

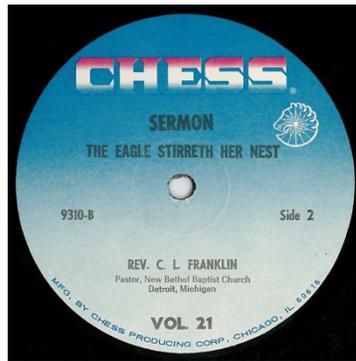
“The Eagle Stirrith Her Nest” – Reverend C. L. Franklin (1953)

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Essay by Nick Salvatore (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



C.L. Franklin

“The Eagle Stirrith Her Nest” is arguably the most demanding sermon in the African American Baptist tradition. To deliver it required a maturity of thought and faith, coupled with a superior musical delivery, so much so that most preachers who did attempt it waited until they were well advanced in their ministry. C. L. Franklin first delivered the sermon at age 26.

The earliest written commentary on the sermon came from Sir Charles Lyell, a British traveler to America. On January 10, 1846, Lyell attended the First African Church in Savannah, Georgia, and wrote his impressions of Reverend Andrew Marshall’s sermon before some 600 parishioners. Lyell described the preacher as “a Negro of pure African blood...with a fine sonorous voice” who delivered the sermon “without notes, in good style.” Of the sermon’s structure, Lyell was more precise. The preacher spoke of human frailty and the need for divine grace, and compared the relationship between God and humanity “to an eagle teaching her newly fledged offspring to fly”: she takes her offspring up high, drops it and, if it flails about, swoops down to save it. In a similar fashion, Lyell explained, the preacher exclaimed that God watches over frail humanity and issues rewards and punishments that deal impartially with “the poor and the rich, the black man and the white.”

A century later, the sermon had evolved into one of the most complex ritual expressions in the black Baptist tradition. In 1942, C. L. Franklin, then pastor of New Salem Baptist Church in Memphis but three years removed from the Mississippi Delta, first preached it. Ernest Donelson, a church member at the time and himself a gospel singer, recalled that when his pastor announced he would preach the sermon again, the crowd for that 11:00 A.M. service grew far larger. This young preacher already touched congregants with a power matched only by a relative few of the more tested, experienced preachers.

There was no recording made of any of those New Salem sermons, nor of the sermons Franklin delivered at Friendship Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York, where he relocated in 1944, nor in the first years of his ministry at Detroit's New Bethel Baptist after 1946. But in 1953, Joe Von Battle, a Detroit record store owner and record producer, recorded Franklin live, at New Bethel, delivering "The Eagle Stirrith Her Nest."

Franklin began with his signature gospel selection, "Father, I Stretch My Hand To Thee," rhythmically chanting, with the choir and congregation, the message of humanity's dependence upon God: "Where shall I go," he beseeched, "if you withdraw from me?" But God would not leave his people bereft, and with that Franklin moved to the sermon proper. His text was from the Book of Deuteronomy of the Hebrew Bible, Chapter 32: 11-12, which describes God's providence over Jacob: "As an eagle stirrith up her nest...spredeth broad her wings" to protect her young, "so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him."

In narrative voice, Franklin then explores the history of the text, emphasizing that when the Jews entered their Babylonian captivity they did not forsake their God for false idols. Rather, they blamed their fate on themselves, on their sins. At this early moment and still in narrative voice, Franklin reached out to the congregation for more engagement: "I don't believe you're going to pray with me tonight." He continued: The eagle personified God, and the nest, history; "Yahweh has done that in history for Israel," as he will for all of His people. The eagle is a regal bird, he explained, as God is the King, the ultimate judge. This is just for "Kings and rulers need to be accountable to somebody." The eagle's handling of her young provides another lesson. When the time arrives, the eagle takes her young upon her back out of the nest and then dives sharply down, leaving them learning to fly, only to swoop down to protect them if needed. "God does us like that sometimes" when we are in too "comfortable a nest of circumstances." Throughout this section, Franklin increases the rhythmic pace of his words, and called out to the congregation repeatedly for a more intense response.

By this point, he began to "whoop," to deliver his message with an intensified rhythmic power, transforming the sermon from its narrative beginning into a sacred performance of the Word with roots deep in the African American slave experience. While the preacher had a major role in the timing and development of the sermon, the essence of the whooped sermon was the joining of the preacher to the congregation into a single voice of praise of, and petition to, their God.

"Is God still stirring the nest," he chanted with ever greater intensity. Yes, he proclaimed, even "when we came as slaves to this country." That was a long, hard time for us, but "400 years is just a little while with God." His great-grandparents were slaves, he reminded the congregation of their shared experience, and look where "their great-grandson is today." In suffering, he chanted, is redemption, for "to be ourselves we have to suffer." But as his great-grandparents' suffering benefitted his generation, so will today's suffering aid generations to come. Suffering is not passive acceptance, but God's spur to learn to fly. At this point Franklin was in full whoop, walking the platform away

from the mic, raising his pitch and his cadence, drawing from the congregation a response that sealed the sacredness of the moment: Pastor and congregation, in pace with each other, affirm that their God is indeed “stirring the nest” for them and their people at this moment.

The organist offers a few bars, and Franklin reaffirms the central message: that in every storm of life, God is stirring up history, as the cries, whoops, and exclamations of the congregation slowly subside. A faith is affirmed and, through that process, a congregation recommits itself to transforming the world as found.

Nick Salvatore teaches history at Cornell University. He is the author of “Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist” (1982), “We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber” (1996); and “Singing In A Strange Land: C. L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America” (2005).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.