When Black and womanist theologians call for the creation of communities in which people are free to witness the liberative power of the gospel of Christ in which there are not rigid distinctions between theory and practice, transcendence and immanence, the sacred and the secular, the call resonates with many Black Christians who know what these theologians mean. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a better example of the combination of profound trust in the breaking-in of new promises concerning what we may become as a people with concrete application to life in the social and political realm, than in the life of many Black churches in America. Perhaps this combination of future hope and concrete application to social and political realities has something to do with their roots in African thinking, which includes an unwillingness to adopt rigid time distinctions between past, present, and future that are found in conventional Western thinking.1 The past and the future are drawn into the present in a way that makes it impossible to keep the dream of freedom from having a practical impact on the present. When Black people sang, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” they were expressing a profound religious experience; they were referring to an escape northward to freedom. “When the black slaves sang, ‘I looked over Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home,’ they were looking over the Ohio River.”2

This unwillingness to put asunder what God has joined together—hope for a new future and the willingness to work to make it happen in the community—which characterizes the Black spiritual ethos—is what has uniquely equipped the Black church in its long march toward freedom and equality of Black people in this country. The only institution that could give birth to and sustain the Civil Rights Movement was the Black church. Before Black people went out on the streets to
be beaten by cops and torn by dogs, they entered the door of the Black church to pray. It was not an accident that during the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi thirteen Black churches were burned. The Black church had become not only the symbol of hope, but the agent of liberation for Black people. It was the awareness of the presence of the despised and rejected One in its midst that allowed the Black church to become the inspirational source, the organizational drive, and the sustaining power for a movement that might have often faltered and failed without the conviction that God was committed to the struggle to fashion a liberative community, and to enable the people to experience liberation in history. The solidarity of Christ with the community provided the shape of human hope for new ways of being and acting in community. Black people refused to give up on hope in spite of the oppressive context in which they had to eke out an existence. When Paul in Colossians 1:27 says that Christ is our hope, he makes a connection between hope and liberation for oppressed people. When oppressed people make the connection between hope and liberation, they struggle to free themselves from bondage because “the Lord their God is in the midst of them” (Deut. 7:21). The genius of Black people is that even in the shackles of oppression and slavery, they imagined a new community in which dignity and freedom were the fruits of struggle because “the Lord was in the midst of them.” Then, hope must become historical liberation, and this is certainly why in the New Testament, hope is grounded in the incarnation of God, and why, as we seek to understand the hope for fruitful and meaningful community in the Black church, we turn to a review of the concrete history that shaped the Black experience.

Black History as Source for Liberation

Black people understood that although God was not limited to history, God was present in history as friend, mother, and hope for a new future. The God who became their liberator was one who suffered with them at the hands of an unjust oppressor. Enslaved persons were able to carve out an identity based on their relationship with God who joined them in their struggle and bestowed on them dignity and self-respect. The Black community was clear that God shared in their suffering. In a sense, this made their suffering bearable because the divine participated at the deepest level of their suffering. Black people’s identification and participation in suffering was reciprocal. Because Christ identified with them they, in turn, identified with the cross of