

“Begin Again ”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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“The idea of American is in trouble,” writes Princeton University professor Eddie Glaude in his recent book *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. (Crown: New York, 2020)

But is this truly fodder for a *sermon*? Is reflecting on the idea of America a *religious* topic?

What does it mean for something to be *religious*? What does it mean for us to be a *religious* community?

What does it mean to be a *religious* community in an era of mass protests against the killing of unarmed black men like George Floyd and black women like Breonna Taylor?

What does it mean to be a *religious* community during a time of global pandemic that fractures not only the social systems of how we gather, but also the economic systems of how so many survive?

What does it mean to be a *religious* community when the U.S. political storms threaten values that we hold dear?

And, what am *I* to say as your minister in the face of all of this? On the one hand, I am reminded to avoid partisan politics to protect our tax-exempt status. On the other hand, I think of the silent complicity of White clergy to the Nazi government. But then I think also of my aversion to how the Evangelical Christianity of my youth became enmeshed with the Republican party. I fear such enmeshment. What do I say? What do I *not* say?

With all those questions in mind, my sermon today draws widely from Glaude, a Black man, whose book—should you read it in full—is an unflinching criticism of the ugliness of this particular political moment and of the lies that reside at the heart of the American idea. Although the subject is an entwined reflection on Baldwin and politics, as I read it, the core of the book is a search for meaning, for answers that protect against despair, for a kind of salvation. In other words, it can be read as a book of theology.

As your minister, I have often shied away from using religious or the theological language, leaning instead into ethical language of values. In many ways and perhaps for many of you,

this works well enough. But, lately, I find myself reaching for the language of religion and theology to respond to the turmoil of our world.

The shift began almost a year ago when I flew to St. Paul for a theology conference led by the group, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalists (BLUU). In that black-led space, I was the stranger, the student, and the guest. By listening and watching, I *experienced* something I had never felt. I began to *glimpse* another way of being Unitarian Universalist, a different way of being in religious community. There was a level of honesty and pain, hope and resilience in the stories, ideas, and songs I heard. As I deepened my understanding of the pain of being black in America—and in Unitarian Universalism—I also learned about the need for a theology that could respond to this pain, to the experience of oppression, and to the need for hope.

Months later a pandemic began. We all began swimming in a turbulent sea of fear and uncertainty. As the death toll rose, patterns took shape. We could see the deadly impact of inequality in access to good health care, in the privilege of working from home, and in the luxury of a room of one's own in which to isolate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the patterns of inequality were racialized.

This racial inequality is after all the *truth* of America. A truth that reveals the lies in the *idea* of America which says all lives matter, that we are all created equal, that we are the land of the free.

We are not now, nor have we ever been a nation of equality and freedom. We are instead a nation rooted in violent colonization and broken treaties with Tribal nations. We are a nation of slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, and the mass incarceration of black lives. We are a nation that separates immigrant children from parents, putting them in cages in sub-human conditions of filth and cold. We are a nation where Matthew Shepherd was brutally beat and left to die on a lonely fence in Wyoming for being gay— and where [27 transgender people](#) have already violently died in 2020. We are nation of hunger and homelessness in which tens of millions lack affordable health care. We are a nation of ugliness. The American idea is in trouble indeed. It is enough to shake one's faith, to engender despair.

Glaude suggests that “a presidential election alone” will not redress the ugliness. Rather, he suggests, “A moral reckoning is upon us, and we have to decide, once and for all, whether or not we will truly be a multiracial democracy.” (xix)

By describing this time as a moral reckoning, Glaude is pointing beyond the political. I also believe we are not just wrestling with political systems and divisions between political parties. We are facing profoundly religious questions about the nature of who we are as human beings and our purpose here on earth. This is not just about whether to structure a government with more power at the federal or local level. Nor are the central issues about what 'rights' government owes to its citizens and what 'responsibilities' people owe to the state.

Rather we are faced with moral and religious questions about the dignity of human life and what our responsibility is for *one another*. Are some lives expendable? Do some lives matter less than other lives? To whom or to what are we accountable for our actions and our inactions? Are there consequences for how we live? How do we make sense of and/or respond to the ugliness of life—to what is broken or to what is evil and wrong?

Glaude does not treat such questions systematically in his book. Rather, in tracing Baldwin's life and thought, he bears witness to Baldwin's own testimony of life, including the experience of death. As a younger man, Baldwin witnesses the hope in the 1960's Civil Rights movement. And then he witnesses the assassinations of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Overwhelmed with despair, Baldwin retreats from America and goes overseas for a time to think, to enjoy simple pleasures of life, to love and be loved.

As Baldwin continues to write, he becomes a witness to what Glaude calls the "after times." Glaude explains, "This phrase refers, at once, to the disruption and the splintering of old ways of living and the making of a new community after the fall." (16) For Glaude, we too are living in a kind of "after times" as the idea of America falters. The moral reckoning we face today is with the truth of who we are as America, as people living in America.

You might say they are political questions. A question of whom to vote for in the upcoming election. They may be that, but they are also religious. They are questions who we are and of what is true and good. They are questions that remain no matter who the president is or what political party holds power. They are questions of human dignity and social equality that reside deep within our understanding of self and world.

For Baldwin, the questions of human dignity and social equality were not theoretical. They resided in the real and imagined stories to which his work testified. Having born witness to both the promise of the Civil Rights era and to the retrenchment of hate, compromise, and indifference in the "after times," Baldwin wrote:

When the dream was slaughtered and all that love and labor seemed to have come to nothing, we scattered...We knew where we had been, what we had tried to do, who had cracked, gone mad, died, or been murdered around us.

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

To begin again is to bear the mantle of responsibility for our shared world. Such an act chooses to see our lives as inextricably woven together. Such an act is an act of love.

In Glaude's words,

"Baldwin never relinquished the belief that, at bottom, the problem we faced as individuals and as a nation was, and remains, fundamentally a moral one: It was and will always be about who we take ourselves to be. Hatred, in the end, corrodes the soul. ... Only love can fortify us against hatred's temptations." (109)

In these "after times", which threaten to devolve into despair and hate, we need the fortification of love. This means we need communities of love in which we can find rest and renewal. We need to pull those we love closer even as we open ourselves to the pleasure of encountering new people. We need love as a counterweight to the ugliness of the after times.

Even as we find rest and renewal in the spaces and moments of love, still we must not abdicate the responsibility of the fight. Rather, like the ritual of Yom Kippur, this time of reckoning can beckon us to begin again in a new year, a new time. The path forward, however, begins by returning to where we have been and telling the truth about who we are. Only then, without the lies hollowing our moral center, can we begin to build a new world.

Baldwin described this new world as a New Jerusalem. Glaude uses language of a third founding of our nation (which reminds me of the Rev. William Barber's language of a third reconstruction). At the Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism conference last fall, they used language of building the Beloved Community. Whatever name we might give to this new world, I believe they share a vision of a world structured by true equality where "every human being is sacred" (209), rather than by categories of understanding that would value some lives more than others.

The path to this new world runs through truth and leads to love. This is not a sentimental love of Hallmark cards, but a love rooted in the nature of who we are. For Baldwin, love is *salvation* from the ugliness, hatred, and despair of life. In one of his last essays, he writes,

Salvation is not the flight from the wrath of God. It is accepting and reciprocating the love of God. Salvation is not separation. It is the beginning of union with all that is or has been or will ever be. (213)

Salvation is found in love, which is to say in the connective reality of our togetherness.

To build the new world, we need to tell the truth and not hide from one another or from our own painful history. To build the new world, we need to build communities of love, a Beloved Community, that draws the circle wide, bringing us together. Engaging in this work, rather than abdicating the responsibility, just might be our salvation from hatred and despair.

May it be so.

Amen.