

The Sermon as Essay: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher

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Abstract: *From the ages of fourteen to seventeen, James Baldwin was an African American Pentecostal preacher, and this church period of his life significantly impacted the entire corpus of his writing. One of Baldwin's most celebrated essays, "Down at the Cross," was labeled by one scholar as "the essay that comes closest to representing his ideas in total, not in a schematic way, but in the form of a mature and exemplary worldview." It is, in fact, a sermon. I propose that "Down at the Cross" is an African American sermon essay in the contemplative tradition and worthy of serious study in order to expand and encompass the often unheralded tradition of the African American contemplative sermon that invites hearers into their own conversation with God.*

I deeply appreciate David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda D. Barnes for convening such an outstanding group of colleagues and scholars to explore Black contemplative preaching and its bridge-building capabilities. The different perspectives were refreshing, unique, and inspiring. I experienced generous hospitality, collegiality, and deep, profound spirituality. The contribution herein was made significantly better by my gathering in conversation with Shively Smith, Anna Carter Florence, Edgar "Trey" Clark III, and Donyelle McCray. Together, we committed to the exploration and chronicling of contemplative preaching.

The Sermon as Essay

There is a consensus among several scholars that two of Baldwin's published essays are, in fact, sermons. The first is "Down at the Cross," published in *The New Yorker* (1962) as "Letter from a Region in My Mind" and in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) as "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind"; the second is "White Racism and World Community," delivered during the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches, Uppsala, Sweden, July 7, 1968.¹ In making this argument, the natural question is, what is meant by the term "sermon" given that Baldwin functioned in no religious capacity in any given church congregation on a Sunday morning past his teenage years? Gore Vidal appeared on C-Span for an interview on the art of writing and was asked by an audience member about his relationship with Baldwin. Vidal said Baldwin was "a wonderful orator and a great sermonizer," and though most of his novels seemed "a bit 'show biz,'" his "sermons hold up well."² According to Professor Clarence E. Handy III, Vidal regarded Baldwin's essays as sermons because they are "spiked with the language of passionate and explicit moral commitment."³

When I define these two essays as sermons, following Handy, I mean Baldwin "challenges a nation still captive to white supremacy with a moral rhetoric percolating with

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. was to have preached the opening sermon, but because King was assassinated in April of that year, Baldwin was invited in King's place.

² C-Span Interview with Gore Vidal, October 1, 2000, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?159496-1/depth-gore-vidal> (time stamp 25:26).

³ Clarence E. Handy, III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 110.

language (including rhythm and themes) of black holiness culture.”⁴ Baldwin’s sermons include the apocalyptic language of the storefront preacher, recurrent images, poetry, and metaphors consistent with and taken from the King James Bible, and a Black evangelical rhetoric that includes critical components of moral vengeance and judgment. Within the framework of Black Holiness culture, Handy suggests that Baldwin was determined to save as many souls as possible.

As further evidence from Baldwin himself, in an essay written in the 1980s, Baldwin laments America’s tendency for self-congratulation. He says: “If I was still in the pulpit, some people (and they may be right) claim I never left, I would counsel my countrymen to the self-confrontation of prayer, the cleansing breaking of the heart which precedes atonement.”⁵ Handy suggests these words are the clear sentiment of self-confession and evidence of Baldwin’s “long standing role as a preacher and moralist.”⁶

Finally, evidence can be found in the work of Frederick Buechner’s *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. Buechner surprises much of the traditional church-based preaching community when he suggests that the most powerful preaching does not necessarily come out of preachers:

There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of poets, playwrights, and novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God in the world and about the storm of his absence, both without and within, which because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm.⁷

For Buechner, a true sacramental theology speaks of a doctrine of the “Real Presence” and also needs to speak of the “Real Absence” of God. He remarks, “Absence can be sacramental too, a door left open, a chamber of the heart kept ready and waiting.”⁸ Buechner’s concern is that most preachers do not talk about the real absence of God and, therefore, in this instance, are not telling the truth, or, in my words, the whole truth.

Buechner calls Shakespeare’s *King Lear* “the mightiest of all preachments.” The central paradox of *King Lear* for Buechner is as follows:

I think of *King Lear*, especially with its tragic vision of a world in which the good and the bad alike go down to dust and, it would seem, equally meaningless death with no God to intervene on their behalf, and yet with its vision of the world in which the naked and helpless ones, the victims and fools, become at least truly alive before they die and thus touch however briefly on something that lies beyond the power of death. It is the worldly ones, the ones wise as the world understands wisdom and strong the way the world understands strength who are utterly doomed. Shakespeare points to the apparent emptiness of a world where God belongs and to how the emptiness starts to echo like an empty shell after a while until you can hear in it the still, small voice of the sea, hear strength and weakness, victory and defeat, presence in absence.⁹

⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperOne, 1977), 44.

⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁹ Ibid., 44.

Buechner regards the real absence and silence of God as a prelude to the real presence of God.

For Buechner, *King Lear* is a homily on the passage in First Corinthians where Paul says the same thing: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” (1:27–28)

When we expand the definition of sermon beyond the church pulpit, we open up other forms that could be regarded as preaching, such as creative writing in poetic and essay form. In the contemporary moment, we do not give much consideration to the sermon as essay in the written form—the sermon as a contemplative document that can be carefully read over and over again to glean continuing insight, interpretation, revelation, and meaning. We are more familiar with the sermon as a time-bound oral pronouncement on Sunday morning heard within the confines of a church or on digital platforms. I often ask my students, “Do you write your sermons for one hearing? Would you consider your sermons disposable, that is, worthy of one hearing and to be cast aside?” Are our sermons exegetically, theologically, and existentially “weighty” enough for consideration past one hearing so they could be read and studied to encounter fresh truths across time? The contemplative sermon calls for continued dialogue and raises questions that are searching and require meditative reflection in a process that requires time and space.

For far too much of the church culture, let alone secular culture, sermons are one-hearing events that are one-use experiences. While this may speak to the quality of sermons being preached, very few people would go back and listen to a sermon again or study a written form of the sermon. Some study, glean, revisit, and reencounter afresh the insight and beauty of a well-crafted sermon. But for the majority in the church, sermons are, as worship is, consumable and disposable from Sunday to Sunday, centered upon the personal needs of congregants alone. For far too many, sermons are cast aside and forgotten for the most part. While some people will watch movies and television shows over and over again, very few replay or read over sermons again. The sermon is a spiritual vitamin that energizes us in the moment or for a short time, then dissolves into our system and, for the most part, is no more.

This then hits directly on the contemplative sermon we are here to discuss and discern. I am quick to say that I do not write sermons for one hearing. I write sermons for thought, reflection, investigation, discussion, and numerous listens, readings, or views to discern the depth of meaning, not only the sermon’s intended meaning based upon the preacher’s study, but how the hearer constructs meaning for their own lives. In some sense, the audience overhears the conversation of the preacher, the text, and God, which inspires their own conversation with the three. A sermon constructed as such in writing could be called sermon as essay—sermon as thoughtful or contemplative composition that takes the hearer inside to ponder what is true in the sermon, what is true for them, and what is true in life.

Defining the Contemplative Sermon

Recognizing that David Schnasa Jacobsen and La Ronda Barnes, in the Introduction to this volume, have taken special care to detail how Black contemplative preaching has been defined, and likewise Edgar “Trey” Clark also in his essay herein, I offer my definition of the term contemplative in contemplative preaching. Contemplation is the process of thoughtful observation based in continued attentiveness that prompts “inwardness,” or the recognition of aspects and particulars of the inward spiritual journey. The path to inwardness is often via quietude and reflection—sometimes what could be considered meditation. Contemplation is the

process that ushers us to the inward journey, the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual process to discover inner meaning to the essential questions inside ourselves. This usually occurs not singly and solitarily but in conversation with contemplative texts, preachers, poets, playwrights, orators, and novelists.

It is an honest and truthful look into the heart of things and sometimes the dark heart of things, as Buechner calls it. As such, contemplation requires absolute honesty—to look at a given situation and to face and name both hope and despair, the absence and the presence of God. Contemplation takes courage. Many sermons feature one or the other. Far too many foreground the absence or the presence of God, but not both. Yet both provide meaning greater than either alone, for we often experience both in life. One without the other is not entirely true.

Contemplation is the process, and from the process comes an output to the world—a prayer, meditation, poem, sermon, or essay that invites inwardness as a response. The process that Baldwin follows is inward contemplation; the output is a sermon essay that leads the hearer/reader to an inward journey to discover what they believe about God and religion and, ultimately, as Baldwin would have it, to discover and overcome the effects of racism and white supremacy on global and American citizens.

The Alpha Narrative

Baldwin's "Down at the Cross" is a sermon/essay, dare I say, contemplative sermon, that Charles Johnson would call an "alpha narrative," that is, Baldwin accomplishes "*an imaginative and original story that compresses the complexity and difficulty of modern life into a few stark and massive symbols in which all our experience and all human history are locked.*"¹⁰ I propose that "Down at the Cross" is an African American sermon essay in the contemplative tradition and worthy of serious study in order to expand, encompass, and continue to define the often unheralded tradition of the African American contemplative sermon as well as to challenge contemporary preachers to preach non-disposable sermons or consider the value of creative and contemplative sermons that lead hearers to inwardness.

To develop this thesis, I offer an analysis of the sermon essay that is a close reading of a portion of "Down at the Cross." Indicative of the genre of theater and plays, I have divided the essay because, in my reading of it, given its length, my mind and body required a physical and mental break. I argue that this format is the best way to understand the sermon. Again, based upon the space limitations of this article, we will only be able to discuss what I call "Act 1."

Close Reading of the First Act of "Down at the Cross"

Act 1 clearly characterizes Baldwin's entrance into and leaving the Black church and his abandonment of the Christian God of his youth. In my characterization, Act 1 has five scenes. Each scene culminates in a central idea, indicative of traditional Black preaching—a crescendo that is the rhetorical, lyrical, and poetic summit Baldwin's thought reaches as the concluding thought. Each scene builds into a cohesive thought pattern, and the five central thoughts of Act 1 are: "The Wall Between the World and Me," "The Bargain at the Foot of the Cross," "Jesus Failed the Bargain and So Did the Church," "Renewal at the Fountain of Our Own Lives," and "The Viable and Useful God."

The Wall Between the World and Me

¹⁰ Charles Johnson, *The Way of the Writer: Reflections on the Art and Craft of Storytelling* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 106.

Baldwin opens the essay with himself as the protagonist with a profound religious crisis at the age of fourteen. The fourteen-year-old Baldwin has awakened to the reality that religion meant God, saints, angels, and “a blazing Hell.”¹¹ Religion and God were synonymous with safety and represented deliverance from the fear of the evils within and without. Baldwin acknowledges being raised in a Christian nation, accepting this deity as the only one, and supposing that God only existed in the walls of the church.

Harlem, or in Baldwin’s words, “the Avenue,” was the place where whores, pimps, and racketeers were the menace. Baldwin sets the context of the Avenue. First, there were the girls, who, besides their “budding breasts and round behinds,” were matrons for God and kept reminding the boys, “You had better be thinking about your soul.” Baldwin says that girls knew the price for one misstep, knew they had to be protected, and knew that the only protection was the boys. So, they functioned as God’s decoys, saving the souls of the boys and binding the bodies of the boys in marriage (a reference to St. Paul’s admonition in 1 Cor 7:9 that it is “better to marry than to burn”).

The boys at this age were settling in for the “winter of life.” They all knew that they would rise no higher than their fathers. They also could not say what oppressed them. They knew it was “the man,” the white men who, for example, practiced vicious police brutality. Their choices were wine, whiskey, the needle, or Baldwin’s choice to flee into the church.

Baldwin is very direct about white power in the ghetto and examines its source. Because white people in America do not love and accept themselves and each other, they are not willing to understand that black people are not trying to be “accepted” by white people; black people simply do not want to be “beaten over the head by whites every instance of our brief passage on the planet.” When white people learn to love themselves and each other, which Baldwin says will not be tomorrow, and maybe never, the Negro problem will not exist because it will no longer be needed.

Baldwin admits that those “more advantageously placed than those in Harlem” will find his psychology and view of human nature dismal and shocking in the extreme. But his views are perfectly justified by the fact that “the Negro’s experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claims to live.” Whites had the judges, juries, shotguns, and the law—power. But it was a criminal power, “to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever.” The values preached by the white world but not practiced were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection. Based upon this criminal power, the barriers between Baldwin and crime diminished.

Baldwin needed a thing, a gimmick, to lift him out of the ghetto and start him on his way. It did not matter what the gimmick was—in reality, the choice was the Avenue or the church. Baldwin summarized his entrance into the church as his only option based upon the fact that Black people are taught by white society to despise themselves, and the Black response to the teaching of self-hate is fear.

Baldwin clarifies his central thought for this first scene: based upon his being fourteen years old—“all the fears with which I had grown up, and which were now a part of me and controlled my vision for the world, rose up like a wall between the world and me and drove me into the church.”

¹¹ James Baldwin, “Letter from a Region in My Mind,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1962, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind>. All subsequent Baldwin quotations are from this source.

The Bargain at the Foot of the Cross

Baldwin admits that his entrance into the church was curiously deliberate, though he did not know it was so at the time. He intentionally did not join the church where his father was a member.¹² Rather, he went with a friend in school, who had already surrendered his life to Christ, to a church to meet the friend's woman pastor. Mother Rosa Artimus Horn looked at the young Baldwin and smiled and offered a question that was exactly the same question posed by pimps and racketeers on the Avenue: "Whose little boy are you?"¹³ In response to the pastor's question, Baldwin states, "my heart replied at once, Why, yours." He was fortunate that he found the church racket instead of some other and, as he says, "surrendered to spiritual seduction long before he came into carnal knowledge." The summer wore on for Baldwin, and he became more frightened and guilty.

The struggle was all kept inside until one night when the preacher woman finished preaching, everything came "roaring, screaming, crying out and I fell on the ground before the altar." One moment, he was on his feet, singing and clapping, and, as he says, "working out in my head the plot of a play," and in the next moment, with no transition and no sensation of falling, he was on his back "with the lights beating down into my face and all the saints vertical above me."

All he remembers is the anguish and pain, unspeakable pain, "as if I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me." For Baldwin, if heaven would not hear him and love not descend to make him clean, then "disaster was his portion."

He recounts that to be born black in an Anglo-Teutonic, anti-sexual white country means that very soon one gives up all hope of communion, noting that black people look up or down, but not at each other, never *at* you. He says, "and white people, mainly, look away"—what hope is there for communion? It did not seem possible to get through life, that is, to love or be loved. The universe and other people had no room for him, and if love would not swing open the gates, no other power would or could. In this despair of human love, only God's love is left. But, Baldwin says, "God . . . is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why are . . . the black cast down so far? Why?"

He was on the floor all night and found no answer to this question. Over him, to bring him "through," the saints sang, rejoiced, and prayed. And when they raised him in the morning, they told him he was "saved." He responds that, indeed, he was saved in some manner, for he was utterly drained and exhausted. He was released from his guilty torment and was only aware of his relief. He wondered why human relief had to be purchased in such a pagan and desperate fashion. In response to his wonderment, it was here that he was able to see that the governing principles of rites, rituals, and customs of black and white churches were the same: "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror." Blindness was often cultivated to deny loneliness and terror. While

¹² I have decided to leave Baldwin's comments about his father (stepfather) outside of the scope of our discussion. This topic deserves more attention than time allows in these few pages.

¹³ Stephen York recounts that Mother Rosa Artimus Horn (1880–1976) was a popular African American Holiness-Pentecostal preacher in Harlem after she established the Mount Calvary Pentecostal Faith Church in 1926. The Mount Calvary Pentecostal Faith Church was incorporated in 1932, and the movement of five churches eventually had some twenty thousand members and adherents. While she was also considered "one of the most controversial black Pentecostal women," by 1934, the church was located in five cities. Dubbed "Mother Horn" by devotees, she was described as having a powerful presence, being an extremely effective speaker, and possessing great charisma (Stephen York, "The Influence of African American Holiness-Pentecostalism on James Baldwin," thesis dissertation, Rochester, New York: Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, 2020).

“Faith, Hope, and Charity” (love) were the professed principles, they were clearly not so for most Christians or the Christian world.

In order to not be bored and revert back to the unsaved wretchedness of the Avenue, Baldwin became a preacher and preached sermons as a young minister for three years. It was the most frightening time of his life, and he says, the most dishonest. The resulting hysteria lent great passion to his sermons—for a while. He relished the attention and relative immunity from punishment from his father and, above all, the right to privacy. He was to prepare one sermon per week. He preached more often than that and could not be interrupted for hours and whole days. Baldwin had immobilized his father; it took him some days to realize that he had also immobilized himself and had escaped from nothing. Baldwin says the church was very exciting, and it took a long time to disengage himself from the excitement, “and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will.”

Though he left the church, he described what he could not disengage from—the enchantment, wonder, mystery, and hope of the black church:

There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to rock.

Baldwin continues and takes us inside to experience the preaching moment and writes what many preachers feel in great moments of preaching:

Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, “the Word”—when the church and I were one. Their pain and joy were mine and mine were theirs—they surrendered their pain and joy to me, I surrendered mine to them—and their cries of ‘Amen’ and ‘Hallelujah’ and ‘Yes, Lord,’ and ‘Praise His name!’ and ‘Preach it, brother’ sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar.

Baldwin says that for a long time, these experiences at the church were his “only sustenance and his meat and drink.” He would rush home from school, to the church, and to the altar to be alone and commune with Jesus, his dearest friend. Baldwin then communicates the second central thought of Act 1: Jesus knew all the secrets of his heart and would never fail him. Jesus knew his secrets, but Baldwin himself did not know them, and Jesus would never let him find out. His wall of safety was accomplished.

Jesus Failed the Bargain and So Did the Church

Baldwin could not escape the secrets of his heart, so he exclaims that Jesus failed at the bargain. He writes this ironic line: “He was a much better Man than I took Him for.” From that point, Baldwin describes the slow crumbling of his faith, what he calls “the pulverization of his fortress.” In my reading, there are seven reasons declared in the essay as to why and how Baldwin left the church.

First, about a year after he began preaching, he started to read again. His reading, as he says, began “fatally” with Dostoevsky. He attended a Jewish high school, and, as taught by his Pentecostal faith tradition, he would pass out religious tracts and leaflets. His classmates laughed at him and pointed out that the gospels had been written long after the death of Christ. This information forced him to really read for himself what he was handing out. He noticed that the tracts were impossible to believe unless one already believed their message. They were a kind of blackmail, and he felt that people should love the Lord *because* they loved the Lord and not because they were afraid of going to hell.

Second, he was told by his Jewish fellow high schoolers that the books of the Bible were written by human beings and translated by human beings out of biblical languages. He rebutted that they had been written under divine inspiration, but he inwardly questioned: Had they? All of them? Based upon how familiar he was with putting words on paper, how frequently he had worked himself into his own visions, how his visions from God differed from those of his father, as well as the fact that he did not understand the dreams he was having at night; and that all of them were not holy, he was not sure about divine inspiration. Alongside this, he spent most of his time in a state of repentance for things that he vividly desired to do and had not done.

Third, the fact that he was dealing with Jewish people in school raised the issue of color, which he had been avoiding. He realized that the Bible had been written by white men. According to Christians, blacks were descendants of Ham and cursed and predestined to be slaves. Most of Christendom seemed to believe that, from the beginning of time, he was meant to be a slave.

Fourth, the Jewish boys in high school were troubling because he could find no point of connection with them and the Jewish pawnbroker, landlords, and grocery store owners in Harlem. They were Jews, but he thought of them only as white. Jews, until he got to high school, were incarcerated in the Old Testament, and their names were Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel, etc. It was “bewildering” to find them so many miles and centuries from Egypt.

Fifth, being in the pulpit was like being behind the scenes in the theatre, and he knew how the illusion worked. He knew other ministers and the quality of their lives. It was not the hypocrisy of sensuality but deadlier and deeper than that. He knew how to work a congregation until the last dime was surrendered and knew ultimately where the money for the “Lord’s work” went. Baldwin said that he had no respect for the people with whom he worked and, if he continued, he would have no respect for himself.

Sixth, based upon the pulverizing of his faith, when Baldwin stood in front of the congregation, it took all his strength not to stammer, curse, and tell them to “throw away their Bibles, and get off their knees and go home and organize, for example, a rent strike.” As he taught Sunday school, he felt like he was committing a crime, talking about the gentle Jesus and telling the children to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life. He asked: “Were only Negroes going to heaven? Was heaven, then, to be merely another ghetto?”

Finally, he might have been able to reconcile this if he had been able to see any loving-kindness in the church. But he had seen too many monstrous things from the pulpit: not only that ministers gained Cadillacs and fine homes while the faithful continued to work menial jobs and still drop their hard-earned dimes and quarters and dollars into the offering plate, but that there was no love in the church—only a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair.

According to Baldwin, the transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended, and salvation stopped at the church door. Congregants were told to love everybody, but

that meant only those who believed as they believed—and did not apply at all to white people. He asks this second penetrating question: “What was the point, the purpose of *my* salvation if it did not permit me to behave with love towards others, no matter now they behaved toward me?” What Baldwin did, and what every person did, for that matter, they all would have to answer for when the judgment trumpet sounded—unless there was in heaven a special dispensation for the “benighted black, who would not be judged in the same way.”

Then Baldwin closes with the central thought of this third scene of Act 1: “In the same way that we, for white people, were descendants of Ham, and were cursed forever, white people were, for us, descendants of Cain. *And the passion with which we loved the Lord was a measure of how deeply we feared and distrusted and, in the end, hated almost all strangers, always, and avoided and despised ourselves*” (italics mine).

Renewal at the Fountain of Our Own Lives

And yet, with all of this said about Jesus and the church, Baldwin could not leave it at that. He says: “In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are very moving and very rare.” Pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children were all bound together by the nature of oppression and yet “within these limits achieve with each other freedom that was close to love”:

I remember, anyway, church suppers and outings, and, later, after I left the church, rent and waistline parties where rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about “the man.” We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other and had no need to pretend to be what we were not.

Baldwin suggests that this is the freedom that is heard in black music. In gospel songs, jazz, and especially the blues, “there is something tart and ironic, authoritative and double-edged.” White Americans feel that happy songs are happy and sad songs are sad, but, as an example of the depth of complexity of black music, Baldwin cites Big Bill Broonzy’s song “I Feel So Good,” a joyful song about a man who is on his way to the railroad station to meet his girl. She’s coming home, and the singer is exuberant, indicating how he has missed her. But there is no guarantee that she will stay this time. Tonight, tomorrow, or in the next five minutes, he may be singing “Lonesome in my Bedroom” or “Ain’t we, ain’t we, going to make it all right? Well, if we don’t today, we will tomorrow night.” The song speaks of joy and sorrow, the anticipation of delight, and the possible pain of rejection.

Baldwin says that white Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an “ironic tenacity” comes, based upon their suspicion of the fact that the force is sensual. They are terrified of sensuality and do not understand it. For Baldwin, the word sensual is not meant to bring up stereotypical sexuality—“quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs.” To be sensual is “to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”

Something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they distrust their own reaction as they do in America and become as joyless as they have become. Baldwin surfaces now the fourth central thought of Act 1:

It is this individual uncertainty on the part of white American men and women, this inability to renew themselves at the fountain of their own lives, that makes the discussion, let alone elucidation, of any conundrum—that is, any reality—so supremely difficult. The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for

reality—for this touchstone can only be oneself. Such a person interposes nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes between himself and reality. And these attitudes, furthermore, though the person is usually unaware of it (is unaware of so much!), are historical and public attitudes. They do not relate to the present any more than they relate to the person. *Therefore, whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals, precisely and inexorably, what they do not know about themselves* (italics mine).

The Viable and Useful God

According to Baldwin, white Christians have forgotten several elementary historical details. Liberation must involve the rise of energy buried before the rise of Christian nations. Most people are terrified of this based upon the great change that must occur. America and the entire Western world must reexamine and release themselves “and discard nearly all the assumptions,” including what has been deemed to be sacred, “that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long.”

In the realm of power, Christianity has operated from an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty. This true faith is more concerned about the soul than the body, to which the flesh (corpses) of countless people considered as “infidels” attests. The spreading of the gospel, regardless of the motives, integrity, or heroism of some missionaries, was, at its essence, justification for the planting of the flag—in other words, for establishing Western power and dominion. The Christian church, as distinguished from some of its ministers, not only participated in but sanctified and rejoiced in that conquest, formulating the belief that the conquest, with the resulting relative well-being of Western populations, was proof of the favor of God.

In the realm of morals, Baldwin notes that Christianity has been, at best, ambivalent. It was extremely arrogant to assume that the morals of others were inferior to those of Christians, and, therefore, Christians had every right to use any means necessary to change them. Then comes a magnificent crescendo and the bringing down of the curtain of Act 1 with its final central thought:

[T]he schizophrenia in the mind of Christendom—had rendered the domain of morals as chartless as the sea once was and as treacherous as the sea still is. It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all of the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him (italics mine).

Act 1 concludes, the curtain falls, and the mind and body take an intermission for refreshment.

The Difficulties and Complexities of Modern Life

Alpha narratives are defined as original, imaginative, and compelling stories that compress the complexity and difficulty of modern life into a few stark and massive symbols within which all our experience and all human history is locked.¹⁴ Johnson says that alpha narratives are very difficult to achieve, maybe once in a lifetime of work, but I believe Baldwin has achieved it! And while I am not arguing that every sermon should be an alpha narrative,

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Way of the Writer*, 106.

there are things that we can learn from alpha narratives for producing high-quality contemplative sermons.

Therefore, let's grapple with delineating the difficulties and complexities of modern life that Baldwin articulates into which all our experiences and all human history are locked. In other words, what are the essential questions of life with which all human beings struggle and, hopefully, in whatever sense possible, come to terms? Not in any particular rank or order, here are the questions in which all human experience and human history are locked, which Baldwin raises and seeks to come to terms with in "Down at the Cross" and invites readers to do the same.

1. *What is the reality, nature, presence, absence, and ethics of God—if there is a God? Then whose God, and what must God be like?*
2. *Why is there suffering and pain? For example, Baldwin asks, why are black people (marginalized people) cast so far down? Why?*
3. *What is the true nature and reality of titles, status, money, power, privilege, position, and earthly resources?*
4. *What is sex? Is it life yearning for itself in procreation, the beauty of desire and sexual pleasure, or inappropriate lusts that dominate and harm others? Or is it something else?*
5. *What is the most important thing that human beings can do for one another? What is the most important thing one can do for oneself?*
6. *How do I construct my identity and authority in the context of culture? How do minorities, marginalized folks—LGBTQI A+, disabled folks, people of color, Asian folks—construct their identity and authority in the face of majority culture, and how do majority folks construct their identity and authority in the face of minority culture?*
7. *What is the nature and reality of death?*

Responses to these questions require contemplation, careful consideration with much inner thought, and reflection on the human experience. Responses require an inward spiritual journey. For me, these are the deeper questions of life, and many of the sermons that I hear and sometimes preach do not rise to this level of contemplation and challenge. I hope I am not being disrespectful because many sermons touch on these very questions, but too many responses fall into the category of what Baldwin called "impossible to believe unless one has already believed the Christian message." Many sermons skirt the hard issues, such as the absence of God, and mask the reality with clichés and theological sloganeering. Many of our sermons and our theological considerations can be surface, shallow, cute, and even clever and, therefore, have little ability to challenge us at the deepest levels of our inward journey.

I consider Baldwin a contemplative preacher, not because I agree with all of his logic and theological conclusions, such that Jesus knew all his secrets and his commitment was never to let Baldwin find out, or that God is white—a tremendously problematic idea. What I respect is the honesty and the depth of thought. Baldwin is not afraid to offer a prophetic critique of the church and raise the issues of our hypocrisy, fear, and even our hate. He is not afraid to be honest—not letting the black or the white church off the hook. Religion is not totally about safety; instead, it strives to tell the truth as best as we can see it from our limited perspectives. Life is about joy and sorrow, hope and despair, love and hate.

I wonder if a disposable sermon is one that avoids hard truths? One that will not deal with the absence of God but assures and reassures hearers of the continual presence of God without facing the occasional and sometimes relentless pain and despair of life that bring us to the place

where we put our fists in the air and ask, “Where can I go and meet with God? How do I make an appointment with God?” I wonder if the sermon can be deep enough to capture the full depth and breadth of the human experience, what Buechner calls the tragedy, comedy, and the fairy tale—the tragedy of human failure, the comedy of being loved by God regardless of failure, and the continuing human rejection of that love and yet the fairy tale of God’s transforming love? To preach not what one ought to say but to preach despair and hope? In the paraphrased words of Buechner, to look into the dark heart of things, the preacher’s own heart, the heart of the people, the heart of the text and the scriptural witness, and to tell as close to the whole truth as the preacher is able?

Baldwin goes there and describes the Pentecostal church that he served as “the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord.” What does he mean by “continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord?” Does he mean being able to say that, as he taught Sunday school, he felt like he was committing a crime talking about the gentle Jesus and telling children to reconcile themselves to their misery on earth in order to gain the crown of eternal life? The experience of goodness and despair in the same sentence—not either or, but both. He captures the entire human experience and does not dismiss either. Life is the continuing goodness of the Lord *and* the despair of God’s presence. He tells the truth as best he can see it, know it, and feel it.

Baldwin uses the contemplative sermon essay form to bridge human divides by pushing all readers on both sides of the divide to go inward and closely examine the effect religion and white supremacy have had on all. The sermon essay “Down at the Cross” is a response to the central question of his work—the inward effects of bigotry and racism and how to learn to love. He contends that these effects can only be healed through an inward journey. This is evidenced in such phrases as renewing ourselves at the fountain of our own lives or rejecting the hypocrisies, prohibitions, and crimes of the Christian church to become a moral human being, or if the concept of God has any validity or use, it is to make us larger, freer, or more loving. He offers us a prophetic interiority and pushes us to ask and respond to the essential questions of life for ourselves.

Ultimately, the contemplative sermon flows out of the devotional life of the preacher—questions, biblical reflections, and commentary offered up to God from the preacher’s life that demand a response from God. The preacher listens to hear from God and offers the people the substance of a real conversation with God. The preacher understands their own heart and the hearts of the people enough to realize that the questions of the people are the questions of the preacher and vice versa. The purpose of the substantive conversation in preaching is to stimulate the hearers or, better yet, invite the hearers to have their own conversation with God. The point is for the hearer to travel their own inward journey to God. The people hear the conversation with God in the sermon as a conversation starter of their own.

James Baldwin unfolds his gospel of love in the second act of “Down at the Cross.” I pray that the reader will read Baldwin’s continued discourse as a part of their own inward journey.