



Daughters of Thunder

BLACK WOMEN PREACHERS

SERMONS, 1850-1979

BETTY

THOMAS

DAUGHTERS OF THUNDER

*Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons,
1850–1979*

Bettye Collier-Thomas



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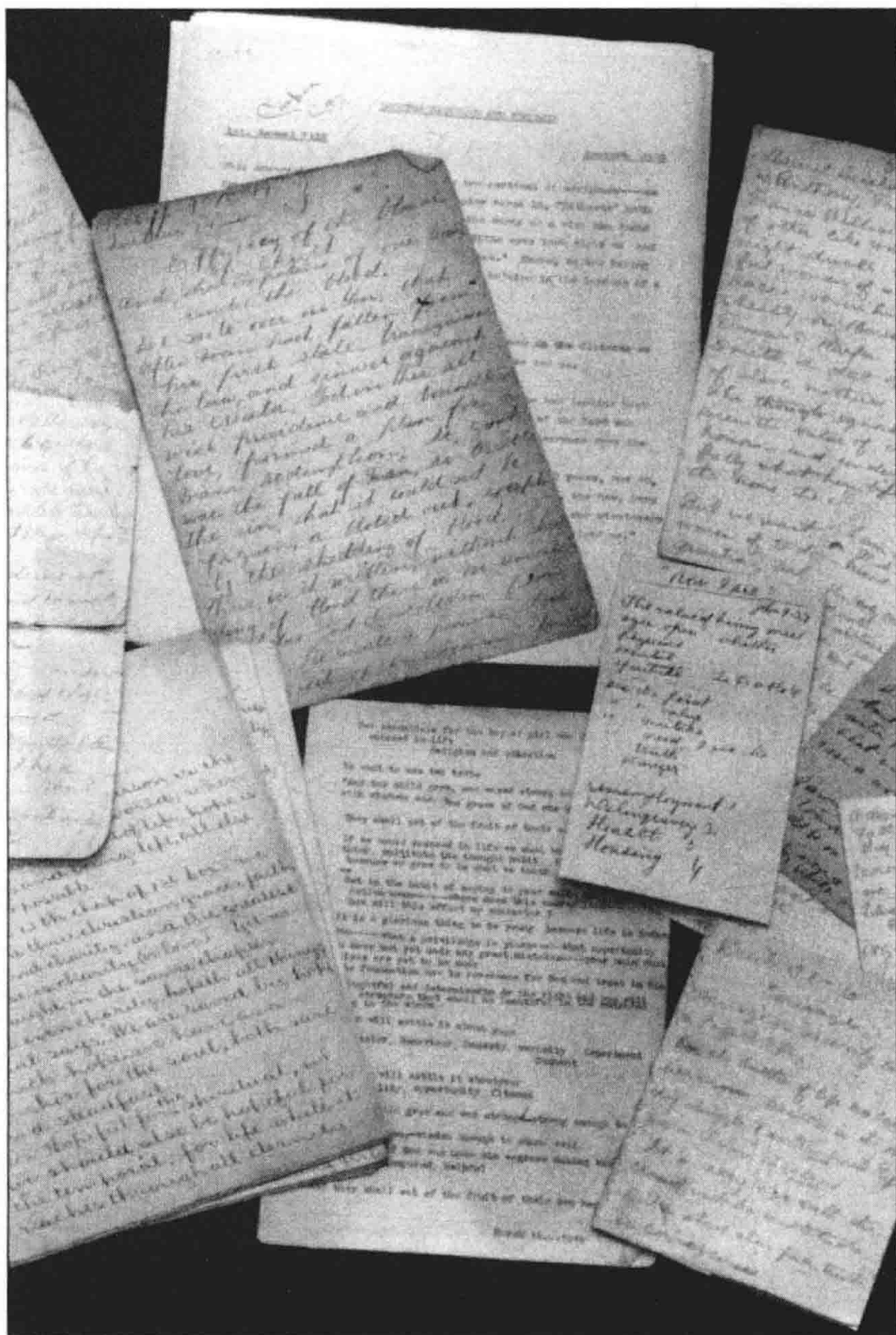
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DAUGHTERS OF THUNDER



Source: Florence Spearling Randolph Collection, Center for
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WOMAN'S RIGHTS

There's neither Jew nor Gentile,
To those Who've paid the price;
'Tis neither Male nor Female,
But one in Jesus Christ.

I am going to tell you friends
Without the slightest doubt,
A day is coming very soon,
When your sins will find you out.

A day is coming very soon,
When sin you cannot hide:
Then you will wish you'd taken,
The Bible for your guide.

You'll wish you had let women alone
When they were trying to teach.
You'll be sorry you tried to hold them down,
When God told them to preach.

Come, dear brothers, let us journey,
Side by side and hand in hand;
Does not the Bible plainly tell you
Woman shall co-ordinate the man?

The hand that rocks the [cradle]
Will rule the world, you know;
So lift the standard high for God,
Wherever you may go.

Some women have the right to sing,
And some the right to teach;
But women, called by Jesus Christ,
Surely have the right to preach.

Some men will call you anti-Christ,
And some would rather die:
Than have the Spirit poured out,
When women prophesy.

To prophesy is to speak for God,
Wherever man is found;
Although lots of hypocrites,
Still try to hold them down.

So be steadfast in the Word of God,
Though fiery darts be hurled;
If Jesus Christ is on your side,
He is more than all the world.

—Lillia M. Sparks, *Latter Day Messenger*, 1934
adapted from a sermon by Ida B. Robinson

*For my mother, grandmothers,
and great-grandmother*

Katherine Bishop Collier

Luzella Veal Collier

Maria Bishop

Minnie Dillard Veal

PREFACE

I DID NOT BEGIN this work by looking for sermons by black women preachers. Rather, I discovered many of the sermons while researching topics as varied as black entertainment, race designation, black biography, and African American women's roles in black Church history. In the case of Florence Spearing Randolph, the sermons were delivered to me in a suitcase by her granddaughter, Anise Johnson Ward. There were several large manila envelopes with hundreds of small loose sheets of paper. It took me three years to match the pieces and assemble what became the sermons. I spread the sheets out on my basement floor and tried to match them by the ink or pencil and size and color of paper. Out of this disorganized mass has emerged the first major sermon collection of an early African American preacher woman. The sermons of Florence Spearing Randolph and Pauli Murray are the only known collections of black women's sermons in a repository: Randolph's sermons are at the Center for African American History and Culture at Temple University, and Murray's are at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

This book results from the research I have done on African American churchwomen for more than twenty years. During the early 1970s, while engaged in doctoral research on the Baltimore black community, 1865 to 1910, I became acutely aware of the absence of black women in published histories about the African American community. I could not understand why their names did not grace the pages of scholarly books and other monographs. Reading secular and nonsecular publications, I discovered that black women wrote extensively. There was no dearth of sources to document their individual and collective histories, explore their intellectual thought, and trace their community work and activism.

I also learned that there was a great deal of discussion during the late nineteenth century about the proper role and place for women in the Church and in society. In 1972, with great excitement, I found the handwritten records of black Methodist preachers' meetings of the Washington Annual Conference between 1872 and 1890. This conference included Methodist Episcopal ministers in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia. I spent four months indexing these records to

determine the ministers' concerns. In addition to discussing Church ritual, sermon development, and community issues, the ministers raised a number of questions about women's proper role in the Church polity and their deportment in church. In 1890, after eighteen years of meetings, the ministers addressed the question, "Is woman inferior to man?" The chairman of the meeting stated, "Sad as it may be, woman is as inferior to man as man is to God." This one statement summed up their beliefs about women's status in the Church and in society.

In 1977, I became the founding director of the Bethune Museum and Archives, the first U.S. institution to focus on documenting and preserving African American women's history. That November, I was invited to speak at the national meeting of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and to lead a black women's collection development workshop for their members. It was thought that the NCNW Sections would be a perfect vehicle for identifying the individual and collective records of black women throughout the country.

One of the people in that workshop was Shirley Herd of Indianapolis. When Shirley returned home, she involved her Section in a statewide project to collect black women's papers. I was impressed with the extent to which she followed the directions I gave in the workshop, right down to asking local banks and businesses to support the project financially. She succeeded in developing an impressive collection and raising quite a bit of money, including \$10,000 from a bank to write and publish a history. Shirley asked me to write the history of black women in Indiana. I said I was too busy developing the Bethune Museum and Archives, but recommended that she contact Darlene Clark Hine, a professor of history at Indiana University at Lafayette. As a result of this project, Hine wrote *When the Truth Is Told* and launched the Black Women in the Midwest Project.

In 1978, I developed plans and wrote a proposal for the first national conference on black women's history. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided funding for "Black Women: A Research Priority—The First National Scholarly Research Conference on Black Women." What a memorable occasion! The Bethune Museum and Archives opened with great fanfare on November 11, 1979, followed by a two-day conference. Held in conjunction with the NCNW's convention, the conference attracted more than two thousand people, including university scholars, organizational leaders, representatives of federal agencies, and laypersons. The program included diverse sessions that reflected the status of the scholarship at the time. At one of the sessions, "Black Women in the Church," Evelyn Brooks Barnett [Higginbotham] delivered a paper on

black Baptist women, and I spoke about black women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

During the 1980s, I aggressively pursued my research agenda on black women and sought research funding. In 1987, I submitted a grant proposal to the Lilly Endowment to research and write the first comprehensive history of black churchwomen. The agency expressed interest, but questioned whether there were enough data to pursue such a project. The Lilly Endowment decided to fund a planning grant to document the nature of the sources. When I completed the planning grant, the Lilly Endowment funded the project in 1990.

In 1992, I learned that there were no published sermons of pioneering black women preachers and that there was only one two-volume publication of contemporary women's sermons. Moreover, I discovered that there were no published histories of black women preachers, few scholarly articles, and no books on this topic. I possessed over four hundred sermons by the Reverend Florence Spearling Randolph, as well as sermons for many of the early preacher women who appear in this work. It was then that I decided to undertake this book.

My purpose in *Daughters of Thunder* is to explore the history of African American preaching women and the issues and struggles they confronted in their efforts to function as ministers and to become ordained. The book also presents for the first time the sermons of pioneering black women preachers.

Who were these women? What were their experiences? What impact did they have on the black Church, and how did they pursue careers as ministers? Are there denominational differences or similarities in terms of how much they have been allowed to function as preaching women? In what ways do the sermons of black preaching women compare with those of white preaching women and black male clergy? Although the papers of most black preaching women remain uncollected, and it is difficult to document their lives consistently, it is possible to reconstruct and identify their careers across denominational lines and to trace their development during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

With the exception of a very few women such as Jarena Lee, Julia Foote, Sojourner Truth, and Amanda Berry Smith, most black preaching women who pursued a ministry between 1800 and 1970 are virtually unknown. Those few who have been rescued from obscurity have survived primarily because they wrote spiritual autobiographies that have been recovered and published. However, there are legions of women who enjoyed great visibility and had long careers in the ministry. Whether they were ordained or whether they functioned as local preachers, evangelists,

missionary preachers, or worked in other capacities, many women had active careers in the ministry. They often traveled extensively and crossed denominational lines as they preached throughout the United States.

The names of any number of these women have appeared in the black press. Some of their sermons were reproduced in the secular and nonsecular press, and a few have survived in private collections. Some wrote letters and articles that appeared in diverse media. Their obituaries, both sketchy and detailed, are frequently recorded in black newspapers. But rarely do women preachers appear in books, either as subjects or as a part of the text, nor do their names grace the buildings of the denominational colleges or other edifices.

In *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya use “daughters of thunder” to refer to African American female preachers. The authors explain that “while the folk idiom ‘son of thunder’ was used to designate the booming voiced, fiery preacher, the origin of the term may also be related to ‘Shango,’ the West African god of thunder and lightning, whose symbol was the axe. Many African American folk customs are related to thunder.” Impressed by the term and what it signifies, I chose it as the title of this book, because I felt that it reflected the power, authority, charisma, and confidence that black women preachers often evoked in their personas and sermons.

This book will be useful for scholars and others interested in religion, preaching, and the history of African American women ministers; teachers and students of Women’s Studies and Black Studies; and those looking for hermeneutical models. For those concerned about the struggle of women to preach and to be ordained over most of the last two centuries, it provides a historical context for understanding the issues that engaged black and white preaching women.

Daughters of Thunder offers a unique and revealing collection of sermons, allowing the reader to sample the intellectual content and social, moral, and theological concerns of black women preachers for almost 150 years. As to the choice of sermons, with the exception of the Reverend Florence Spearing Randolph and the Reverend Pauli Murray, there was no choice to be made, because these are all of the sermons by black women preachers that have been unearthed to date.

Unfortunately, the records of black women, particularly those of many pioneering women, are still uncollected. In the last few years, there have been important publication breakthroughs in African American women’s history, most prominently a biographical dictionary, *Notable Black American Women* (1992, 1996), edited by Jessie Carney Smith, and *Black*

Women in America: A Historical Encyclopedia (1993), edited by Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. However, many prominent preaching women, such as Harriet Baker, Mary Small, Ida Robinson, Rosa Horn, Mary G. Evans, Elder Lucy Smith, and any number of other important women preachers, are not mentioned in these sources. They do include traditional figures such as Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith, and Julia Foote, and more recent twentieth-century notables such as Pauli Murray.

Although the sermons in *Daughters of Thunder* differ widely in hermeneutical style, content, and target audience, when viewed as a whole, they reveal a unifying theme. They seek to present their audience with strategies for understanding and living with the tension between what *is*—human imperfection, injustice, suffering—and what *God calls creation to be*—a creation in which humans live righteous, harmonious lives in their relations with God and with other human beings. While never denying the reality of human suffering, these black preaching women offer powerful messages that all humans *can* overcome the imperfections of the world, and, moreover, that all humans are *called* by God to overcome imperfections, both spiritual and temporal. Thus, these sermons offer their audience hope that one has power, through Christ, to defeat worldly evils by overcoming either personal shortcomings or oppressive political, economic, and social structures.

Cherry Hill, New Jersey
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BETTYE COLLIER-THOMAS

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DAUGHTERS OF THUNDER

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