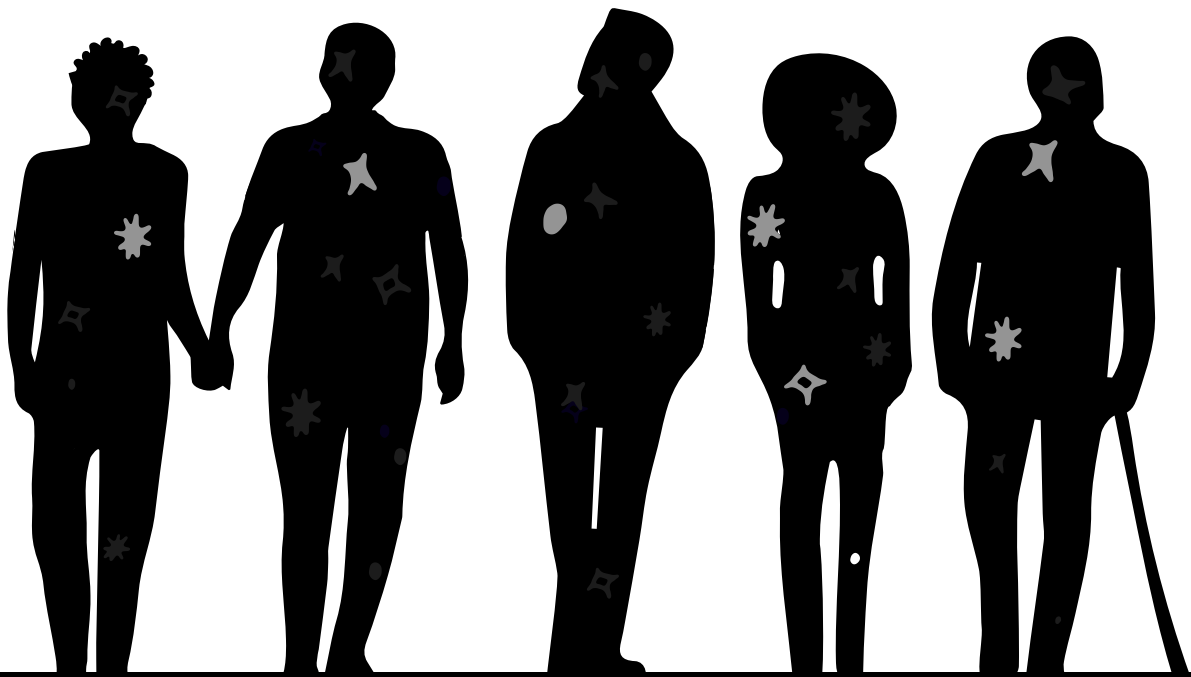


# THE COSMIC WE

Episode 4:  
Preaching From the Depths of Life

with Dr. Frank A. Thomas



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Frank A. Thomas: Life sometimes is not about the politics. Sometimes it's crude, sometimes it's ugly, sometimes it's challenging. Some of the tests that we have to undergo it is not pretty. And so I think there are people in life who crunch the profane and the sacred and articulate real lived experience that we all can learn from. And I think that gives our preaching a broadness and a depth because we are looking at the real versus looking at a cleaned up version. Many churches, we clean it up because the church operates in the politics of respectability, except people are living this alternative theology when they got a church that is lived experience on the ground.

Donny Bryant: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Barbara Holmes: We're trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color, continent, country, or kinship. And we're going to do this through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts.

Donny Bryant: I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes. And this is The Cosmic We.

Donny Bryant: Welcome, everyone. Today we have with us a very, very special guest, a friend, colleague, a mentor. We would like to introduce to everyone, Dr. Frank A. Thomas. Dr. Thomas currently serves as the Director of the PhD Program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric, and the Nettie Sweeney and Hugh Miller Professor of Homiletics at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Indiana. He's the author of many books. More recently, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, *Intro to the Practice of African American Preaching* and one of my favorite, *They Like to Never Quit Praising God, Celebration, Preaching*. Dr. Thomas is married to Dr. Joyce Scott Thomas. They're both the parents of two wonderful adult children, Anthony William and Rachel Milton. Dr. Thomas, welcome to The Cosmic We.

Frank A. Thomas: Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Donny Bryant: I think this is going to be a very fluid and interesting conversation because Dr. Thomas, you have a relationship with both Dr. B and myself. And I think the relationship with Dr. B goes far back and far deeper than the relationship with myself.

Frank A. Thomas: It does.

Donny Bryant: And I think the introduction, and if I had to be honest, the introduction to Dr. B came through your work, your scholarship prior to meeting Dr. B. So I would just want to kind of start out with the history of our trilogy relationship here. And Dr. B, you want to jump in? How did you and Dr. B meet? How far back did you guys go?

Barbara Holmes: Well, Dr. Thomas, you were the first contemplative preacher that I ever heard. You preached without performance or hooping, you just bared your heart. And when I walked into Mississippi Boulevard, Christian Church, because I was a church girl, but I wasn't churchy and I thought, okay, maybe I can tolerate this. And I sat down and I said, "I'm in the right place at the right time." I had just moved to Memphis in

1998 to take my first job as a professor at Memphis Theological Seminary. And one of the things about me was that I had started off as a bootleg preacher. Called at 13, preaching everywhere, calling myself an evangelist, didn't know the first song, couldn't exhort anybody. They would call children up behind me to preach better. And it was bad. And I had no preaching voice. Without saying so you mentored me and you allowed me to preach badly in your church. You talk about the five mistakes a preacher makes. I've made about 3,500 in one sermon.

Frank A. Thomas: I think you're hard on yourself with this.

Barbara Holmes: But I will never forget the Sunday that I found my voice under your tutelage. I preached a sermon called Who Called You and What Were You Called To Do? And I was using my poetry, my truth telling about phone calls that wives were receiving from their husband's side chicks. Now this is before caller id, right? So it hit home. It was real. I found my voice and I haven't lost it since. There is a way in which you mentor, where you allow a person to fail and make mistakes and then support them by letting them do it again until they find themselves. And so I am forever grateful that I saw you preach in a way that I knew that I could. That I didn't have to try to find a male voice in me and that I could use my poetry and I could use the skills that I had. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Frank A. Thomas: Well, thank you. Now first I think you're being hard on yourself. You were not hard to invite back. That's the first thing to say. And then I was deeply appreciative of our relationship. And just like you mentored me in this whole scholarship thing because I was debating whether or not to do a PhD program at the University of Memphis. The rhetoric program, a professor in there was really recruiting me to come up to the program. I was like, oh, no, no, no, no. And then I started talking about the GRE and I started talking about all this stuff. And so we had lunch, and not that you talked me into it, but you pulled down every barrier that I had to go in that direction. So when you finished with me was nothing to do but go that way.

And the next crucial... That was a critical decision. I ended up finishing a PhD in 2008 and then a seminary, a Christian Theological Seminary, came to me and made me an offer to come and be one of their preaching professors at the time. And I didn't know anything about seminary life, I didn't know anything about that. And then I came... Do you remember the meeting? I came to you? We talked and you pulled down all the barriers that I had. Every time I threw up one as why when I couldn't go, you pull that one down. So I ended up... So you helped mentor me or into this whole scholarship thing and seminary life.

And I knew church, I knew church backwards and forwards. Seminary is quite a different matter. So thank you so much for years of relationship and openness and honesty. And then your book, *Contemplative Preaching*, it is being used, it has flowered into a dissertation by soon to be a published book by Trey Clark, who is a professor out now at Fuller. And he is deeply, deeply impressed with your work, as he's probably reached out to you. And so he has this thing called *Contemplative Preaching* is now a thing.

So he's writing about it, teaching about it, and all from the seeds. And of course your work on contemplative, is just seminal to his work. And then he gets to me. And so I was on his dissertation committee, so that's how I know so much about the work.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, I was an outside reader and it was wonderful work. You did a good job with him.

Frank A. Thomas: Yeah, yeah. Got that for... He's wonderful. We probably need to have him next. I mean, he'd be wonderful.

Barbara Holmes: Yeah, he would be. Donny, how did your relationship begin with Frank?

Donny Bryant: Dr. Thomas, through your landmark work? They Like to Never Quit Praising God, which highlights the role of celebration preaching in the African American preaching tradition. I don't recall the year, but I was able to get my hands on that book. And I was probably introduced to you prior to that through the African American Pulpit. Probably around 2006 I got my hands on several different publications and was really intrigued with that particular publication. But once I got my hands on, They Like to Never Quit Praising God. The systematic approach, the blueprint, that was provided in that book really helped me to structure, to bring discipline, to bring organization around my preaching. And in that particular book you cite Dr. Barbara Holmes. And it was in that book that I was introduced to her work because I was looking at your citations. And so I began to explore some of the work that Dr. Holmes had published.

And fast forward one Sunday in a church service in Minneapolis, Dr. Barbara Holmes approaches me and says, 'I'm Dr. Barbara Holmes,' after a sermon I preached, and she was at the time the... I believe, Dr. B, you were the president of United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities. And she introduced me to the idea of the DMin program there. And that kind of opened up my interest in maybe applying to a program.

I subsequently decided to apply to Luther Theological Seminary. And in my first, or I believe it was actually my second year there, we had a visiting professor to teach on a topic called Celebration Preaching. And lo and behold, it was Dr. Frank A. Thomas. And so I just think it was just an amazing how all the loose ends came together. And I was excited because during that time I looked at Dr. Thomas as a mentor through his work, but to actually have him as a teacher during our second year of seminary was transformative for me. I looked at him as a sage. The life lessons, the wisdom, Dr. Thomas, that you shared with my classmates and my cohort and myself really inspired all of us. And to this day, many of us still discuss that particular class amongst ourselves. So thank you again for your inspiration.

Frank A. Thomas: Thank you. Thank you.

Barbara Holmes: Dr. Thomas, there is a centered quietness in the midst of your preaching.

Where does that come from?

Frank A. Thomas: For a long time I would beat myself up because I didn't sound like a whole lot of preachers. I couldn't sing, I didn't have a hoop. I liked depth, both in interpretation. And so when I was at my first church, they used to say, "We're going to bed on Saturday night because we know that you're going to work us emotionally, intellectually, and physically. So I'm just going to get some rest because we got to rest to deal with you." So the style kind of grew out of a very young congregation, 35 members, rented building. I was fresh out of seminary. And across time it just became clear to me that that was the way that I wanted to do it. And I didn't have a bunch of histrionics. I didn't have a floor show, but I had meaning. And it just kind of developed. And I didn't accept it for a long time, but at some point, probably, I don't know, the '99, by the time I got to Mississippi Boulevard, this is who I am.

And so this is what it is. And so we put it out there. We study hard, we pray hard, and I just didn't like surface things. I think life is too complicated for surface. I think the inner motivations of people and why we do things and why we behave, both good and bad, are much too complex for a surface things. So I would then grab psychology, sociology, I would grab anything to help illustrate just the complexity of human behavior. And also with exegetics, God's voice, God's movement, God's will given the complexity of human behavior.

And when you get to a certain level of depth, there are some sermons that can't be hooped to. I mean, they're too... And I'm not making a judgment on anybody that's a hooper. Martha Simmons says, "Almost every Black preacher would hoop if they could." And I tend to agree. I don't care for me, I wish I could. I own it. I would love to be a hooper. I have a friend, Gina Stewart. I mean, she's a daughter of thunder. I mean, she can do it. I like to do that. I really would. Then she comes to me and says, "Frank, you just say stuff. You don't raise your voice, you don't get all, and it just explodes in people's lives. I'd like to do that." But that's year after years. So I think if I had to name it, I like depth because life is too complex for shallow and superficial.

Barbara Holmes: Our listeners might want to know that your dad was a jazz musician and you talk about your dad telling you that Coltrane played ideas and that you preach ideas. And when I think of an idea, I think of an abstraction. Tell me what you mean by preaching ideas.

Frank A. Thomas: Well, let me tell the story. Basically, my dad was a jazz musician and he would buy an album. At the time they were called Music Minus One. So, which means that the whole orchestra, the whole trio would be there minus one instrument, which was the saxophone which he would supply. So I grew up hearing jazz music under my basement and some big band and bebop. I could hear it all. So he's playing John Coltrane. So I went down there one day, he always played Love Supreme, Love Supreme, Love Supreme. Play it all the time. I went down there one day and said, "This just sounds like noise to me. I don't get it. I just don't get it. You play this over and over and over and over. What in

the world is this stuff?” So he told me that I didn’t have enough life experience... That Coltrane was playing ideas and I didn’t have enough life experience to hear the ideas.

So I said, “I don’t know what the heck you mean, but I’m going to go back upstairs and I’m going to say, this is noise, this is complete noise.” So I was in college, no, I was married right after college and I was going through some things that ran across a Love Supreme. So I just played it for old time sake and it brought back memories of being in the basement, my dad, growing up. But all of a sudden underneath that I heard it. I said, “This man is playing ideas.” So to make the whole long story short, my dad came to hear me preach and I was in Memphis now, and they would come, stay the weekend and they would leave after church. We’d go get something to eat and they’d leave after church.

So he brought us to the house, backed the car out of the driveway to return. I went to the door and I heard the car come back in the drive. So he gets out of the car and says to me, “You’re playing ideas in you’re preaching.” And that was so affirmative to me that it stays with me. For me, what it means is if I had to kind of summarize it the best, in jazz music, there’s a feeling, okay? So a jazz musician will hear something, a sound, that sound corresponds to a feeling or that sound corresponds to an idea that corresponds to a feeling. I’m working on trying to express this so I don’t have it all together. So the jazz musician will then repeat the sound that is a result of the feeling that leads to the idea. The listener will hear the idea, hear the sound, capture the feeling. And so when you’re playing ideas, you’re playing feelings.

I don’t know why we come to think that ideas are rational and they don’t have any emotive impact or emotive content, but ideas are full of deep feeling. So this is part of why in my preaching style, I can do it contemplatively because ideas have deep emotion and we are trained to think that only one style has emotion, or only the hooper has emotion, which ideas have emotions. So when you’re playing ideas, you are trying to answer deep and profound fundamental questions.

Let me take a scripture to tie to a text to give an example that maybe do it better than what I’m doing it. So in Hebrews 11, after they called that great hall of sheroes and heroes into faith, the text says down there about verse 13, “These all died into faith not having received the promise.” Now wait a minute, you mean all these people that great Abraham, Sarah, Noah, Abel, Enoch, all these great heroes, they are not receiving the promise? So that contradiction, those ideas start me, well, what does this text mean?

I open up the text. So in verse 40 it says, “So they did not receive me because they were waiting for a better resurrection. They couldn’t be fulfilled unto Jesus.” And then it says, “And we will all be together made perfect.” So I just take all that and try to put it in a sermon. I’m playing the contradiction. Somebody said that in contradictions are the potential for transcendence. And because human behavior is so complex and we often have contradicting feelings, thoughts, and emotions, when the text raises up the contradiction, then the text resolves the contradiction, then I try to preach it. And the particular way I’m trying to preach it doesn’t need a whole lot of... It doesn’t need necessarily a floor show if I can say that in the best sense of the word. It just needs presenting with authenticity because the ideas carry such deep emotion, so that’s the

best I can articulate it.

Donny Bryant: Leveraging the theme of music as you were speaking it brought to my remembrance one of the classes that we had with you, you had a required textbook reading. That text was by an American poet by the name of Jay-Z. And that text was entitled Decoded.

Frank A. Thomas: Yes.

Donny Bryant: Most of my classmates at the time and I were very surprised that that text was a required reading. As you were talking about this contradiction and discussing that, could you help our listeners understand how jazz, poetry, even hip hop, can be a vehicle to empowering even oral communicators, particularly in the case of preachers. And how the ideas that are being handled through that genre can be utilized even in our ability to preach more effectively and communicate more effectively. And how Decoded was an example of what you're sharing with us right now.

Frank A. Thomas: I use that book because he's a master communicator and if you're going to be a communicator, you have to learn from people who are massive communicator. Now there's some people, his subject matter and his content is so egregious that they can't envision possibly learning from him as a communicator. To which I say, "Fine." I said, "I'm uncomfortable with some of the misogyny. I'm uncomfortable with some of the lyrics. I'm uncomfortable with some of the language." I said, "I have a middle class upbringing and the politics of respectability are part of my life." But what Jay-Z says is, "I am going to explain to you why it makes sense for a young hustler to stand on a corner and sell drugs. I'm going to help you understand that. And if you just listen to what I have to say and if you suspend some of the politics of respectability and you become less offended enough to listen, I will explain to you from our experience standing on a street corner selling drugs, why that makes sense." So what Jay-Z is presenting is lived experience.

Dr. Holmes just described that as side chicks calling the wife. That's real. That's real lived experience that she's dealing with. He deals with and he explains, and it... I wouldn't do it. I don't think it's right, it destroys the community. I got all kind of critiques, but he explains it. So he's giving me real lived experience and I think that the biblical text is about real lived experience. Now we polish it up and clean it up and we don't... So rather than in Job 3:1 where he says, "Cursed be the day." That's a cleanup. He says, "Damn the day I was born." That's the literal translation of it. But we clean it up because we have politics of respectability.

And life sometimes is not about the politics. Sometimes it's crude. Sometimes it's ugly, sometimes it's challenging. Sometimes you are the caregiver and you take the bed pan and it is not... Sometimes some of the tests that we have to undergo for it is not pretty. And so I think there are people in life who crunch the profane and the sacred and articulate real lived experience that we all can learn from. And I think that gives our preaching a broadness and a depth because we are looking at the real versus looking at a cleaned up version. So in many churches we clean it up because the church operates in the politics of respectability, except people are living this alternative theology when they get out of church that is lived experience on the ground.



So to give you an example, I was in Mississippi Boulevard once, and a woman came up, invited her up at the invitation to give her life to Christ, she gives a testimony, she says, "I went to jail for selling drugs." And she says, "I don't want to do that anymore and it's a great temptation to come out and do that." So she had drug paraphernalia. So I said to her, "As a sign and symbol of you don't do anymore, just lay stuff on the altar before God. We'll pray off it. We'll pray for you and we got some folk that can help you, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." When she laid that stuff on that clean communion, not that it was dirty, but it was dirty from the sense of being drug paraphernalia. Some folk had a heart attack. She's defiling the altar. I said, "I thought that was the point of the altar."

Barbara Holmes: Right.

Donny Bryant: Right.

Frank A. Thomas: The woman is saying she trying to clean up her life. If anything gets on it, we can change the little, I don't know, the little doily on it. So it's like all this lived experience we can't talk about. And so it ends up being shallow, is the best word. And so I say, "Well let's talk about it." I got in real trouble in the church one Sunday I was preaching and I was talking about violence against women, domestic violence, violence in relationships, et cetera, married relationships in particular. I was talking about that Sunday and I said, "It's real confusing for a lot of women because trust and love. You hit me then you say you love me. You cuss me and then you send me flowers and it's hard to kind of decide what's what." And I say, "It's hard when somebody says bitch I'll kill you if you leave here." So they had a meeting with me, three of the folks of the leadership, they went saying I was cussing in the pulpit. I said, "Did you hear what I said?" See that's what... It's...

Barbara Holmes: Oh, help us Lord, help us.

Frank A. Thomas: So we've got this sense that the sacred is over here, which is pristine and pure and holy. And the profane is over here and it's dirty and it's ugly except we live in both worlds every day in our bodies. That's part of why we don't value the body, because we think it's dirty, but it's sacred.

So I'm trying to join this stuff together. And so Jay-Z made sense to me and he decodes his lyrics. He gives you the background, he breaks... I got it from Gary V. Simpson who said, "Frank, this is the best piece of exegesis I've read in 25 years." And he used the word exegesis because he's exegeting the community in the context. So that's why I put it on the syllabus and let's talk about real things. Can we be real? I'm doing a workshop with some leaders in several weeks and it's called 30 Minutes of Real. So I've structured this thing so that leaders and we'll get 30 minutes of real with another person. 30 minutes of real, because we don't get real very often, especially in the church.

Barbara Holmes: Before I headed to Mississippi Boulevard, I was living in Miami and I was on my Pentecostal journey and attending a storefront church. And every Sunday we used to step over prostitutes and drunks to get into the storefront to shout. And it didn't



make any sense. There was so many contradictions in the church. But you were talking about the politics of respectability, that same politics of respectability during my era, your era, kept a lot of pastors from aligning with Black Lives Matter. Were you able to support the movement even though you and I, we grew up with this politics of respectability.

Frank A. Thomas: Yeah, for sure. Thank you for the question. Well, I'm doing a lot of reading of James Baldwin right now. And James Baldwin is helping me through the madness and the insanity of white supremacy and this expressions, even as we turn the television on and see these folks playing the race card and showing Black people as criminals. I mean this stuff is... So to deal with it. I mean just the stress and the anger and the rage and the sadness. I read a line in Baldwin in essence he says, "Go to the ancestors." And so I went to him. So I've been reading him and I find it very difficult to pretend like Black folks are not being killed. That there are not systems and structures that are denying Black people their basic humanity. And so I don't have a problem at all supporting Black Lives Matter because so much of the culture indicates that Black lives don't matter.

So right now, DeSantis has got this craziness going on in Florida of election police going around arresting people with voting cards. It's silly. It's ridiculous. It's absurd. It's cruel. It's racist. So how do you not say that? I mean maybe you have to, I don't want to say clean it up, it's not the word mean. There's a good way to say things that's helpful to the discussion and there's a bad way to say things, but I don't see how you could not support Black Lives Matter.

Well, I'll go to a James Baldwin quote and let me go to that. What he says is that "Black is an experience and not a skin color." And so every person that has a Black... This is my word, every person that has a Black skin is not my kin. And I haven't figured out the backside that there might be some white folks who might be my friend. I'm still working on that side of it. But there are plenty of Black people who are not my kin. We got the same skin color, but for me, anybody that's had a Black experience can't help but see, for me, that Black Lives Matter and saw that man put his foot on his neck and I can't make that an individual.

No, it's systematic. There's too much of that happening. So it's not accidental. Something in the training, something in the way they look at Black folks. They got in the mall bunch of, I think it was white kids jump on a Black kid, a white kid and a Black kid get into a fight. So the mall police can look at the students, they wrestle the Black kid down to the ground, they set the white kid up on a chair when the white kid attacked the Black kid. But it had to do with how we are seen to be criminals, to be violent. We don't get the benefit of the doubt.

So I'll put it this way, I write to stay sane. And part of what drives me insane is you can take records, claim they're yours. You can lie, steal. You can do a bunch of things that if I did, I'd go to jail. They'd have me in handcuffs if I did any of it. So I get irritated by that stuff. I'm writing a memoir right now and I'm trying to track down why I get so angry because many white people think they're superior. Why do I get so angry about that? I know they're not superior, but you have the audacity to think that

you're better than me. It makes me mad.

I need to see a therapist and work on that but that's how I feel. And so not only did I write how to preach a dangerous sermon, I wrote *Surviving the Dangerous Sermon*. I also wrote the *God of the Dangerous Sermon* that there's... I do a rhetorical read of Trump turning that Bible upside down and who is he appealing to and what kind of God is behind that? A God of anger, pettiness, racism, vengeance. And why Christians, evangelicals in particular but others, can support that. And so my argument is, of course, we're not serving the same God because I don't serve that kind of God.

Barbara Holmes: See, the thing is though that, and you say that the sin of America's white supremacy, and that's a fact. But there are listeners right now who are going to give very uncomfortable with that idea. I mean I think it was William Stringfellow who's a lawyer and a theologian who said, and I'm going to summarize this, "America is infatuated with the myth of its goodness." And there seems to be no way out of that despite evidence to the contrary. So how do you break through? I mean, because the preacher is the one who, as Walter Bergman says, "Flies low under the main paradigm." Has to break through all the mess and the polarization and get a word in. How do you break through this idea that we're good, we're good, America's good. But there's evidence to the contrary.

Frank A. Thomas: I'll go to Baldwin, Baldwin calls it innocence. He says, "The innocence is the crime." That this lifestyle is destroying the lives of thousands and millions of people. And we can talk about genocide, we can talk global, we can talk local, and we're innocent. A supreme court is innocent. It's like if they'd have asked any Black person in America except a handful of them, they would've said, if you say what's going to happen if you break up the Voting Rights Act? Well, any Black person would tell them the same states are going to go right back to voter suppression. But out of their innocence they think we don't have racial issues. That's innocence, ignorance, innocence.

So I don't know how you break through that. I think I'm more concerned with sustaining those who suffer from... In this piece I wrote, I'm quoting David Meara who says he's more interested in the tale of the losers than the winners. And his work is to break the curse. I think that's my work to break the curse. And I don't know that some of these folks are going to be saved. I think that they don't even want to be comfortable with the whole 1619 stuff. They don't want an alternative version of history. And I ask them when I get a chance to talk to them, "Why do you only have one response, guilt?" I don't want any guilt. I'm not asking a white person and them. No white person ever talked to them asking for guilt.

And so you don't want your children to feel bad. Why is that your only response to facing up to real history is to feel bad. And I think that it interrupts their pleasure. They want to feel good. And you bringing up all this stuff that I have to accidentally do some work, and I don't know anybody that does not grow, that does not feel uncomfortable. It's a phase. So my wife and I will fall out in an argument and she'll say, "You're not da da, you didn't." And she's right. But my first response is to get mad, right? That's my first response.

- Donny Bryant: That's true.
- Frank A. Thomas: To deny. No, I'm innocent. You the one, da, da, da. But then a day or two or a minute or two, I take a walk and I have to pray about it and think about it and well, maybe she's right. I have to work through the process, but they want short circuit. They don't want to take the uncomfortability of it. So I don't know if there's any breaking through of any of this if you're not willing to sit down and be uncomfortable with your own history. As much as the drug addict has to be uncomfortable with their history, as much as we all have to be. If we going to have a long term relationship, we have to be able to be uncomfortable with our behavior at some points.
- Barbara Holmes: I guess if you can't tell the truth about who won an election, it's going to be impossible to come to terms with the history of violence and oppression.
- Frank A. Thomas: Exactly. It is. Which is why once you tell me that Trump won, I'm done. I don't have conversation. I am. We can't even have a rational platform. So I was in a discussion and I said, "I'm not trying to convert these people." I'm not, I said, "It's too much energy trying to convince them why people are hurting." And I say, "I'm working with the hurting people."
- That's why I want to work with the people, and this is not all white people. I say that very quickly. This is not all white people. It's not a diatribe against because there are some white people who believe in pluralism. There's some white people working hard. We just have these other ones who are loud, boisterous, arrogant, don't care about decency, justify their behavior by making this the other enemy. And I wrote in a chapter that I'm working on, it's dangerous when you need an enemy to feel better about yourself. So I don't know that they can be converted. They have to be defeated. And I don't mean with pistols and guns.. I'm not advocating violence. I said, "Our best chance is to out vote them." That's where I am. And I'll talk to anybody, but I'll share, I'll do reconciliation, I'll do all that except when you tell me that Trump won the election. I'm done. Let me move on. Why am I on TV arguing with you about did Trump win or not.
- Barbara Holmes: True.
- Donny Bryant: Could you speak to maybe the evolution even as you're speaking to how you use your platform or how sermons or communication or rhetoric can be used to speak hope in the midst of hopelessness or even to deal with seasons in just a culture of injustice and oppression. How do you see the role of the preacher, the communicator, the one who may have a voice, if you will, to be a vehicle to help liberate or to bring enlightenment to these particular situations that we're talking about?
- Frank A. Thomas: I think that one has to, for Baldwin when the artist is a disturber of peace, he has a phrase, he says that the artist vomits up the anguish and speaks the truth even if that truth convicts the artist. So some of us preach like the critique... We preach out there, we're being prophetic out there, but the prophecy don't apply to us because we are the prophet. And so what happens when the community critiques the church? I heard Dr. Vanessa Seal the bombing Gilead out New York. She has a beautiful... I asked her to

do a lecture and the lecture was a critique of the church from the community. And that's was one of the things she said, we're not interested in bigger buildings. We got people out here hurting. We need you to help. We don't need big buildings unless those big buildings help people. We're out here doing the work on the street, in the lives and the homes of people we meet.

It was a wonderful thing. And you get offended because they could be prophetic. But when somebody's prophetic on us, do we have the humility? We can disturb the peace. Are we willing to be disturbed? Are we willing to grow? Because all of have places where we're not whole. So for me, you only can see in the text at the level that you see within yourself. And real complex problems require real difficult... The word that I use is M-I-N-E. Mine. We have to mine hope. We have to dig up out of the text, our lives, hope. And I just wonder sometimes if first we make the decision really to be a disturber of peace. That's one. Secondly, I wonder if we are willing to prophetically critique and then apply that same critique to our own lives. So we live under what we say, the judgment that we might offer and that if that's the form of critique that we're offering.

Thirdly, have we done enough work in our private lives, therapy, spiritual direction, quietness to discern our motives and our motivations? If we don't do that kind of inner work, we don't see that in the text. And so to dig up hope to these complex situations require a tremendous amount of inner work. My argument is the text is a lived experience. So Dr. Susan Smith, one of my great friends, I talked to her this morning, she did a sermon on guilt. I use this in all my classes years ago and the only sermon I've ever heard preached on Judas. So she opens up the sermon, shall never forget it, quoting Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. How the person that got away scot free, but the guilt ate him up and he had to confess. Then she shifts to Judas, the guilt was eating him alive. The name of the sermon was Cut Down The Noose.

So then she describes the Judas based upon the guilt. And then she took a side street. We all got guilt. Everybody in here got guilt. And she gives a couple examples. If you a mother, kid didn't turn out, you got some guilt or you're a friend. And then she comes back to Judas and said he put his head in the noose as if God didn't have enough grace to forgive, to give him a new start. And then she turns to the audience and says, "Cut down the noose." I mean, I was like, now this is preaching right here. Because I have to go inside my life into the Word of God is the power to heal, to forgive, to be forgiven, to forgive others, to forgive myself. She talked about all of that and she begged us cut down the noose. Now that's, of course, personal in terms of it's not social justice preaching per se, but I just believe that same kind of depth is needed to address these deep and profound structural issues in our culture.

And Baldwin said he wanted to understand white supremacy from the interior side. And he also wanted to understand how white supremacy affects Black people and other folks who suffer on the white supremacy from the inside.

So how do we address it? We can address it out there, yes. But then also how do we address it in here? What it has done to us. We don't address our rage in church, maybe. I think that African American people, a lot of people, anybody that has a tremendous

amount of rage. And I think we quote scripture over it. And because we are afraid that if the rage ever really came out, we'd hurt some people. We'd destroy some stuff and we'd... But I don't know that you can't be healthy without some expression of rage. So the things that I want to deal with...

I had a friend named Charles Booth who was a fabulous preacher and he had a sing. He would always say, "I'm going to keep preaching until preaching come back in style." That's what he would say, "I'm just going to keep preaching until preaching come back in style." So the night that Lehman, 2008, remember when everything crashed and the credit was frozen and nobody knew what... The Lehman Brothers crashed. They announced it at 9:00 at night. He called me at 9:30. Central time, 10:30 his time. He's on East coast. He called me and says, "Frank preaching his back in style."

It's too complex with these surface answers here. That this was the prosperity, name it and claim it. Get your miracle, get your breakthrough. Get your blessing. Your haters are your elevators. All of this stuff, this little cute stuff that we're... And then life happens. Trump happens. Preaching is back in style. So I'm going to keep preaching depth until preaching come back in style.

Barbara Holmes: Is it easier, though, for the prophet to prophesy outside of the walls? To prophesy against oppression? Is systemic racism and to empire, is it harder to preach inside against the misogyny, the homophobia in the church? So how do you keep from getting fired?

Frank A. Thomas: When I wrote *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, I wrote it in basically political terms because Trump had just been elected and I had the manuscript finished, but my assumption was Hillary was going to win. When Hillary Clinton didn't win. I went back and redid, not the whole thing, but it had more urgency in it when I finished. And so six months ago I did a workshop on dangerous preaching and I put up a flip chart and said, "Okay, I've learned now after doing this for a while, because initially people would say, I want to preach like that, but how do I survive it? So I wrote *Survive a Dangerous Sermon*." Then I told you, I wrote *God of the Dangerous Sermon* talking about the God behind. Do we serve a tribal God? Do we serve a universal God? So I've been dealing with this a while. So I said, "Take a test sheet of paper, here's a flip chart. What if you address this in your congregation, would you be fired for? Danger is not just the political trying to speak to that, all of that.

And they filled it with hypocrisy in the church. LGBTQIA issues, I mean they filled it. Misogyny, they filled it. They talked about leadership, immature leadership. If they just addressed the leadership. I mean all the things. So it is harder and much harder to, as you say, be prophetic in the house. Because just like you can go in some Black churches and speak to these issues and be treated like y'all know you can be treated like we don't want to hear no more of that. We going to take our money out of here. Or they meet with you. And so a lot of pastors that I get when I'm teaching dangerous sermons are tremendously wounded, tremendously wounded.

Because people don't come to church to be disturbed. They come to church to

feel better. And particularly people that got wealth, they don't want to hear the disturbance. The system is working for them. We think it's the best system in the world. Why would you... They're lazy. That's why they don't have anything. They stop having babies. They stop selling them drugs and doing criminal behavior they might not. After all, this is a place of opportunity. There ain't no discrimination. My parents came here, they were discriminated against, but they, Rosie and all. Now we own buildings and businesses. If our parents did it, why can't Black people do it? Stop whining. Can you tell I think about these issues? I hope that this-

Barbara Holmes: Yes. I'm glad about it.

Frank A. Thomas: There's evidence of some reflection here, right?

Barbara Holmes: We're glad about it. I mean, you started the first Black preaching PhD in the country. I mean there was such a big opening there. No one before had thought that it was worthy of a doctoral program. And what do you want your students to do differently when they come out of your program?

Frank A. Thomas: Well, when we started the program, my experience in church was it couldn't be an academic program alone. It had to be a movement. A movement is different than an academic program or an academic program can have no movement aspects to it. Or a movement can be housed in an academic program. It's very challenging, very, very hard to get this done. So I was laying in bed one night, I said, "God, I need a movement." So traditionally in a PhD program, we're not going to take one or two people and slowly bring them through. We're going to have a cohort and we're going to bring a group of people through. It's got that. Then I heard the genius, the beauty, the power, the depth, the imagination of African American preaching can generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity in the 21st century.

So I got up at our very first cohort, we started in January 2, '17. We had 12 people in the room. I said, "Okay, let's talk about why are we here? What are we doing?" I said, "African American preaching is considered ignorance and buffoonery, emotionalism, but this is sustained Black people for 400 years. It's the beauty, the history, the depth, the power, the imagination, the genius of Black preaching can generate a preaching renaissance to revive American Christianity in the 21st century." And they bought it. They were like light bulbs. I said, "We're part of a tradition here. This has been going on for 400 years." I said, "We're the only group that gets up and is ignorant of their tradition." So we acting like we're saying stuff. When a doctor trains in medicine, they have to anchor in the tradition of medicine, the attorneys in the tradition of medicine. Church, you can get up and start today and think that you start your own reformation. Do your own thing.

The first cohort traveled and we had an open house for the second cohort and we decided to include some of the students in the open house to prospective students. Some we had hybrid, some in-house, and some online prospective students for the second cohort. And two of the PhD students got up and said, "This is what we do. The beauty, the depth, the genius, the power, the imagination, the creativity, the energy of African American preaching to generate, to revive, a preaching renaissance



to revive America.” I broke down. It’s like when you as a pastor, you get up and you articulate the vision. You’re articulating the vision. You have to keep articulating the vision. You have to keep articulating. When I got ready to go, I said, “Well why you can’t take him?” I said, “I can’t take one more meeting. I have to get up and explain the vision. I just can’t take it.”

I say the same thing every leadership retreat, I got to explain the vision. So to sit down and to receive the vision of the program from a student, it broke me down. It just broke me down. You can get them on here, get them and talk to them. And sooner later they’re going to talk about a preaching renaissance, revive American Christianity in the 21st century. When we send them out, this is what we do. We teach, we archive, we write about the genius, the power, the beauty, the depth of the African American preaching tradition to revive American Christianity in the 21st century. So that’s why I’m still working at it.

Donny Bryant:

You and I have spoke about this before. For many of our listeners, they may not have context about the African American preaching tradition and the genius and the brilliance behind it and why that can become a vehicle for revolution and transformation within American Christianity. Can you speak to some of the particularities of the context behind the tradition, the genius of the tradition that actually is universal to American Christianity and how that can be impactful.

Frank A. Thomas:

So I think probably the best way to approach that is through King, people you most familiar. White people woke up to King when he did I have a dream or woke up to Black preacher. When they heard Black preaching and they heard him describe a vision of a future. “Not the color of your skin, but the content of your character. Little Black children. All Jews and gen...” All that’s Black preaching. All that’s Black preaching. So what if I say to you, we’ve had thousands of Martin Luther King Jr.s. Now it happened to be his time for that Martin Luther King Jr. to speak in his moment, given his gifts and his time. But we have a tradition. Frederick Douglas was the greatest orator of the 19th century. We have a bishop Henry McNeil Turner. We have a whole long tradition of this that if people don’t know or don’t connect to Gardner Calvin Taylor, you can pray through your hall, you can call them.

These are the heroes and sheroes of the faith who were able to move nations. When Martin Luther King spoke, the nation rocked. That’s why it was so disappointing to me when I found out that there was a hit, \$250,000 for the person who killed that nigger. 250,000, there were hits on his life because he upset the system. And the whole getting a seat on the bus is one thing, but we going to bring all poor people to Washington. We’re going to shut down this nation until the demands of poor people. Oh no, no, no, no. So Vincent Harding says once he said that he could only be seen through a rifle. So we have this tradition that painted new worlds and lifted people and inspired people with wonder and mystery and hope in the most degrading circumstances and situations.

They got the movie Till out right now, so many of us getting ready to go see Till. And I don’t know if there’s a preacher in there anywhere. I’m hoping to find one somewhere. But what the gruesomeness could help people get a sense of first the



tragedy of evil, but also a vision of a new future of how we could connect with each other and work together so that this wouldn't have to happen again.

So we got what does the preacher, after a lynching, what does the preacher preach? What does the preacher get up and say? Right? If I had time, I would collect the sermons at the funeral. I haven't seen it yet. But at the funeral, what did the preacher preach? Or what are these things that are in our history and our tradition and the most degrading, degrading and miserable contexts, the preacher rose to give the people hope. And so we have 400 years of that. Men and women, great preachers. And so we don't study the garden variety of Black preaching. We study the best of, the genius, in order to teach it, imitate it, find courage, strength, to challenge forces and powers, principalities. Paul says, "We don't wrestle against flesh and blood." And now I think that's our only hope.

I think that's our only... I believe in economics. I do. I believe it. I believe we should have Black empowerment. I believe that we should have Black economics. I believe all of that. And so maybe because the church, we've abdicated our responsibility, the poets rise. And the comedians rise. And the spoken word artists rise. And Jay-Z rises to speak to the masses of Black people. I don't know. I have a student who's doing his dissertation on Black humor in Black preaching and it's going to be very interesting what we discover and what we find.

Barbara Holmes: This has been an amazing conversation. I'm encouraging our listeners to get a hold of Dr. Frank Anthony Thomas' books.

Frank A. Thomas: Oh yes, thank you.

Barbara Holmes: And to take a look on YouTube at the series of interviews of these great preachers that I have been listening to. It's wonderful. What gives you life these days? Do you want to tell us just as we close, what gives you life?

Frank A. Thomas: I will summarize it. I am finishing the last chapter of the memoir. It was sparked by the fact that on January 6th, my dad died. The day of the insurrection my dad died. As a matter of fact, I was watching the insurrection. He had stage four cancer, was virtually in at home hospice. And so as they were storming the Capitol, something said, "Check on your dad." And I turned on my phone. We had a camera in the house, my parents' house. And he was lying with his mouth open and it was the death scowl. And I said, "The insurrection took my dad out of here." He just couldn't take them no more. He just had it, just left.

So anyway, I'm writing or finishing a memoir about the intersections of my dad's death. How I picked up some of his rage. I wasn't sure that my dad loved America. So I kind of traced some because I'm the oldest. So you get the emotional genes right down the line. So my dad played jazz music. James Baldwin's most celebrated essay is called "Sonny's Blues." And about two brothers and one brother was the straight algebra teacher, family man, responsible. And the other brother was a jazz musician who got arrested for heroin selling and heroin use. In the piece, and mama said, "Take care of your brother to him."

And he abandoned the brother. He comes back and then his brother, they have this conversation, he's trying to talk his brother off the stuff. And he begins to describe in such profound ways that it helps him to keep from shaking to pieces. I mean he just defines this. Anyway, he goes down, his brother invites him to hear him play, Sonny is his name. And he goes to hear Sonny play. And he describes the process of the jazz music of Sonny. And he says, "I saw my mother, I saw my father." He talks about, "I saw freedom." And he saw, it's called Sonny's Blues. And so at the end of the set, he sends him a drink up to the piano. The brother lifts a drink and nods back to him, which means I understand. Sonny's Blues, I get it.

And so I'm finishing this piece. My dad chose jazz music. I chose preaching. Preaching is the way that I make sense of the world. And I talk about my dad was a loner. And I said, "I didn't know I was a loner. I didn't know that." And I said, "But in jazz music there's room for the loner because the loner is the solo. But you're not really a loner because there's the other instruments playing. But for that moment you have the highlight and you're spotlighted." And I said, "And the affirmation you get, and maybe for a few moments, the solitariness, the being of the aloneness." My father was abandoned by his mother and he left his father. So he had this solitariness that I think he funneled into jazz.

So I think that the sermon is my solo. If I could say that in those kinds of terms. I get to articulate what I think God is doing and what makes sense. And so I'm closing this. I wrote it this morning. I said, "Dad, I get it. I get it." I said, "I wish I could have heard you play with a different ear, but after all these years, I get it." And then I say, "And I also, now that I got your music, I get my preaching. I get it. I've just chose a different instrument. I make music with my words." So....

Barbara Holmes: That is so powerful.

Donny Bryant: We lift up our glass to you, Dr. Thomas. We get it, we get it. We lift up our glass.

Barbara Holmes: Wow.

Frank A. Thomas: So that's why I'm a teacher of preaching. That's why I'm a professor of preaching because it's my blues. It's my way to make sense of the world. It's my freedom, it's my salvation. It's my hope. It only would make sense that then I would teach it. It only make sense then that I developed a program. I get it now.

Barbara Holmes: We all get it. Thank goodness for this wonderful conversation. You've helped us all to see some new things and to listen with new ears. Thank you, Dr. Thomas.

Donny Bryant: Thank you, Dr. Thomas.

Frank A. Thomas: Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to perform. I mean, thank you for allowing me to solo. You all were the bass and the drum. You allowed me just to have a chance, step out, play my piece, and then slide back in.

Barbara Holmes: Blessings to you.

Frank A. Thomas: Blessings on you.

Donny Bryant: One of the things we want to leave with our listeners from the conversation with Dr. Frank Thomas is this concept of playing ideas. Dr. Thomas discussed a conversation that he had growing up with his father and about listening to jazz music. And John Coltrane was the artist of choice. And Dr. Thomas' father indicated that Coltrane was playing ideas.

And Dr. Thomas struggled with the understanding what that meant and didn't make a lot of sense to him at the time. And he said as time went on when he became an adult, his father heard one of his sermons. And after he heard the sermon, his father approached him and said, "You're playing ideas." And that's when the connection happened. And Dr. Thomas began to really give us insight to how all of us and each and every one of us have our own unique shine in that passion. When passion drives us, has this deep emotion that tries to answer and address the deep human questions that we all have about life.

Barbara Holmes: I agree with everything you said about playing ideas, but I also think that Dr. Thomas is embodying ideas. He didn't talk about that, but as he spoke about the issues of our nation right now, he stands as a contemplative prophet who is speaking out. Who's doing it differing but differing politely. Who is standing in what he believes despite whatever happens, he stands on what he believes. So it's a matter of preaching ideas-

Donny Bryant: In him.

Barbara Holmes: Living ideas. Embodying not only the sacred, but the ideas that make our society better.