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## **January 8, 2012 First Sunday after the Epiphany (Baptism of Jesus)**

*By Joseph Evans*

Genesis 1:1–5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1–7

Mark 1:4–11

### **Introduction**

I cannot recount how many times I have read *The Souls of Black Folk*.<sup>1</sup> I was introduced to W. E. B. Du Bois's classic by my grandmother, along with Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*.<sup>2</sup> She instructed my reading to prevent what Carter G. Woodson called "the mis-education of the Negro."<sup>3</sup> Currently, people are rediscovering an appreciation for social and political significances found in Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*. I read *Souls* as a book of fourteen civic sermons.<sup>4</sup> In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois masterfully demonstrates his double consciousness, namely, interpreting the majority culture's Eurocentric traditions and values without abandoning the minority culture's interpretive critique of those traditions and values, and adding some of their indigenous experiences that have been shaped by oppression.

Evans Crawford, for many years dean of the chapel at Howard University, makes use of this double consciousness as part of a process that he refers to as biformation in *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching*. Biformation is "a shaping of identity, perspective and expression that flows from being both African and American."<sup>5</sup> In this important book, Crawford turns to the well-known preacher Howard Thurman to illustrate the biformation process, suggesting that Thurman would have evolved toward his biformation theory:

The biformative process and its consequent creative marginality would have been an inevitable part of Howard Thurman's spiritual development as a black man in America. That is why I prefer to call the process of preparation for preaching that I observed in Thurman and that I am exploring . . . "spiritual biformation." That term keeps before us the particular legacy of being black in America and its impact upon the homiletical musicality of African American preaching traditions.<sup>6</sup>

Echoing Du Bois, Crawford points out that the African American preacher has a "felt twoness" that is partly African and partly American. One lens for both Du Bois and Crawford is the majority cultural lens, a lens that affirms Western traditions and values. The other lens is the African American lens, a marginalized cultural lens that critiques Western traditions and values from the margins. The preacher who responds with "dogged persistence" to these two "warring tendencies" comes to a consciousness that "makes for 'creative marginality.'"<sup>7</sup>



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In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois mainly focuses on the second lens. His objective is to orient his primary readers toward oppression as a means to understand the African American experience. Du Bois creates a new space for his readers to hear a new voice. Du Bois wants to abolish racial inequality and social barriers. He seeks to do so by exposing the inequities of racial and social castes, particularly by highlighting the experience of oppression (epitomized by the sorrow songs).

In doing so, Du Bois makes use of the motif of tricksters, found in both African and African American lore.<sup>8</sup> These tricksters act to create a space in which listeners or readers can come to fresh understanding of text or a tradition. Du Bois employs this approach by beginning each essay with a well-known literary passage and then a bar of music from a spiritual. Thus Du Bois begins his first essay, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” by quoting from the poet Arthur Symons.

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,  
All night long crying with a mournful cry,  
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand  
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,  
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?  
All night long the water is crying to me.  
Unresting water, there shall never be rest  
Till the last mood droop and the last tide fail,  
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;  
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,  
All of life crying without avail,  
As the water all night long is crying to me.<sup>9</sup>

The musical bar that follows is from the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” These ideas set out a leading motif of *The Souls of Black Folk*: suffering and struggle as the contexts in which to understand the experience of the African American community. The baptism of Jesus is an epiphany, not only in revealing Jesus, but in modeling what should happen to all who are baptized: we should all have an epiphany of God’s purposes. My purpose now is to use motifs inspired by *The Souls of Black Folk* in the mode of bifurcation to help preachers recognize how biblical themes for today in support of the baptism of Jesus call for the inclusive social world for which Du Bois longed.

### **Mark 1:4–11**

F. F. Bruce writes, “Of all the religious movements in Palestine on the eve of Christianity none is more directly relevant to Christianity itself than the ministry of John the Baptist.”<sup>16</sup> John the Baptist played a significant role in helping form the sociopolitical movement called Christianity. Verse 4 describes a place, person, and proclamation. John the Baptist was in the desert preaching forgiveness of sins. In verses 5–6, Mark says that John’s proclamation had power; and people came from Jerusalem, Judea, and the vicinity of the Jordan River



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to hear his message. John wore a garment of camel hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

John was an eschatological prophet; that is, he announced that God was about to end the present evil age, marked by injustice, exploitation, violence, and death, and would complete the manifestation of the realm of God as a world of justice, mutual respect, sharing, and eternal life.<sup>10</sup> John saw Jesus as the one who would bring this age. John's mission was to prepare people for the coming world by inviting them to repent and to be baptized. However, while John prepared the way, Jesus would be the one to begin the transformation (vv. 7–8). Furthermore, John baptized Jesus. The opening of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit like a dove upon Jesus are symbols confirming that Jesus was the one who would bring the realm. Double confirmation comes from the voice out of the heavens: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (v. 11). Du Bois introduces us to John, first an unprepared boy, and then a man prepared to join the social movement toward the realm. We meet John in Du Bois's essay "Of the Coming of John." Du Bois describes a change of consciousness that took place: He had left his queer thought-world and come back to a world of motion and of men. He looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh.<sup>18</sup>

In effect, Du Bois describes an epiphany that took place over time. The preacher who develops a sermon along the lines of John's preaching can hope for a similar transformation in the congregation today. Many Eurocentric people are hardly aware of racism and its destructive effects on the entire community. Such people can acknowledge their complicity in racism, can repent, and can join the movement to a more just society. The preacher might help people of color develop more nuanced understandings of the oppression in which they live and point them toward liberative action. In both cases, the preacher hopes to bring about an epiphany, a growing awareness of God's purposes.

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989). This edition includes an insightful introduction by Henry Louis Gates Jr.
2. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, ed. William L. Andrews (London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996).
3. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933; repr., New York: Africa World Press, 1990).
4. See Jonathon S. Kahn, *Divine Discontent: Religious Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Also see Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Kahn and Blum substantiate my claims that Du Bois writes *Souls* with religious language.
5. Evans Crawford with Thomas H. Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response African American Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 19.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 9. When discussing African American preaching, LaRue contends, "At first glance,



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the very breadth, diversity and complexity of this tradition would seem to hamper the search for identity, common methods and dynamics. On closer inspection, however, one can detect an integrative force, a common thread running throughout this style of proclamation that clearly provides its spirit and *raison d'être*, namely, a distinctive biblical hermeneutic."

8. On the trickster motif, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), xx–xxi.

9. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1. 16. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 152.

17. *Ibid.*, 154.