

Sermon Notes: February 15, 2026 [Lectionary Readings](#)

Focus: Moses and Jazz

We have a jazz Mass at 10am this Sunday, so I want to look at Moses as a jazz cipher. Not literally but inspirationally. This exodus moment helped shape an imagination where freedom, transformation, and improvisation belong together. You know, “let me people go.” That imagination is part of what eventually gives rise to jazz.

Jazz was formed in the crucible of pain. African musical traditions were carried to North America in the holds of slave ships. Music became a way to communicate, to adapt and to stay human under unhuman conditions. Enslaved people turned to the Bible as a source of meaning and hope. While slaveholders used Bible verses to demand obedience, enslaved communities listened for a different story. Repeatedly, they heard Exodus.

The Moses Archetype Moses became more than a character in Scripture; he became a way of naming what liberation looks like. Millenia later, Harriet Tubman was called “Moses” because she was leading people out of captivity toward a promised land.

The Hush Harbors of Song Because open worship was often restricted or watched, enslaved people in the US gathered in secret places known as hush harbors. There, African rhythms, call-and-response, improvisation and biblical imagery wove together. Songs evolved in response to the community and the Spirit. This was faith finding its voice in real time and lies at the heart of what will later be called jazz. (One of my all-time favorite movie scenes was the dance in Sinners, the movie.)

The Rev. Angela Ford Nelson reminded me that hush harbors could become the site of Black churches. In the South Carolina Methodist Advocate, she writes:

On March 27, 1871, just eight years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation wherein African-American slaves were given their freedom, the Rev. Samuel Watson and eight of his members purchased two acres of land in Sumter County to be used for building a church that they would later call Good Hope Methodist Church.

*Although March 1871 is the date the church was officially established on the property, its congregation is thought to have worshipped there for many years before in a secluded space called a hush harbor. *

Spirituals: The Bridge Toward Jazz Long before the first jazz notes were played in places like New Orleans, enslaved people expressed faith through spirituals. These songs did not always speak openly about abolition, but they

carried its hope. *Where* they gathered and *what* they sang was important. “Go down, Moses,” was not only about ancient Egypt, but it was also a way of saying that God still hears the cry of the enslaved and oppressed in America.

The Birth of Jazz and the "Sacred" Secular Jazz emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a largely secular cousin to the music of the Black Church. It did not reject the sacred so much as carry it into new spaces. Early jazz musicians often moved between church music and dance halls.

Louis Armstrong’s *Black and Blue* stands as one of the earliest statements in jazz. He questions the moral logic of a society that can celebrate Black talent while denying Black dignity. Later, Duke Ellington would hold sacred concerts, insisting that jazz and the Black Church were not competitors but collaborators, two languages speaking to the same human longing.

Bible Jazz God tells Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here.” At first glance, he gets time away from a complaining people and a dusty wilderness. But in the Black tradition of faith, the mountain was never a hiding place. It was a place to gain vision. Black communities imagined and re-imagined dignity rather than domination in their own moments of calm.

Exodus 24 Moses gained the perspective necessary to lead on the mountain. He receives not just commandments, but an alternative way of life. He heard an opposite vision to Egypt’s economy of exploitation. Harriet Tubman later trusted the North Star as a kind of celestial mountaintop, guiding people through the valleys of the American South during the Underground Railroad.

The cloud in Exodus is a type of Hush Harbor A cloud covers the mountain for six days before God calls to Moses on the seventh. There is an echo of this in the ‘hush harbors’ those hidden places where enslaved people gathered to pray beyond the gaze of the plantation’s pharaohs. For the oppressed, the ability to commune with God outside the surveillance of the oppressor is itself a revolutionary act.

My sermon is not ultimately about jazz. What I am really after is the way Exodus story holds together inspiration and liberation. When Moses comes down the mountain, he must translate the glory of the mountaintop into the long, patient work of healing people in the valleys.

My hope is that St. Timothy’s might be a hush harbor, a place to rest, to listen and to commune with God. May we have strength to love others in whatever desert, valley or dusty place we find ourselves. May you find your own hush harbor with God to be strengthened before the forty-day journey of Lent begins. **Todd**