

# Howard Thurman: Moral Anchor to the Civil Rights Movement

Class 1: Up From Slavery:  
Introducing Howard Thurman in Historical Context

October 4, 2023  
Fatimah Fanusie, Ph.D



# Course Goals and Outline

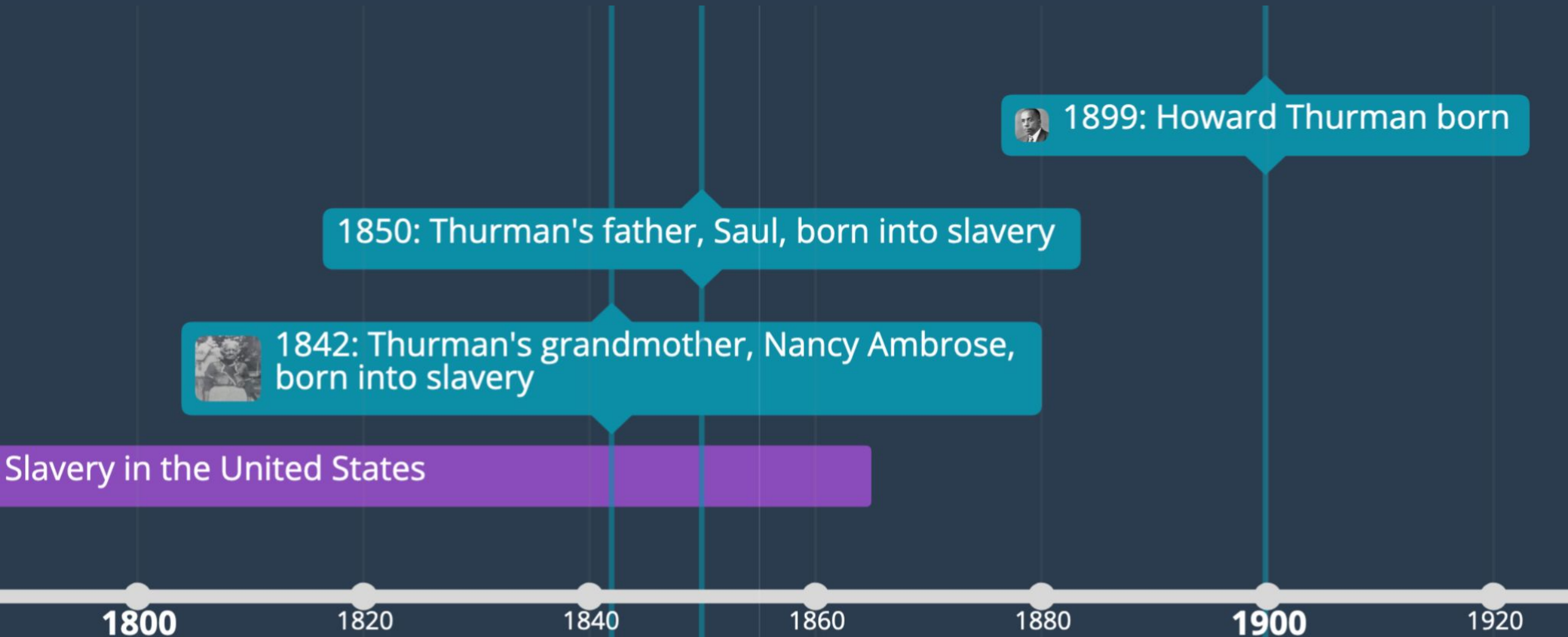
## GOALS:

- Introduce Howard Thurman and place him in historical context
- Illustrate his influence on the American Civil Rights Movement
- Highlight his impact on American Christianity

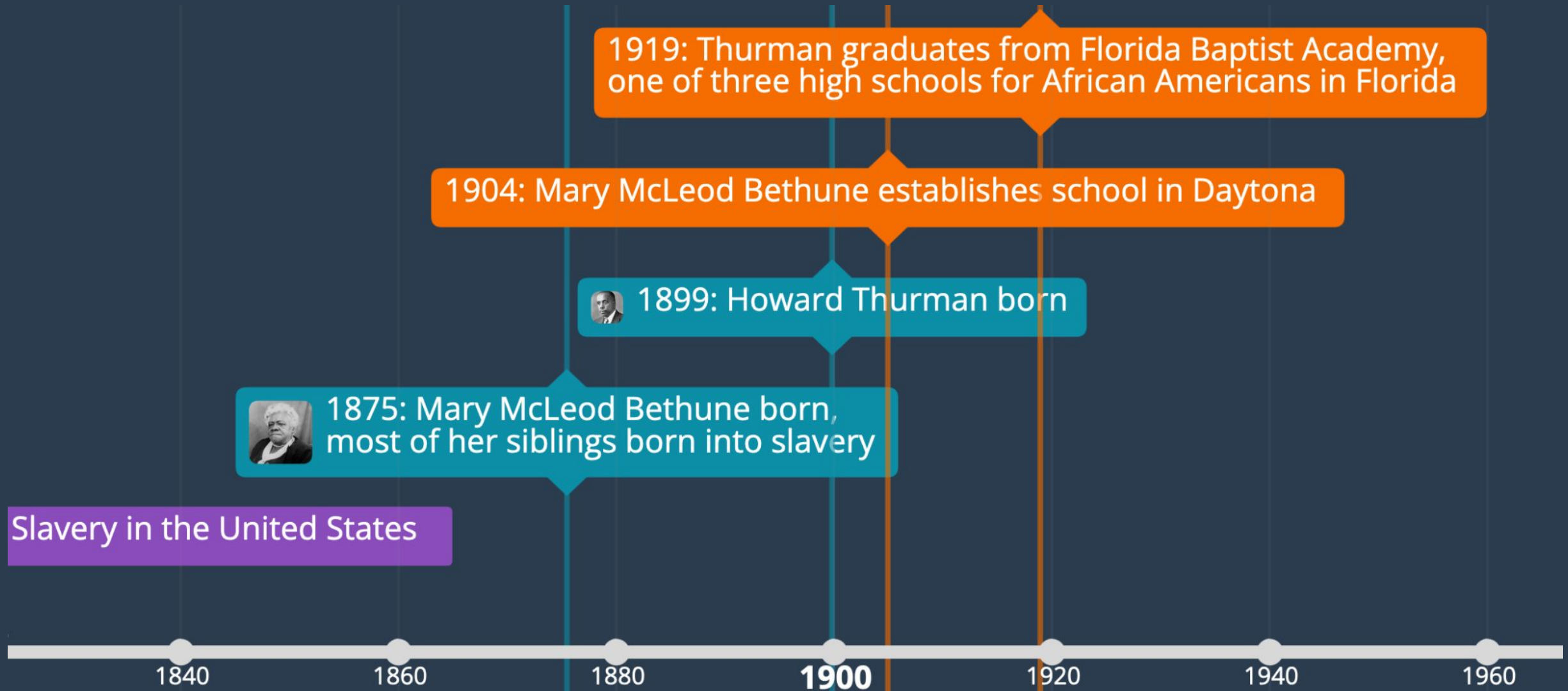
## OUTLINE:

1. **Up From Slavery: Introducing Howard Thurman in Historical Context**
2. Mentoring the Movement
3. Searching for Common Ground and the Beloved Community

# Historical Context: Up From Slavery



# Historical Context: The Landscape of African American Education in Daytona



# Climate in Daytona: Relative Prosperity and Upward Mobility



# Climate in Daytona: Relative Prosperity and Upward Mobility

*“The very presence of the school, and the inner strength and authority of Mrs. Bethune, gave boys like me a view of possibilities to be realized in some distant future”*



Mary McLeod Bethune and the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Girls (est. 1904) - image above (1905)



# The Early Years: Growing Up in Daytona

- Family relocation to **Daytona** (1900)
  - ◆ shaped by Freedmen and women
  - ◆ majority of adult > 35 born into slavery
- Early Influences:
  - ◆ Thornton L. Smith: a cousin and Negro Leagues baseball player, independent businessman, community leader
  - ◆ John T. Stocking: African American physician who treated African and European American patients including Thurman's family
  - ◆ Julia Green: Kindergarten teacher
  - ◆ R.H. Howard: principal



(above) Thurman's childhood home in Daytona Beach, FL



(right) Madison County, FL: Thurman visited the neighborhood of former cotton plantation that his grandmother had been enslaved on

In the chat, please answer the question:

What did 18 year-old Howard Thurman value?

## “My People Need Me” 18 June 1918

“Listen while I tell to you my soul.... I want to be a minister of the Gospel. I feel the needs of my people, I see their distressing condition, and have offered myself upon the altar as a living sacrifice, in order that I may help the ‘skinned and flung down’ as you interpret. God wants me and His precious love urges me to take up the cross and follow Him. I want advice from you as to how to direct my efforts. I am scheduled to finish here next year. As you know, the war is on and young men are being snatched daily. I am patriotic; I am willing to fight for democracy, but my friend Rev. Johnson, my people need me. I want a thorough training for my work which would necessitate my taking a college course prior to Theology, would it not? If I do by the time that I am in Junior College, providing the age limit remains as it is I shall will be drafted. Hence my training cut off. What would you advise me to do? Please take a personal interest in me and guide me and God will reward you, for you are God's trustee. Believe me when I say that you made a deeper impression upon my life than any man at the Conference either last year or this year. I am hoping that you will not misunderstand me. I come to you {for guidance}, I have no real guide but Jesus but in some things I believed that He intended for his "Watchmen" (your expression) to point out the way.”



# Finding God in Nature





# Nancy Ambrose

- Lived first 2 decades of her life as a slave, owned her house (Thurman's childhood home)
- A respected member of Daytona's African American community was the "anchor" of the Thurman household/family
- Distaste for Pauline epistles [Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22 etc.]





# Early Encounters with the Church

Mount Bethel Baptist Church (Waycross):



*“I listened with wonderment, then anger, and finally mounting rage, as Sam Comarte preached my father into hell.”*

*“One thing is for sure, when I grow up and become a man, I will never have anything to do with the church.”*

# The YMCA and Kings Mountain



## YMCA Young Men's Christian Association

- An incubator for African American leadership
- Leadership and Networking (local, national, and global networks developed)



## Kings Mountain Student Conference

- Purpose: "to promote a positive, aggressive and efficiently constructive religious leadership among the students in schools and colleges for the education of colored youth"
- Students from Morehouse, Tuskegee Institute, Talladega College, and Hampton Institute



# The Morehouse Years

- Student Leader
- YMCA Morehouse chapter president
- FOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation)





# "Our Challenge" 2 January 1922

"Physical slavery is no more. No more too the frantic wail, the awe-inspiring groan of black men as they crouch and cower beneath their master's lash. ...We have been told that our progress is unparalleled in history; we have been told that our loyalty is unsurpassed from Bunker Hill to Carazel; we have also been told that we are a peculiar people ordained of God to bring salvation to the world. All of this, too often. The effect has been decidedly unwholesome. Instead of inspiring us to higher heights, to greater effort, these things have tended to make us fold our arms in complacency and satisfaction."

"We have carried to the extreme the philosophy of the eternal Now. We have transliterated, rather than interpreted the teachings of Jesus relative to the eternal present."



What is the challenge that Thurman is issuing to his peers in this address given his junior year of college?

## "Our Challenge" 2 January 1922

"...In our struggle for existence in the American civilization, our salvation depends upon our independency, our organization, our keen sense of responsibility for the future and our jam-up efficiency, along all lines temporal and spiritual. Then, as teachers and prophets of a new era, let us go forth wherever black men live and suffer and eject into the masses this same emotion. Through a series of slow and painful processes, we, the victims, will soar higher, higher and higher, above the sordid ruins of our hindrances and set our own selves free. No one can do this for us! We have been freed, now let us be free."

# Spiritual Evolution: Meditation, Awareness, Mysticism + Social Change

- Rochester Theological Seminary
- Oberlin, Ohio, Pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church
- Early career Joint Teaching position at Morehouse & Spelman Colleges
- Tutelage under Rufus B. Jones at Haverford College
- Grief and Trauma: the Death of Katie Thurman

# Rochester Theological Seminary



- New Environment
- Radical Changes in Thinking
- Magnetic Field
- Deep exposure-Modern Liberalism
  - Biblical Criticism
  - Social Gospel





*“At RTS I learned how to think creatively about religion without having the wings of my thought clipped by dogma and theology. It was there I made the discovery, which to me was primary and first, that all dogma, all theologies are inventions of the mind. They are what the mind does in its effort to reduce religious experience to something that can be apprehended-comprehended.”*



“Until I went to Rochester, I had accepted the fact that I was a Christian, a practicing Christian. I believed sincerely in the necessity for loving my fellow man. It was a serious commitment; however, it had not ever occurred to me that my magnetic field of ethical awareness applied to other than my own people.”



# Katie Laura Kelly and the Thurmans in Oberlin





# The Oberlin Years



*“When I close my eyes and listen  
with my spirit I am in my  
Buddhist temple experiencing  
the renewing of my own spirit.”*

## Early Career: The Morehouse and Spelman Years

Thurman accepts a position teaching jointly at Spelman and Morehouse College

Thurman delivers 5 part series “The Message of the Spirituals” at Spelman. This is a theme he would continue to revisit throughout his career evolving religious world view of the enslaved

# A religious spokesperson for the folks with their backs against the wall: “The Message of the Spirituals”

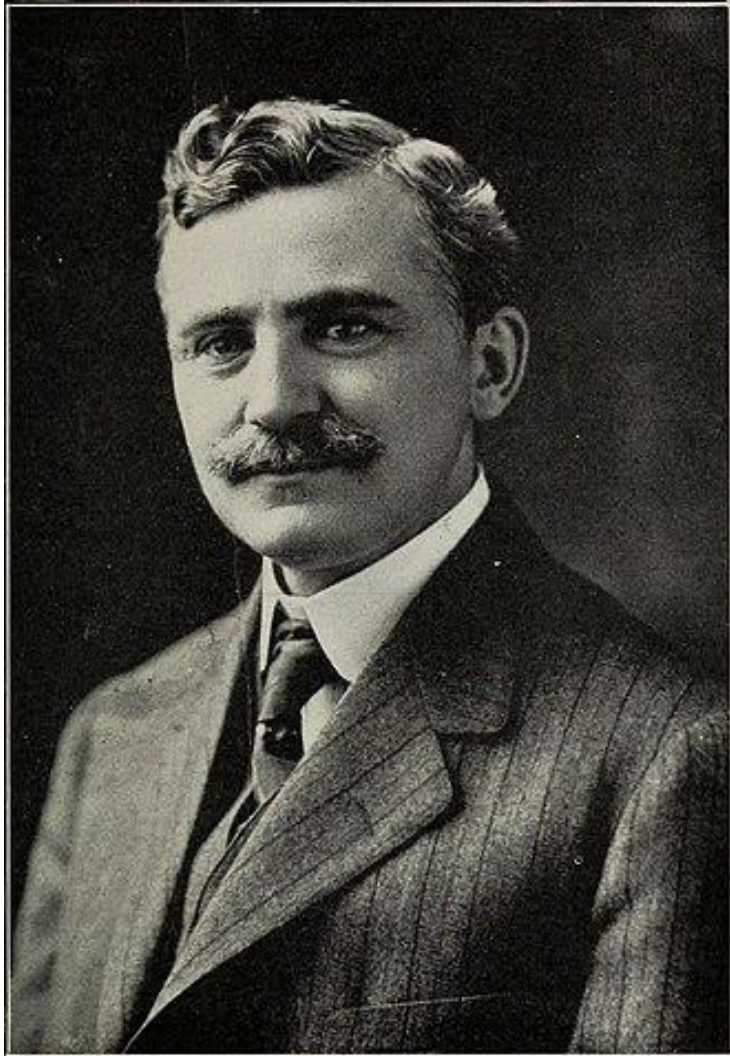
*“This (De Blin’ Man) “spiritual” has to do with one of the most common problems of human life, a problem which always baffles, a problem for which men find it very difficult to discover a solution which is satisfying. It has to do with the problem of human suffering.”*



Thurman on the verse, “everybody talking ‘bout Heab’n ain’t goin’ dere” from the slave spiritual, Heab’n, Heab’n!, wrote:

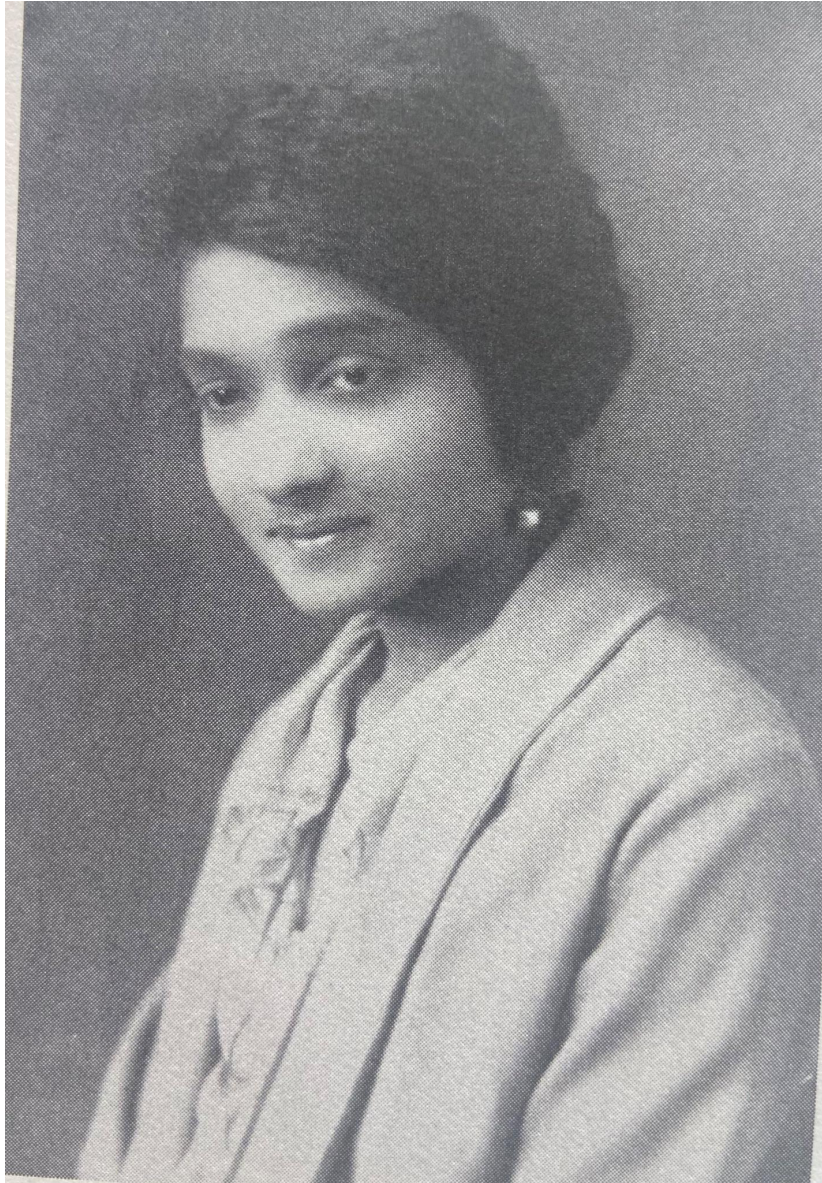
*“This suggests two things to me. The first is that to these simple people the great gulf between the confession of faith and the quality of life of the master was most apparent. With remarkable insight he saw that the test of the religion of Jesus, in the last analysis, is to be made in the intimate, primary, face to face relationships of people who live together day in and day out. It was true then and it is true now. IF the religion of Jesus cannot purify human relations, if it cannot teach men reverence for life and personality, then one of two attitudes is forced upon us: Men have misunderstood it's genius and upon embracing it discover that it is impotent, or they have deluded themselves into believing that they have embraced it when they have not.”*

# Finding the Trail of Life: Rufus B. Jones



“I am convinced, too, by my own life and wide observation of children that mystic experience is much more common than is usually supposed...[Children] have more room for surprise and wonder. They are more sensitive to intimations, flashes, openings. The invisible impinges on their souls and they *feel* its reality as something quite wonderful.”





**Grief and Trauma:  
The Loss of Katie  
Thurman  
December 1930**

# Reflection for this week: What makes you come alive?

*"You must wait and listen for the sound of the genuine that is within you. When you hear it, that will be your voice and the Voice of G-d."*-

**Next Week: October 11, 2023**

**CLASS 2: Mentoring the Movement**

