



HARMONIES OF HERITAGE

Music's Journey through Black Church History

Presented by the JUST *Love* MINISTRY



The History of Music in the Black Church

To honor Black History Month in the ELCA Florida-Bahamas Synod, the Just Love Team presents *Harmonies of Heritage: Music's Journey Through Black Church History*. We present four genres of music that impacted the heart and soul of America:

- [African Drumming/Call Response](#)
- [Negro Spirituals](#)
- [Gospel/Civil Rights](#)
- [Contemporary](#)

We ask each congregation to present the *Harmonies of Heritage: Music's Journey Through Black Church History* summary each week in February. It can be done during announcements, a bulletin insert, or wherever fits best into the service. Each week we offer songs and prayers for use during the service.

For pastors and liturgical leaders, there are several resources in *Sundays and Seasons* that can be emphasized during Black History Month. We suggest congregations use *This Far By Faith* hymnal in February. Read the introduction pages #8-12 for a better understanding of the hymnal and its use. *This Far by Faith* is available on SundaysAndSeasons.com.



WEEK 1

African Drumming/Call Response

Scripture Reading: Exodus 1:8-14, 2:23-25

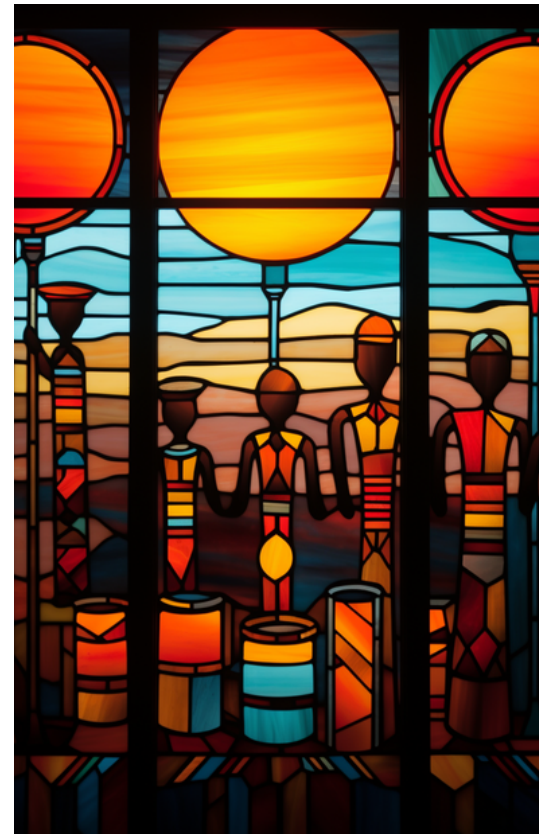
The safe haven of Egypt for the descendants of Joseph and his brothers turns into a nightmare of xenophobia and forced labor. This instinctive mistrust and willingness to abuse people who are different is very human, but God's ways are not our ways. God takes notice of the Israelites, and of those who oppress them.

⁸ Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

⁹ He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰ Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." ¹¹ Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹² But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³ The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

²³ After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.



African Drumming's Enduring Legacy

Shaping Gospel Music and Spiritual Expressions in the Black Church

African drumming, stemming from diverse regions across the African continent, has profoundly impacted gospel music and the African American culture, fostering an ongoing and vibrant evolution. Its influence on rhythmic patterns and the spirited essence of gospel music, especially within African American churches, is undeniable.

The passages in Exodus 1:8-14 and 2:23-25 recount the oppression faced by the Israelites in Egypt as slaves and their fervent prayers for deliverance. This also mirrors the oppression African Americans faced during slavery and their impassioned prayers for deliverance. In response, God hears their cries, remembers His covenant, and initiates their redemption.

One aspect of historical drumming that is overlooked is the musical experiences of slaves in America. African-Americans used drums to entertain, celebrate and communicate. Many of the techniques used to create and play drums were brought over to America from their native lands.



Unfortunately when slave masters realized that drums could be used to communicate over long distances they outright banned them from their plantations. The drumbeat not only accompanied chants and dances, but was also used to send messages. By striking and holding the drum in certain ways, drummers could replicate tones of speech almost exactly.

Regardless of their intent, the rhythms of Africa could not be suppressed in their entirety. Often in place of traditional drums, slaves resorted to clapping and stomping in polyrhythmic cadences to reproduce the complex rhythms of their ancestors. These were used to mimic traditional drumming found in Africa.

There are three different types of African drumming. Firstly, a rhythm can represent an idea (or signal). Secondly, it can repeat the accentual profile of a spoken utterance or thirdly, it can simply be subject to musical laws. According to a narrative published by DJ Zhao for This is Africa, "...because the drums were taken away, the forms of West African music which were either purely vocal or featured the voice prominently, traditionally played without drums, using simple instruments...this took root in a big way and gained wide popularity in the deep South."

"Call and Response" is a form of music which is deeply rooted in African musical traditions. It predates written history, and holds a central place in various African cultures.

The resilience of African rhythms persisted within the Black Church, even in the absence of traditional drums. This tradition not only enriched the music, but also the spiritual expressions within the Black Church, evolving dynamically over time. The legacy of African drumming profoundly enriched gospel music and the spiritual expressions within the Black Church, persisting through adversity and evolving into a vibrant tradition that continues to resonate and evolve.

Song Recommendations

- “Lift Every Voice and Sing” – Hymn #295 (Appropriate Anytime) - *This Far By Faith* Hymnal

Drumming/Call Response

- Wade in The Water – Hymn#114
- This is the Day - Hymn #262
- In the Name of Jesus - #265
- Victory is Mine - Hymn #266

Prayer of the Week

(For individuals, small groups or the prayer of the day...write yourself or use this one)

Everlasting God, you give strength to the weak and power to the faint. Make us agents of your healing and wholeness, that your good news may be made known to the ends of your creation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Blessed are you, Holy One, for all good things come from you. In bread and cup you open heaven to us. Meet us at this table, that we receive what we seek and follow your Son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

Blessing

God who names you, Christ who claims you, and the Holy Spirit who dwells in you, \oplus bless you and remain with you always. **Amen.**

African Drumming/Call & Response Additional Information:

Music

- [Angels](#) - A Call and Response Hymn by Cynthia Liggins Thomas
- [Walk by Faith](#) - Dr. Iona Locke
- [Principles of Call and Response](#)

Articles

- [What is Call and Response in Music?](#)
- [The History of African Drumming: Origins](#)

Video

- [History and Sounds of the Talking Drum](#)

Negro Spirituals

Scripture Reading: Exodus 15:1-3, 20, 21

Moses, Miriam, and all the Israelites use music to express their joy for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Music remains a powerful way for people to express the highs and lows of their emotions.

¹ Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

² The LORD is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

³ The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.

²⁰ Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.

²¹ And Miriam sang to them:

"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."



Musical Narratives of Hope

Resistance and Legacy in the African American Experience

The “spiritual” is a musical genre that grew out of the experiences of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas. Some spirituals served dual roles, such as work songs. Those who created the first spirituals mixed their indigenous musical traditions and techniques with Biblical images or other Christian teachings. This allowed those who created the spirituals to express their hopes, dreams, nightmares, and sorrows in a way that could hide the depth of these powerful and often forbidden emotions under the guise of spiritual teachings or worship songs.

It is also possible, but not certain, that some spirituals were used as “code songs” to relay in secret sensitive information from one community to another. For instance, many claim that the spiritual “Follow the Drinking Gourd” includes travel directions for slaves in Mississippi seeking their freedom in the North. In addition, some claim that the song “Go Down, Moses” is specifically connected to the work of Harriet Tubman, who was known by the nickname “Moses” in her work as a guide on the Underground Railroad. This includes Sarah Bradford, who recounts a conversation she had with Tubman in her book *Scenes In the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869) in which she says it was a song that signaled that it was safe for people attempting to escape slavery to reveal themselves to Tubman.

Even after Emancipation and the end of the Civil War, the old spirituals continued to be relevant in the harsh reality of Jim Crow laws in the South and pervasive racism throughout the United States as well as songs for worship. Spirituals as a genre would go on to influence the development of later genres include the blues, ragtime, gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues (R&B), rock and roll, rap, and hip-hop.



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Song Recommendations

- When Israel Was In Egypt's Land (Go Down, Moses) - TFF #87 (also WOV #670)
- O Mary, Don't You Weep - TFF #88

Other suggested songs/hymns for Transfiguration Sunday

- Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory (Battle Hymn of the Republic) - TFF #297 (also ELW #890)
- I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me - TFF #191 (also ELW #860, WOV #673)

Prayer of the Week

Almighty God, the resplendent light of your truth shines from the mountaintop into our hearts. Transfigure us by your beloved Son, so that we may be roused from the comfort of our holy structures. Compel us to go down the mountain to bring the liberating power of your Good News to those who are enslaved by greed, passion, resentment, addiction, hate, or power, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Offering Prayer

Gracious God, we offer the songs of our lips, the work of our hands, the longing of our hearts, and the timespan of our lives to your purposes for us and our world. **Amen.**

Blessing

May the God of Moses and Elijah, the Father, beloved Son \oplus , and Holy Spirit, bless you with light and truth, now and forever. **Amen.**

Negro Spirituals Additional Information

- [Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals](#) (Book)
- [Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman](#)
- [Louis Armstrong - Go Down Moses](#) (Lyrics Video)
- [The Swan Silvertones - Oh Mary Don't You Weep](#) (Video)
- [Wade in the Water](#) (Video)

Gospel/Civil Rights

Scripture Reading: Numbers 11:1-9

The joy of deliverance turns into despair over misfortunes for those on the Exodus, especially for those who were better off during their bondage in Egypt. It is in our nature to distort the memory of the past in the face of profound challenges and turmoil. We are constantly tempted to soften or even erase memories of hardships and raise up or even create memories of things that seemed safer only because they were predictable. But we are reminded that we do not live on bread alone, and that it is the truth that sets us free. How have we ignored the realities of the past in favor of a sterilized version of it?

¹ Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. ² But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. ³ So that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned against them. ⁴ The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; ⁶ but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." ⁷ Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. ⁸ The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. ⁹ When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.



Harmony in Struggle

The Role of African American Spirituals in the Civil Rights Movement

African American spirituals and gospel songs played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement. Musicians and songwriters set life experiences, calls for justice, and equality to melodies and rhythms of perseverance and hope. These songs served as a means by which individuals were bound together for extended marches, sit-ins, and protests. Song would prove psychologically empowering when their “good trouble” actions were met with hostility and brutality.

One such song that proved popular to the movement was “We Shall Overcome” (TFF 213) – an African American spiritual that was taught to activists in places such as The Highlander Folk School in New Market Tennessee. “We Shall Overcome,” “Tree of Life,” and “Eyes on the Prize” were anthems of the Civil Rights Movement. But it is “We Shall Overcome” that speaks to the power of song sung in unison unto the Lord, aimed at the forces of evil and oppression. Consider the experience of professional gospel singer Jamila Jones of Montgomery Alabama who as a teenager came to the Highlander Folk School for nonviolent activist training. As Jones recalls in her interview, Highlander was raided by the police, who shut off all the lights in the building. She found the strength to sing out into the darkness, adding a new verse, “We are not afraid,” to the song, “We Shall Overcome.” Jones explains, “And we got louder and louder with singing that verse, until one of the policemen came and he said to me, “If you have to sing,” and he was actually shaking, “do you have to sing so loud?” And I could not believe it. Here these people had all the guns, the billy clubs, the power, we thought. And he was asking me, with a shake, if I would not sing so loud. And it was that time that I really understood the power of our music.” View Jamila’s story at the Library of Congress by [clicking here](#).

In the Numbers text, the Israelites grumble, the Lord’s anger is kindled, land is scorched, and they cry out to Moses. They pine for what they had (fish, leeks, onions, garlic), and lament the Lord’s provision of manna. Their escape from tyranny and oppression at the hands of Pharaoh and deliverance through the Red Sea is a distant memory. Their strength is dried up, and the manna is just not enough. Chosen, loved, guided and provided for, yet uncomfortable and seemingly thankless.

On this First Sunday of Lent, might we be reminded that through Christ we, too, are chosen, loved, guided, and provided for by our God. In the context of our country’s history with Civil Rights, might we examine our comfort and strength of heart, mind and soul in traveling the wilderness of Civil Rights with our African American brothers and sisters in Christ. All of God’s children in Christ are the “we” in “We Shall Overcome.” How might you sing this song in thought, word and deed this Lenten season?



Gospel songs like “We Shall Overcome” played an important role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Song Recommendations

- Gathering Hymn: “Come, All You People” - TFF #138
- Hymn of the Day: “We Shall Overcome” - TFF #213
- Offering Hymn: “Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow” - TFF #276
- Communion Hymn: “Blessed Assurance” - TFF #118
- Sending Hymn: “Satan, We’re Going to Tear Your Kingdom Down” - TFF #207

Prayer of the Week

In the book Speak it Plain, Meta Herrick Carlson prays for courage, “The world is filled with good reasons to hide, to turn away or inward to preserve some distance and dignity. But the struggle remains, and justice beckons your attention to come alive and together for the here and now. The Spirit of God stirs, even in fear, so you might keep moving through thresholds with hearts wide open to heaven revealed in good courage.” Lord God, at the outset of this Lent season, might we be courageous for Christ. May your Spirit challenge us to walk in your ways, focused on our blessings, and seeking to bring others into your gracious fold. Grant us courage to seek forgiveness, sing of freedom and justice for all, and be agents of peace and healing in our communities. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Jesus, you are the bread of life and the host of this meal. Bless these gifts that we have gathered that all people may know your goodness. Feed us not only with this holy food but with hunger for justice and peace. We pray this in your name. **Amen.**

Blessing

Beloved, we are God’s own people, holy, washed, renewed. God bless you and keep you, shower you with mercy, fill you with courage, and ✚ give you peace. **Amen.**

Gospel/Civil Rights Additional Information

- [Satan, We’re Going to Tear Your Kingdom Down TFF 207:](#) (Video)
- [We Shall Overcome, TFF 213:](#) (Video)
- [Jamila Jones oral history interview](#) (Video)

Contemporary

Scripture Reading: Numbers 14:1-4, 10b-18

After most of the spies sent into the Promised Land report that it was too dangerous to cross over into it, the people rebel against God and Moses, intending once again to go back to Egypt. God loses patience with the people, but Moses bargains again for love and mercy. It is in our nature to desire to return to the past, but God's promises reside in the future.

¹ Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt."

^{10b} Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. ¹¹ And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they." ¹³ But Moses said to the LORD, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for in your might you brought up this people from among

them, ¹⁴ and they will tell the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that you, O LORD, are in the midst of this people; for you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go in front of them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, ¹⁶ It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷ And now, therefore, let the power of the LORD be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying, ¹⁸ 'The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation.'



Soulful Symphonies

The Fusion of Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary African American Church Music

Contemporary music within African American churches continue to be a vibrant and diverse expression that reflects a fusion of traditional gospel roots with a wide array of modern musical genres. Artists and worship leaders draw inspiration from hip-hop, R&B, soul, jazz, and electronic music, creating a dynamic and inclusive musical landscape. The use of technology remains prevalent, with churches incorporating advanced sound systems, multimedia presentations, and online platforms for worship services. This modern approach enhances the worship experience and allows for broader accessibility.

Contemporary gospel artists, such as Kirk Franklin, Yolanda Adams, Tasha Cobbs Leonard, Travis Greene, and Jonathan McReynolds, are influential figures in shaping the current landscape. They bring a fresh and innovative sound to gospel music while maintaining a strong connection to the spiritual and theological foundations of African American worship. Franklin's crossover success helped expand the reach of contemporary gospel to a broader audience.



In addition to solo artists, gospel choirs continue to play a significant role, combining traditional vocal harmonies with contemporary arrangements and instrumentation. The lyrics often touch on themes of faith, social justice, empowerment, and the enduring resilience of the African American community.

African American church music reflects a commitment to both tradition and innovation, embracing a broad spectrum of styles to engage diverse worshippers. This contemporary musical expression serves as a dynamic and evolving channel for spiritual connection and cultural celebration within the African American religious experience.

Gospel music saw a rise in popularity with artists like Kirk Franklin, who brought a fresh approach by incorporating hip-hop, R&B, and urban contemporary sounds into gospel music. Franklin's crossover success helped expand the reach of contemporary gospel to a broader audience.

Song Recommendations (LBW)

- [Lift Every Voice and Sing – Hymn #841](#) (Appropriate Anytime)
- [Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing – Hip Hop Version](#)
- On Eagles Wings – Hymn #787
- [On Eagles Wings – Hip Hop Version](#)
- Let Justice Flow Like Streams – Hymn # 717
- [Let Justice Flow – Spoken Word Version](#)
- Blessed Assurance – Hymn #638
- [Blessed Assurance/Rap The Word](#)

Prayer of the Week

*Heavenly Father, Today I commit to staying so centered in the awareness of God in all things so that loving-kindness will inevitably pour forth from me. I gladly and wholeheartedly dedicate my time, resources, talents, and treasure to those efforts that help create a world where everyone feels accepted. I promise to provide a safe place where everyone can be themselves. I will strive to meet others where they are. I am grateful for our similarities and hope to learn from our differences. I value individual contributions to this world. I freely share and spread the seeds of unity, love and peace wherever I go. **Amen.***

Offering Prayer

Jesus, you are the bread of life and the host of this meal. Bless these gifts that we have gathered that all people may know your goodness. Feed us not only with this holy food but with hunger for justice and peace. We pray this in your name. **Amen.**

Blessing

Beloved, we are God's own people, holy, washed, renewed. God bless you and keep you, shower you with mercy, fill you with courage, and ☩ give you peace. **Amen.**

Contemporary Additional Information

Articles

- [The future of the Black church will include its musical heritage](#)
- [Black Gospel Matters—Because Gospel Is Intrinsically Black](#)

Video/Documentary

- [Rejoice & Shout](#) - Covers the 200-year history of African-American Christian Music.
- **Music:** [Contemporary Black Gospel Playlist](#)