

James Baldwin: America's Prophet

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UU Society of Sacramento

Rev Lucy Bunch

Part 1 The Lie

Reading

This quote from James Baldwin appears in his book "Nobody Knows My Name".

It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, or 6, or 7, to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to discover that Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, when you were rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians were you. It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection, the demoralization, and the gap between one person and another only on the basis of the color of their skin, begins there and accelerates – accelerates throughout a whole lifetime – to the present when you realize you're thirty and are having a terrible time managing to trust your countrymen.

Sermon part 1

It's a challenge to consider what to preach before the day that is both the birthday celebration of a great civil rights leader and the inauguration of a racist President. So I chose James Baldwin. He is just the bracing tonic we need in these times.

Baldwin is often considered in the same category as other civil rights leaders but he was actually quite different. Martin Luther King was a brilliant tactician and motivator, he worked within the system to organize people to bring about change. Baldwin was a provocateur, working from outside the system (actually outside the country for most of his adult life), he used his writer's voice and observer's eye to speak truth to power. He likened himself to the prophet Jeremiah, who felt burdened by his vision and troubled by his role of calling out in justice- but felt compelled to do so, almost unbearably so.

Baldwin was born to a poor family in Harlem – the eldest of 9 children. Fortunately for us, teachers both black and white, noticed his brilliance and introduced him to ideas, music, theatre and literature that opened his eyes fed his intellect. His step father died just as he was

graduating from high school and Baldwin went to work at menial jobs to help support his family. But he always knew he wanted to be a writer.

He tells a story about a pivotal moment in his life – he and a friend went to see a movie in New Jersey and afterwards went to have a bite to eat. They were refused service at three separate diners because of the color of their skin – at the last rejection Baldwin lost it and threw a glass at a waitress – missing her but shattering a window. Baldwin escaped – but the experience opened his eye to the depth of his rage at the oppression he faced– he knew that if he didn't get away he would likely become addicted to drugs, in prison, or dead.

Soon afterwards he received a writing fellowship and used some of the money to move to France. There he could be free from the oppression he experienced as a black man, as a gay man. He stayed away for nine years.

Being outside of the country allowed him to see America more clearly, with deeper perspective. He explored some of these ideas in fiction that he wrote, but especially in his essays.

Baldwin said that at the heart of America was **the lie**- the lie that America tells itself: that we are all about freedom, that our country has made mistakes but we strive to be fundamentally good, that we live into our founding ideas that all men are created equal. But the truth gleaned from lived evidence - historic evidence – found in our myths, systems and structures, is that in the United States of America, white lives have always mattered more.

The lie is the mechanism that allows, and has always allowed, America to avoid facing the truth about its unjust treatment of people of color. The lie deforms the soul of the country because it allows us to shield ourselves from the truth.

Baldwin names that the lie is embedded in our founding DNA. He said “the people who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't...anything else but a man; but since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he was not a man. For if he wasn't, then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble.”

Baldwin believed that the only way to save our country was to confront this lie and heal.

Part 2 : Ignorance

Reading

From Notes of a Native Son 1955

“I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

From his book titled "The Fire Next Time 1963

“To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”

From his 1972 book, "No Name in the Street".

“Ignorance allied with power is the most ferocious enemy of justice.”

Sermon Part 2

I grew up in the mid-20th century in an all-white neighborhood in Hayward California.

There were a few people of color in my elementary school – but they lived in a different neighborhood, past the school. My best friend was a Japanese girl - we were inseparable at school, – but I never visited her house and she never came to mine. I remember knowing that I should not ask why. I do not recall ever learning the Japanese internment camps as a child, nor was I taught about the civil rights movement that was happening, or the native American genocide. In fact I was taught that the indigenous people were the aggressors, and that all race issues ended with the emancipation of the slaves.

Baldwin came back to the US in 1957 as the civil rights movement was heating up and continued to bear witness. He said that he came back after seeing a picture of the face of a young woman who was walking through a white hate gauntlet as the first black to attend a newly desegregated high school. She walked alone, and that disturbed him profoundly.

He continued to speak and write about race, including his bestselling book The Fire Next Time. He worked closely with Martin Luther King raising money for the movement and was friends

with many in the civil rights movement. But he was always something of an outsider because of their discomfort with his gayness.

So he charted his own path. In 1965 he debated the conservative pundit William Buckley at Cambridge university which has since come to be seen as one of the most historic and influential intellectual debates on race relations in America. Baldwin won the debate handily.

But in the late sixties after the assassinations of many of the civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Malcolm X and Medgar Evers, Baldwin fell into despair. As his biographer Edie Glaude said “ Baldwin was in despair that the country finds itself on the precipice of significant change, only to turn its back on it all and double down on its historic ugliness”

In many of his essays and speeches Baldwin named the vicious cycle of promise and betrayal in America – starting with the white power response to the reconstruction in the late 19th century, when Jim Crow laws outdid many of the advances achieved after the civil war. This was followed by truncation of the civil rights movement along with the suppression of the black power movement. The civil rights act was a significant achievement but it was quickly followed by federal anti-crime legislation act which militarized the police and reinforced in a racist justice system, ensuring that men of color would be imprisoned at much higher rates than white men. These cycles of promise and betrayal were a reset to our roots - a racist nation that claimed to be democratic.

I had not appreciated this arc of history until I read Baldwin-I only had the vaguest outline without the connecting dots. I was ignorant of experience of the “soul crushing setbacks” to use Baldwin's words. I am not alone. And that is the essence of the problem. It is part of white privilege and power to be ignorant of this history, these stories, this lie of who we are as a nation. I remember a speech by Britney Paquet racial justice activist addressing the typical white response after racist violence – white people would say - “that is not who we are as a county” That’s exactly who we are, was Packnett’s response, and history proves it.

Many white liberals thought that all had been resolved with the election of Barack Obama. We had reached reconciliation. The president of the United States, most powerful man in the world was black – doesn’t that fix everything? Lets all breathe a sigh of relief.

So here we are now in the next cycle of promise and backlash. Baldwin did live to see the election of Obama, nor the uprising and suppression of the Black Lives matters movement. I wish he was here to help us make sense of things.

But maybe we know more now to see for ourselves. White liberals were shocked at the election of Donald Trump in 2016. We were shocked by the great reset of white power – that white supremacists – those who want white to be in charge of everything- were not just a few neo nazis and skin heads, they were our neighbors they were our family. I heard it said that some

of the people who voted for trump were good people - Yes indeed - good people who responded to racist dog whistles, good people who cling to a vision of our country where white men are in charge and set all the rules to benefit themselves. Once again we reset back to the roots of the lie. And those who claim that they didn't know that Trump was racist are perpetuating the lie through their ignorance.

Part 3: Begin Again

Readings

From Just Above My Head" published after his death in 1978

"Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again."

From a 1978 interview

I live a hope despite my knowing better":

From his book titled "The Fire Next Time 1963

"in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is, after all, emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general, and American Negro history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible."

Sermon part 3

And so begin again. Here we are in 2024 on the eve of the second inauguration of Donald Trump. Make no mistake about it - we are not same people we were 8 years ago when he was first elected.

We have recovered more quickly this time from the shock - and now we are going about getting our wits about us and beginning again.

The veil of ignorance has been lifted from all those who have a moral compass. We no longer buy into the lie that we tell ourselves that we are a good country that has made mistakes. That ended when 400 years of racist hate and suppression pressed down on the neck of George Floyd in liberal Minneapolis. And no one stopped it.

Baldwin moved back to France in 1968 and remained there until he died of cancer in 1987. However his voice is more powerful now than ever. There has been a resurgence of interest in his work as we attempt to navigate the challenges of a world in crises.

One of his biographers, Eddie Glaude Jr says that Baldwin always believed that we could be better than we are. That he also understood that the battle to choose life was fought every day, and imagination was one of his most potent weapons.

Glaude asks us: How do we muster the courage to keep fighting in the face of abject moral failure?

I know that we are weary, discouraged, angry, fearful. We must do what is necessary to restore and sustain ourselves. We can learn from people of color who have had to have sustaining practices for hundreds of years.

But we are not powerless. This is still a democracy. We have energy and resources and a strong voice – together. We have our UU values to ground and inspire us, and we have each other and all those who seek a more loving and just world. With all that, nothing is impossible.

For those of us who are white, we have work to do. We must have the will and the courage to face the lie and see our country for what it is. We can't pass it off on a radical white supremacist fringe – it is us. We must understand our own role in perpetuating the lie. And with that we can begin again.

Benediction

I want to give Baldwin the last word from his last speech 11 months before he died.

We are living in a world in which everybody and everything is interdependent. It is not white, this world. It is not black either. The future of this world depends on everyone in this room.

Thank you James Baldwin, for being our prophet. May we be blessed by your words, and by all the gifts that you gave us.