

Response to Frank Thomas, “The Sermon as Essay: James Baldwin as Contemplative Preacher”

D. Quentin Miller
Professor of English
Suffolk University

I would like to thank Thomas for his provocative, engaging, and insightful essay which usefully reframes the timely and timeless work of James Baldwin by considering his most enduring essay as a contemplative sermon. The year 2024 marks the hundredth anniversary of Baldwin's birth, and the year 2023 marks the sixtieth anniversary of Baldwin's most prominent year, 1963, a year which included the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, a speaking tour of the beleaguered American South in a pivotal year of the Civil Rights Movement, and an invitation to meet with Attorney General Bobby Kennedy about race relations (a meeting that did not go well). His prominence as a writer and a spokesman landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine. These anniversaries of his birth and the peak of his fame serve to remind us that Baldwin remains relevant long after his miraculous lifetime and premature death in 1987.

I will acknowledge from the start that my field of expertise is literature rather than theology, so my perspective will hopefully amplify or complement Thomas's rather than overlap with it. I will also acknowledge that I've been asked many times why a white, heterosexual, nonreligious, middle-class man has devoted much of his scholarly career to studying and teaching Baldwin, who does not share these identity labels. To me, it makes perfect sense, for I think Baldwin at times wanted to shake up and enlighten a reading audience like me: “Down at the Cross,” the main essay in *The Fire Next Time*, was originally published in the high bourgeois pages of *The New Yorker*. Some of his best friends were white liberals, and he pushed them hard, seeing their education as crucial to the goal he stated at the end of “Down at the Cross”: “to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.”¹ But I would never claim Baldwin was only writing to people like me: his audience was vast and diverse, and he had (and still has) the uncanny ability to make all his readers and listeners feel like he was speaking directly to them. As to what really draws me to Baldwin, I nodded in strong agreement with Thomas's statement toward the end of his talk: “What I respect is the honesty and depth of thought.” Yes: and passion and the willingness to explore the self not for the purposes of elevating one's ego but instead for the purposes of insight and enlightenment and risk. This was his life's work and his grand achievement, and I find it inspiring even though his experiences and mine are markedly different.

I hope to expand on Thomas's excellent argument that “Down at the Cross” can be productively read as a contemplative sermon by broadening the context to consider other work by Baldwin that suggests exactly where he landed when he left the church. As Thomas points out, “Religion is not totally about safety but striving to tell the truth.” Part of what Baldwin silently rejects in “Down at the Cross” is the very suspect concept of safety, which is an idea he returns to throughout his career. The nameless narrator of his most famous story, “Sonny's Blues” (1957), and David, the anti-hero and narrator of his landmark novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956), are both taken to task for their false beliefs in the safety of any kind. In his story, Sonny is encouraged to play jazz as though he is venturing out into deep water, taking dangerous risks to embrace his humanity, which is the only way to make oneself available to love, which is the focus of my remarks here. Baldwin's biographer, David Leeming, claimed that Baldwin “left the

¹ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 105.

church in order to preach the gospel.”² That gospel is, in fact, a sophisticated understanding of what love is.

Baldwin narrates the experience of his conversion, his years as a boy preacher, and his rejection of the church at a number of key points throughout his career, in addition to what Thomas calls Act 1 of “Down at the Cross.” In his debut novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), he contextualizes these experiences in terms of ancestry: the fictional John Grimes’s story is placed next to stories of his mother, his aunt, and his stepfather that occurred before his birth and that have yet somehow affected his journey. Echoing a line Thomas quotes from “Down at the Cross,” the novel ends with John calling down the stairs to his parents, who are rushing him to get to church, “I’m ready. I’m coming. I’m on my way.”³ The reader realizes John’s meaning: he may be on his way to church today, but like his author, he is on his way out. We see the dynamic replayed in his first play, *The Amen Corner* (1958), in which the teenage David is forced to choose between playing music in the church that is his mother’s congregation or playing jazz like his father, a lifestyle which includes behaviors his church considers sins (drinking, smoking, and premarital sex). His father’s world easily wins out. In this play, the church is rendered as divisive and backbiting, devoid of the love Baldwin sought. In the essay “Notes of a Native Son” (1955) – one of his finest – he again tells the story of how and why he left the church, this time in the aftermath of his father’s funeral, which happened to coincide with his own nineteenth birthday, the birth of his youngest sister, and the Harlem riots of 1943. His father’s career as a preacher in a Pentecostal church in Harlem had resulted in extreme bitterness against the white world, and Baldwin, who throws a water glass at a white waitress who refuses to serve him because he is Black, is terrified that he has internalized that bitterness, a reflection of the anger he sees on the destroyed streets of his neighborhood. Just as he fled the church, he flees segregated America for Paris at that moment.

To push against Gore Vidal’s claim that Baldwin’s novels are “a bit dated” – all novels are – I want to suggest that a full understanding of Baldwin’s message of love can be clarified through his novels, which Leeming views as “parables” alongside the sermons of his essays. Time constraints won’t allow a full reading of *Another Country* (1962), his novel published the same year as “Down at the Cross,” but I will briefly suggest how this novel, which has little to do with the church, works to amplify Baldwin’s unique and challenging gospel of love. Two of the points Thomas makes apply here; one is that white Americans’ inability or unwillingness to love themselves and each other has created the American racial nightmare, and the second is the question, “Why is there suffering and pain? Why are Black people cast down so far?” *Another Country* opens with a suffering Black anti-hero named Rufus Scott, who has been cast down so far that he sees no way up. In “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin speaks of “a gimmick” needed by anyone living in the ghetto “to lift him out and start him on his way.”⁴ For Baldwin, the church was his initial gimmick, but it was followed by his true calling, writing. For Rufus, the initial gimmick was music, but it was not enough to sustain him, nor to protect him from the feeling that he was being persecuted or “beaten down” by the white world even though some of his best friends are white. As he prepares to jump to his death off the George Washington Bridge, he curses God: “He raised his eyes to heaven. He thought, You bastard, you motherfucking bastard.

² Karen Thorsen (director), *The Price of the Ticket* (1 hr. 27 minutes), San Francisco, California Newsreels, DVD, 1990.

³ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 211.

⁴ Baldwin, *Fire*, 15.

Ain't I your baby, too?"⁵ Feeling rejected by humans and God alike, he initially lashes out, treating sex, as Thomas describes it, as "inappropriate lusts that dominate and harm others" rather than "the beauty of desire and sexual pleasure" in his relationship with Leona, a white southern woman who becomes the object of his vengeance. In their first sexual encounter, he imagines his penis as a "weapon" and his semen as "venom."⁶ After that, he abuses her physically and emotionally, sending her into a mental hospital before taking his own life.

Rufus's story is a tragic parable about the fate of individuals in a world devoid of love. The rest of the novel illustrates – without easy answers – the fifth of Thomas's questions "in which all human experience and human history is locked," namely, "What is the most important thing that human beings can do for one another?" The answer in Baldwin's case is clearly "love!" but a one-word answer is too easy. This is where the journey to understand Baldwin becomes long and challenging, "worthy of our contemplation," in the terms described here. At the end of Act 1 of "Down at the Cross," Baldwin provocatively suggests, "It is time we got rid of [God]," but only, he says, "If the concept of God" fails to "make us larger, freer, and *more loving*" (emphasis mine).⁷ When he turns to the Nation of Islam in Act 2, he is worried that the rejection of all "sinners" outside the Christian church of his youth is no different from the rejection of "white devils" outside the Nation of Islam. The misguided Christian suggestion that God was white he learned in his youth is flipped here to embrace a God who is Black, but both formulations in Baldwin's mind promote hierarchy and separation; as he says, "The dream, the sentiment is old; only the color is new."⁸ During his tense meeting with Elijah Muhammad, he feels chastised by the Nation of Islam leader's questions and tells him, "I did not care if white and black people married, and that I had many white friends." What he then tells himself but not Elijah, though he voices it in the essay, is, "I love a few people and they love me and some of them are white, and isn't love more important than color?"⁹ Following the recurrent topics of his career, he could easily have added, "or faith, or sexuality, or nationhood, or class status, or ideology?"

Love is more important than anything, but it's not what most people think it is. This is the lengthy inquiry of *Another Country*. The many characters in the novel reel in the aftermath of Rufus's suicide, trying to understand how they failed him. It's a 436-page exercise – a really long contemplative sermon – in defining exactly what love is and committing to it, for though many say they loved Rufus, they don't realize until it's too late that they couldn't get him to feel loved. Sensing another life slip away, the character Eric says of his one-time lover Cass, "He wished that he could rescue her, that it was within his power to rescue her and make her life less hard. But it was only love which could accomplish the miracle of making a life bearable – only love, and love itself mostly failed; and he had never loved her."¹⁰ The novel's arguable protagonist, Vivaldo, has affairs with Eric as well as with Rufus's sister Ida, the latter of which ends badly. Ida admits that she was permanently damaged by her brother's suicide, claiming, "Rufus had always been the world to me. I loved him." "So did I," [Vivaldo] said – too quickly, irrelevantly; and for the first time it occurred to him that, possibly, he was a liar; had never loved Rufus at all,

⁵ James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 87.

⁶ Baldwin, *Another*, 22.

⁷ Baldwin, *Fire*, 47.

⁸ Baldwin, *Fire*, 57.

⁹ Baldwin, *Fire*, 71.

¹⁰ Baldwin, *Another*, 404.

but had only feared and envied him.”¹¹ His interest in Ida, which he also labels love, might just be an attempt to avoid facing that possibility.

Though painful, and though it occurs too late to save either Rufus or his relationship with Ida, this realization is a valuable breakthrough, for Vivaldo has to learn what it is to love if there is to be hope for the future. Fear and envy – divisive forces in a society like the hierarchy and separation I mentioned earlier – prevent it. Toward the end of “Down at the Cross,” Baldwin offers his own definition of love clearly based on what he wants the concept of God to do so we don’t necessarily have to get rid of the Divine; he says, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”¹² This sets up his conclusion that “the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks...must, *like lovers*, insist on, or create the consciousness of others” in order to “end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country” (emphasis mine).¹³ These words echo down six decades to prove emphatically what Thomas argues, that “Down at the Cross” is an enduring document “that can be carefully read over and over again to glean insight, interpretation, meaning.”

¹¹ Baldwin, *Another*, 413.

¹² Baldwin, *Fire*, 95.

¹³ Baldwin, *Fire*, 105.