

Remembering James Baldwin

Jamaica Plain, February 20, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

This year for Black History Month we remember the great African American writer and leader James Baldwin. This sermon is informed by James Campbell's excellent biography of Baldwin, *Talking at the Gates*. Baldwin was born in New York City in 1924; his mother had recently moved up north from Maryland and never told her son his father's name. "I never had a childhood," Baldwin told an interviewer, meaning he never had a true father. He also said that he "was born in the church." His stepfather David Baldwin was a Pentecostal preacher; his family lived in dire poverty, with little to eat. Baldwin's father also told him that he was "ugly" and had "frog eyes."

Though New York City at that time was a magnet for Southern Blacks, promising greater freedom and opportunity, Baldwin's childhood memories of Harlem are ones of oppression. His first memory of home was on impoverished Park Avenue, "not THE Park Avenue," he explained to an interviewer, "but, maybe the American Park Avenue." Police would make derogatory comments when he went downtown to use the New York Public Library. When he was ten years old, two white police officers searched and questioned him about a crime, leaving him on his back in a vacant lot.

A literary star at his honors high school, at the age of 14 he became a Pentecostal preacher, by all accounts a great one. As Baldwin said and often acted out in his life, "the sons slay the fathers." He loved the music of the church, using phrases from spirituals for the titles of several of his books, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, *The Fire Next Time*, and *Over My Head*. Even after he had left the institutional church, he retained its concept of healing love as central to his life.

As a teenager he began a life-long friendship with the Black painter Beauford Delaney, an extraordinarily kind, generous, and gentle artist. At the same time, Richard Wright published his novel *Native Son*, and Baldwin saw a role for himself as a novelist.

However, his father David Baldwin went insane and had to be institutionalized. Instead of going to college, James as the eldest child had to work at menial jobs to help support his family; his mother cleaned homes.

Baldwin started having essays published by literary magazines like *Commentary* and the *Partisan Review*; they paid little, but it brought him to people's attention. Richard Wright generously arranged for a \$500 grant for the young writer. Angered at the continual indignity of being told "No Blacks eat here" at restaurants and the difficulty in renting an apartment, in 1948 Baldwin took the money from another grant and arrived in Paris with \$40 in his pocket. He felt that the freer atmosphere in Paris "saved his life," though he lived in terrible poverty for almost another decade. In Paris he didn't have to suffer the same kind of racism as in New York, though strangers would assume that, as a Black man, he was a jazz musician.

Baldwin started introducing himself to new people by saying right off, "I am a homosexual." Increasingly, most of his relationships were with men, though he continued to have intimate relationships with women throughout his life. When in the 1980's he was pressed by an interviewer if he was "gay," Baldwin said that he preferred to define himself as "androgynous." In Paris he met his great love Lucien Happersberger, a young Swiss man. For the rest of Baldwin's life, Lucien would remain a key friend. Both men had other lovers. When a female lover became pregnant, Lucien asked Baldwin's advice. "And he, being the good Protestant that he was, told me, 'Marry her.'" Through shifting relationships, Baldwin retained a firm belief in love, believing there should be love and self-knowledge in every sexual act.

At this time Baldwin had a falling out with father figure Richard Wright. He published a well-received first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, with its lead character a young Black man growing up in a Pentecostal church. A second book, a collection of essays entitled *Notes of a Native Son*, was published by the Unitarian Beacon Press. His second novel attempted to self-define Baldwin as an "American," not a "Black" writer. All of the characters of *Giovanni's Room* are white, and central to the book is the love between two

men, a love at that time illegal on both sides of the Atlantic. Giovanni's Room is a fable on the disastrous consequences of not being true to love.

By the time of the landmark "Brown versus Board of Education" Supreme Court ruling in 1954, Baldwin was beginning to sour on Paris. His encounters with Africans in the city made him conscious of how American he was. The French oppression of the Algerians in revolt also disillusioned him. Baldwin returned to America to be part of the struggle for integration. He saw issues of race bound tightly with issues of sex, "we were integrated in the womb," he would say. Or as Baldwin was told, down South "there was always integration after sun down."

Baldwin traveled the South writing articles for high circulation magazines like the New Yorker.. He was also funded by groups like the Ford Foundation. He helped his family members and shared his new prosperity with them; it irritated Baldwin that his mother kept cleaning homes to "keep busy." His next book of essays, *The Fire Next Time*, delivered a powerful message of justice, love, and reconciliation, and made Baldwin a celebrity.

Attorney General Robert Kennedy asked to meet with Baldwin, who brought along other Black and white leaders. The sharp questioning that Kennedy received from this group (they compared him to the Sheriff of Nottingham) caused Kennedy to request an F.B.I. investigation of Baldwin. This investigation was pursued vigorously by J. Edgar Hoover, and Baldwin's file eventually ran to 1,750 pages. Baldwin's surveillance and harassment by the Bureau was intense, and informers would be planted on his staff. Once when his friend Lucien was coming through American customs, he was detained, and finally released with a warning that mentioned Baldwin by name. Though Baldwin always introduced himself with, "I am a homosexual," the F.B.I. struggled in their documents with the question, "Is Baldwin gay?"

In the terrible year 1963, Baldwin's friend Medger Evers, the head of the NAACP in Mississippi, was assassinated in front of his family. Later, Baldwin expected to be one of

those asked to address the March on Washington; he was a spellbinding speaker. However, Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Council's inner circle was afraid that Baldwin's sexual orientation would offend. Two weeks after the march, Baldwin was profoundly disturbed by the Birmingham church bombing which killed four little Black girls during Sunday School and badly wounded many other children. Later that day in Birmingham, two Black youth were also killed by a mob. Speaking on a television program called "The Missing Face of Christ," (the bomb in the Birmingham church had neatly blown out the face of Jesus in a stained glass window), Baldwin began to question whether non-violence was indeed the way.

Baldwin served as a witness for the voter registration efforts in Selma, spending the day in the hot sun while 350 people waited to register, and only 20 were allowed into the building during the entire day. Baldwin consciously chose to change his writing from literary English to what he called "blues singing," a more Black influenced idiom. Some felt his "fire" had been replaced by "fury," that he was "typing," not "writing," and his reputation as a writer suffered. Certainly his many Movement activities took him away from his writing. Baldwin also began to write fewer essays and give more interviews.

Baldwin would escape sometimes to Istanbul, so that he could get some writing done in peace. In America he was too much of a celebrity; sometimes even Blacks would approach Baldwin and deride him as "Martin Luther Queen." In 1964, he still had to use Lucien as a front to buy a home on West End Avenue in Manhattan. The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed to almost push him over the edge. He spoke of the potential of "mass exterminations" of Black people. The deaths of "Medger, Malcolm, and Martin" became a mantra for him - he feared, and not without some justification, that he might be next. Once while speaking at a Florida college, a threatening message was broadcast over his microphone.

It was "hard to write between assassinations," he said. He supported many worthy causes, led the fight for a friend unjustly imprisoned in New York City's Tombs, and directed the play *Fortune and Men's Eyes* in Istanbul. In the 1980's he taught at U. Mass. Amherst,

trying to make his students feel responsibility, not guilt. He died of cancer in the arms of his family on November 30, 1987 at the age of 64. He wrote, "People fear love more than they fear death."

During last year's debate on equal marriage for gays and Lesbians, Black politicians like Byron Rushing, Marie LaFleur, and Diane Wilkerson supported equal rights, while Black clergy generally led the opposition. "Androgynous" James Baldwin was a product of the Black Church and loved its songs. Inspired by the Black church, he wrote and preached a message of justice, reconciliation and love, trying to bridge the gaping divisions of America.

We gather during Black History Month, and we gather during Lent, a time of penance. Today we heard from Genesis how Abraham, at the age of 75, was called by God to a new land of promise and blessing. I hope and pray that our country is not too old to begin anew, to leave behind our racism, and that we will yet listen to James Baldwin's message of justice and love.

May we not fear love.