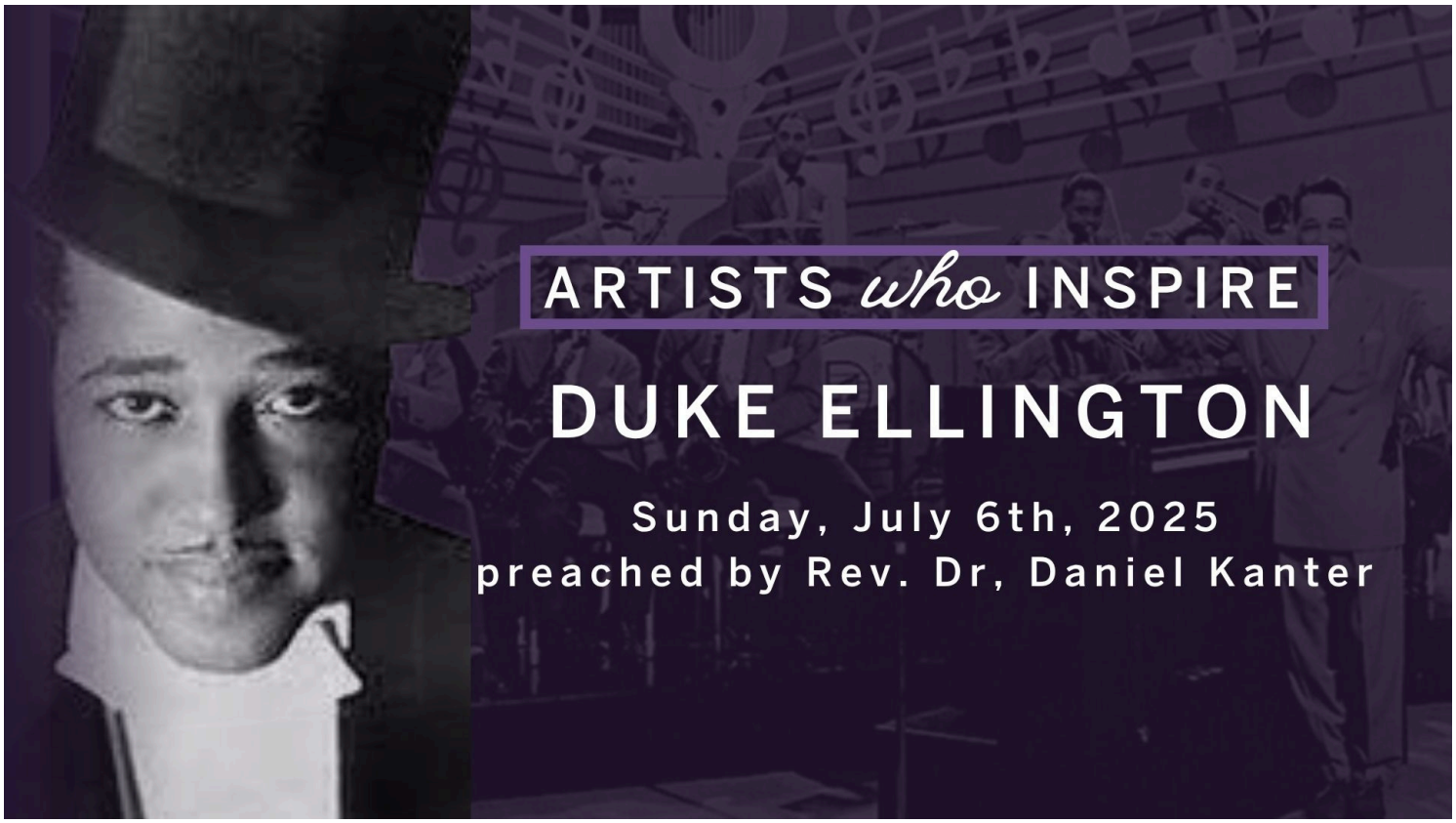

Well, it feels like a luxury to be having so much fun today in the face of so much tragedy, right? Texans are thinking about the Guadalupe River, the flooding south of us, which has claimed so many innocents. It feels like we should be in prayer all day here in the church for those families whose children are gone. So much tragedy. Not to mention the tragedies in our country coming out of Washington, where in many ways the actions of our government are aimed to prop up the rich on the backs of the poor without shame in the name of some form of Christianity I cannot understand. So much tragedy and wars and rumors of wars, and it feels a luxury to be safe and sound, and here in this place enjoying such beautiful music and talking about jazz.

But jazz also knows about tragedy. Up from slavery, through the blues, comes this unique American expressive art that weeps for the tragedies and smiles when it can. A poet once said that, "Artists introduce us to the beauty of holiness and usher us into the awesome worlds in which we begin to live anew in all its fullness and pain and joy." And so here we are, artists who inspire, and I wanted to feature a jazz musician today. There are so many. I know many of them and their stories because I spent three hours a week for eight years as a jazz DJ at the University of Vermont Radio Station, broadcasting to Northern Vermont and parts of New York State and Quebec, and I studied and I listened, and I read their stories, and I interviewed every jazz musician who came to town. I interviewed people like Max Roach and Charlie Haden and Amina Myers, and Lester Bowie and the Fort Worth legend, Julius Hemphill and many others. If those names mean nothing to you, it's okay. They were the kings of all the jazz music of the past.

As a young man, I understood what Wynton Marsalis says of jazz, when he says, "Jazz music is the power of now. There is no script, and the emotion is given to you by musicians as they make split

second decisions to fulfill what they feel the moment requires." In my 20s, this resonated so much I was on a first name basis with jazz musicians in New York City, but I never met Duke Ellington. He died when I was too young. 1974, Duke Ellington was dead after a life of music. Ellington also knew tragedy. He was born just a few days after this church was organized in 1899. He was 10 years old when Allen Brooks was lynched downtown in our city. Whether he knew that story or not, he knew of stories like that. He knew discrimination for most of his life. He knew tragedy. But Ellington took his experience as a Black man in America and turned it into the beauty of holiness in its fullness of pain and joy, and showed so many he would not bend or break under the tragedy that America as a country was in his lifetime.

We had just heard some of his music played in spirit, soul of Kent and Matthew here, the music which has soared throughout the world from the late '20s until his death in the '70s and still soars in combos of bands everywhere. Anytime someone whistles Take the 'A' Train, Duke and Billy Strayhorn are tapping out their iconic songs in our heads. So, it's true that in this summer series we usually pick artists whose lives were full of struggle and transformed by some redemptive act, but Duke was different. He was just elegant, elegant from the start, and he evolved and grew as a symbol not only of musical prowess, but of Black integrity for all to see. And today is a good day to celebrate Duke Ellington as we have our friends here from Remembering Black Dallas. Dallas, a city that was steeped in a rich blues and jazz history. A city that is also steeped in terrible racial historical events, and this church has been through so much of that.

Our church, while not a hero in the city's story, has been there standing, what I think, on the right side of racial justice from the day that our church member, George Clifton Edwards, held the hand of Allen Brooks. Edwards was the only lawyer who would represent Brooks in the trial on March 3rd, 1910, when he was dragged from Edwards' side and thrown out a window and lynched in our city streets. Our church was early to integration in 1949, housed student non-violent coordinating committee meetings in the '60s, had ministers in Selma marching down the road with Martin Luther King Jr. We have done everything we can and we are continuing to make that a priority in our work for racial equity, especially right now in our strategic planning work as we work with local historian Jerry Hawkins on what is next for First Dallas and racial equity.

Today, we look at the inspiration of Duke Ellington, who found audiences who loved him madly in this flawed and dangerous city because Deep Ellum was a vibrant hub of Black culture and music, a national center for the blues and the jazz, welcomed musicians like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Lead Belly and Duke Ellington. Many of musicians did their training here in Deep Ellum before they went off to Kansas City and New York and Chicago, and Duke Ellington himself played, of all places, at the Dallas Public Library in 1965. This is a picture of him receiving flowers after that concert. Was anybody there? I don't know. I wish I would've been there. I didn't even exist.

Ellington led a life that resonated with Dallas and with the very soul of America, a life that, though not a traditional tale of fall and redemption, was a testament to continual growth, to unwavering dedication, to a profound late-life embrace of the spiritual. His story has threads of transformation and overcoming and the spirit of continuing striving for higher ground. His artistic evolution starts in

the gritty world of the Cotton Club, playing for rich white audiences who framed his music as "jungle music". But Duke Ellington was not to be confined by labels or expectations, slurs, or slights. He was a seeker. He was an innovator. He was constantly pushing the boundaries of his sound, his collaborations, his experimentations, and reaching for something deeper. He wrote pieces that bent and swayed, had people dancing and contemplating the meaning of life at the same time. He wrote movements like Black, Brown & Beige, a musical tapestry woven with the history of Black America. And then in the twilight of his career, he wrote Sacred Concerts which were blends of soulful improv and jazz and timeless truths and faith.

This life that Duke Ellington lived, friends, is a form of redemption, transcending the commercial, reaching for the profound, using his genius to elevate and illuminate. Duke was a champion of racial justice. He deliberately used his appearance to combat negative stereotypes of Black people. He presented himself as a sophisticated and elegant artist, shattering the racist caricatures prevalent in his life, and he showcased immense talent for creative Black artists to challenge racist notions of Black inferiority and demanded equal recognition and respect for Black composers and musicians. In a time when equality and equity were a distant dream for many in our country, he used his platform, his influence to advocate for what was right, and he demanded things like equal access for African-American youth who were barred at the door of the venues where he played, and he held benefit concerts where everyone was welcome no matter what they had in their pockets, and he lent his voice to the civil rights movement.

His unfinished project, Black, Brown & Beige, was not just about musical history, but it was a declaration, a testament to the resilience and dignity of a people. This dedication that he had to righting societal wrongs, to improving the lives of others is a redemptive act in some sense in the purest form. And he persisted through difficult economic times when his band struggled. He paid his musicians out of his own savings, keeping the music alive, and his resilience, his determination, his facing of adversity is a personal redemptive narrative playing out on the grand stage of life for all to see.

Perhaps most poignantly, Duke Ellington was a person of faith. Toward the end of his life, he embarked on what he considered his most important work, the Sacred Concerts. They were not just musical performances, they were expressions of his deepest convictions, profound integration of spirituality and art. We just heard before the prayer Come Sunday, a piece that is embedded in his sweet Black, Brown & Beige, considered a spiritual heartbeat of the Black movement. Later, he added lyrics, transforming it into a vocal testament to God's providence, to finding solace through faith, to the profound significance of Sunday in African American life, a day of rest and reflection, renewal and community, a break from the challenges of the week. "Come Sunday," it says, "with God's blessing, we can make it through eternity."

Ellington's belief in a higher power drove him through Come Sunday, expressed through harmonies, unusual and evocative extended chords, and a blend of instruments from the solo to the big band. Come Sunday has resonated for so many years. It's a powerful blend of jazz and spirituality and African-American history, and it's in our hymnal, by the way. We have sung it here in the sanctuary,

sometimes badly, but its words are real and grounding. It goes, "Heaven is a goodness time, a brighter light on high. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you and have a brighter by and by." The hymn he wrote says, "I believe God is now, was then and always will be. "With God's blessings, it says, "we can make it through eternity."

Whenever I hear Abbey Lincoln sing those words, I start driving my car to the nearest church to get down on my knees and pray. You see, Duke was unique in expressing these spiritual values, not something jazz musicians are known to do. He didn't care what you thought about it. He had a theology and he tried to live it out in his life and in his music, A friend of his, the Reverend Gerald Pocock, a Canadian Roman Catholic priest, once visited Duke toward the end of his life in the hospital. The story goes that the good Reverend asked Duke, he said, "Duke, is God a three-letter word for love?" And Duke, in his inimitable way, incorporated into his third Sacred Concert rephrasing the question as "is love a four-letter word for God?"

Ellington spoke often of seeing God, not with his eyes, but with a deeper sense, a belief, a feeling, an intuition. He understood that some are afraid to admit that they have these kinds of experiences. I know that some of you are afraid to admit that you've had some of these experiences because I've taught a class all about this. But he said, "Don't be naive. Don't be brainwashed, but be true to yourself." In his wisdom, he recognized a truth that transcends trends and societal acceptance. He called himself God's messenger saying that God lived beyond categories, that he, Duke Ellington, knew he was, as he put it, in God's structure. This is process theology. This is liberal theology spoken by a Black jazz musician living through a world that was doing everything it could to deny him his freedom.

A reminder that all the artists that we have up here are not legends. There are so many stories of Duke's humanity also. One I love is when Ellington's band member, Joe Nanton was asked if Duke was a genius. Nanton said, "I don't know about genius but, Jesus, he can eat." He was famous for so many things. He was also famous for being superstitious. No one could wear anything yellow in his band. He never had 13 members. He carried Saint Christopher medallions in his pocket wrapped in dollar bills, and if someone dropped a button on stage, they stopped the concert. No one's buttons could be lost in a concert. He was a man, but he was a legend. When he died in 1974, 10,000 people filled the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Thousands more listened on the radio. Icons like Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald and Pearl Bailey came.

The New York Times said, "There weren't just the famous there. Plain people, Black and white, arrived by bus and subway and trudged up Morningside Heights from Harlem. As the service concluded and the bishop commended Duke's soul to God in the front pew," the New York Times obituary reported, "Count Basie, Duke's longtime friendly rival of 40 years, had his face covered in handkerchief, weeping like so many that day." A tribute to a man who never preached in a pulpit, but lived the life that, in a sense, was a sermon itself, a sermon of artistic integrity, of social justice, of enduring resilience, and a deep abiding faith.

Duke Ellington knew tragedy. He knew America would fail, also, over and over again, but he himself believed that he should be a continuous act of creation, a constant striving toward a higher purpose, a living devotion to his music and to his God, to free his listeners to be joyful in the face of tragedy, to be joyful in the face of the things we are dealing with. He was an artist who inspires integrity, being true to who you know you should be, and making room for those who need you, to show beauty. The beauty of holiness in the fullness of joy and in the fullness of pain. May Duke Ellington's legacy continue to inspire us to push boundaries, to seek justice, and to find our own unique way to express the sacred in our lives. May it be so and amen.