

The Wright context: Prophetic preaching

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If you were to visit Trinity United Church of Christ, a predominantly African-American congregation on the Chicago's South Side, you would be warmly welcomed. You'd experience spirited singing that comes deep from the soul. You'd feel the palpable pain of the people, many of whom live in neighborhoods where innocent children are caught in the crossfire of warring gangs, where police officers are regularly accused of engaging in racial profiling, and where the rates of incarceration and unemployment are extremely high. And until his recent retirement from the pulpit, you would have heard the powerful preaching of Jeremiah Wright.

Wright's style of preaching has caused problems for Trinity's most famous member, Barack Obama. A clip from one of Wright's sermons shows him saying, right after 9/11, that "America's chickens are coming home to roost," apparently suggesting that the United States brought the attack upon itself. If you listen to this comment in its context, you'll discover that it is part of an aside, and that he attributed the view to a TV commentator who had recently been interviewed on a cable news show. Wright's main concern in the sermon, however, is to consider the question that was pressing at the time: How should Americans respond to the attack? Citing Psalm 137 ("Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"), Wright acknowledged the inclination to seek revenge, but he warned his congregation that "violence begets violence, hatred begets hatred and terrorism begets terrorism." He suggested that this was a time for self-examination, especially for examining one's own relationship with God.

Another sermon sound bite shows Wright repeating a conspiracy theory that has been floating around the black community—that AIDS was a government means of genocide against people of color. The claim is indefensible. But here, too, Wright was primarily engaged in making a larger point: that governments aren't God, that governments lie and therefore can't be trusted—only God can be trusted. (That God sits in judgment of governments—even that of the U.S.—is a prophetic view that can

be heard on the right as well as the left.) Wright cited numerous cases in which the U.S. government has lied to its people and treated them unfairly—including the infamous Tuskegee case in which researchers deliberately withheld treatment for syphilis from black patients so as to study the effects of the disease. With that history, it is not surprising that people of color might give ear to a conspiracy theory about AIDS.

Obama has tried to put some distance between himself and Wright, yet he has not completely divorced himself from him—for good reason. Obama came to faith through Wright's ministry. Wright married the Obamas and baptized their two daughters. More important, Wright has carried out one of the most successful ministries, white or black, of any congregation anywhere in the country. And he has given voice to the pain and poverty of marginalized people living in a land of privilege.

We don't know if the United States is willing to elect a black candidate to its highest office. But it is already clear that many Americans are not interested in understanding the prophetic preaching of a black minister.