not. As the German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann put it, "The resurrection is . . . a chapter in the theology of the cross." Or the cross is "the signature of the one who is risen."<sup>47</sup> The cross places God in the midst of crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned, and tortured. Seeing himself as a man crucified like Jesus, Isaiah Fountain (January 23, 1920) insisted that "he be executed wearing a purple robe and crown, to analogize his innocence to that of Jesus Christ."<sup>48</sup> Before he was lynched in Oxford, Mississippi (1899), Steve Allen testified to his "peace with God," saying that "Jesus died on the Roman cross for me; through his mercy all my sins are forgiven. I am anchored in Christ." With that testimony, "he went to his death without a tremor."<sup>49</sup> Before Charles Johnston, a black minister, was hanged in Swainboro, Georgia, "he 'preached his own funeral sermon,' inducing the crowd to sing, kneel, raise their hands, and pray along with him."<sup>50</sup>

Blacks did not embrace the cross, however, without experiencing the profound contradictions that slavery, segregation, and lynching posed for their faith. That was why most blacks left white churches during slavery to form their own places of worship. Leaving white churches helped blacks to find their own space for free religious and political expression, but it did not remove their need to wrestle with God about the deeply felt

contradictions that slavery created for faith. "Does the Bible condemn slavery without any regard to circumstances, or not?" roars Reverend J. W. C. Pennington in 1845. "I, for one, desire to know. My repentance, my faith, my hope, my love, my perseverance all, all, I conceal it not, I repeat it, all turn upon this point. If I am deceived here—if the word of God does sanction slavery, I want another book, another repentance, another faith, and another hope."<sup>51</sup> Faith achieved its authenticity only by questioning God, asking, as the Reverend Nathaniel Paul did, "why it was that thou didst look on with calm indifference of an unconcerned spectator, when thy holy law was violated, thy divine authority despised and a portion of thine own creatures reduced to a state of mere vassalage and misery?"<sup>52</sup>

Bishop Payne of the A.M.E. Church was so troubled that he questioned God's existence:

Sometimes it seems as though some wild beast had plunged his fangs into my heart, and was squeezing out its life-blood. Then I began to question the existence of God, and to say: "If he does exist, is he just? If so, why does he suffer one race to oppress and enslave another, to rob them by unrighteous enactments of rights, which they hold most dear and sacred? . . . Is there no God?"<sup>53</sup>

No historical situation was more challenging than the lynching era, when God the liberator seemed nowhere to be found. "De courts er dis land is not for niggers," a black man from South Carolina reflected cynically. "It seems to me that when it comes to trouble, de law an' a nigger is de white man's sport, an' justice is a stranger in them precincts, an' mercy is unknown. An' de Bible say we must pray for we enemy. Drop down on you' knee, brothers, an' pray to God for all de crackers, an' judges, an' de courts, an' solicitors, sheriffs, an' police in de land."<sup>54</sup> Whether one was lynched on a tree or in court, the results were the same. "Lord, how come me here," they sang, "I wish I never was born!"

There ain't no freedom here, Lord . . .  
 They treat me so mean here, Lord . . .  
 I wish I never was born!

Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans continued to struggle to reconcile their faith in God's justice and love with the persistence of black suffering. Writer James Baldwin spoke for many: "If [God's] love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?"<sup>55</sup> No one knows the answer to that question.

Dealing with nearly four hundred years of ongoing suffering in African American history is enough to make any black person lose faith and roam in a blues-like way, trying to find meaning in an absurd world of white supremacy. Unlike the spirituals and the church, the blues and the juke joint did not lead to an organized political resistance against white supremacy. But one could correctly say that the spirituals and the church, with Jesus' cross at the heart of its faith, gave birth to the black freedom movement that reached its peak in the civil rights era during the 1950s and 60s. The spirituals were the soul of the movement, giving people courage to fight, and the church was its anchor, deepening its faith in the coming freedom for all. The blues was an individual's expression of a cultural defiance against white supremacy, a stubborn refusal to be defined by it. The blues prepared people to fight for justice by giving them a cultural identity that made them human and thus ready to struggle. The blues sent people traveling, roaming, looking for a woman or a man to soothe one's aching human heart. But it was Jesus' cross that sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to change the social structures of racial oppression.

Those of us who confront the brutalities in black history must be self-critical regarding the church as well as the juke joint, the spirituals, and the blues. We cannot be too sure of ourselves—whether we sing the blues or spirituals or both. "One can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of a pure

regard for truth," wrote French philosopher, activist, and mystic Simone Weil. "Christ likes for us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms."<sup>56</sup> We know from history that African Americans never stopped affirming their humanity and struggling for justice in their churches and the juke joints. But what does the cross in the Christian scriptures and the black experience of the blues have to say about these enduring atrocities? This is the question that both black secular thought and prophetic faith seek to explain for the African American community, for America, and for the world.

Since black thinkers, whether secular or religious, were influenced by white people who enslaved, segregated, and lynched them, what did their own white religious leaders say about Christians who permitted such atrocities? That is the question to which we turn.