

The
Givenness
of
Things

Sermons and Reflections of Father James A. Callahan

Rector, St.Margaret's Episcopal Church 1982-2000

Lisa Plummer Crafton

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This book is dedicated to the Callahan family,
to Peg, Mary, Susan, Martha, and to the memory of John.

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Foreward

For the last two years, I have been honored to live immersed in the words of Jim Callahan, that larger-than-life poet priest of Irish descent, who served as Rector of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Carrollton, Georgia from 1982-2000. Transcribed from audio cassette tapes as well as typed and handwritten copies of sermons that I treasure, these words are a tangible, permanent record of Jim's reflections on the gospel—not understood in terms of general principles of theology or philosophy, but in the way we as humans experience it: the gospel that is “gotten at” in a community of people, spontaneous laughter over a drink at a kitchen table, or at Jerry's Country Kitchen over coffee and biscuits, or tears shared over a grave. His is a theology of incarnation, of the way that the trinity of joy, sorrow, and love is the story of our life, of the fact that our human life on earth is not a journey to Paradise but rather *is* Paradise. The title of this collection echoes a phrase that comes up many times in these pages and which speaks to our willingness to embrace the joy and the sorrow and love of which we live in the midst.

As Jim puts it, “For apart from that world—the *givenness* of things—you and I have no being and make no sense. For it is just the *givenness* of things—this sadness and sorrow, this all too fleeting pleasure, this boredom and fear and terror, and this laughter and these tears—that are the *thick of it* into, or out of which God speaks.”

Those of us who experienced Jim's words behind a pulpit know of their power, how week after week he took a

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gospel passage that might have seemed a bit dull, a ribbon that had lost its sheen with too much handling, and pulled that ribbon into the fabric of a sermon where the meaning would suddenly shine forth, as one of Jim's favorite poets Gerard Manley Hopkins would say, in "God's Grandeur," "like shining from shook foil." But, even more importantly, the power of the message lives out there in all those who encountered Jim wherever he happened to be—from the clerk who sold him his peanut butter crackers at the gas station, to the waitresses at Millie's, to the pizza delivery boy stunned by Jim's outrageously generous tip, to a taxi driver in Durham, England who would go on to become a priest himself, inspired by the gift of Jim's friendship.

Jim's words are layered with others' words, so we hear in these pages words of wisdom from theological figures, from Diedrich Bonhoeffer to his favorite Episcopal writer Frederich Buechner. His sermons are infused with lyrical words of others, from literary allusions to Shakespeare's Caliban of *The Tempest*, Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, the lyrics of Robert Frost and Thomas Hardy and John Donne, the novels of Alice Walker and Cormac McCarthy, to American cultural treasures like *The Wizard of Oz* or the gospel of St. James, Sweet Baby James Taylor, that is. But, perhaps the most powerful voices here come from the characters Jim loved to talk about, his notorious Uncle Henry and Aunt Sue Belle and Mama Jesse and, of course, his own mother whom he immortalized in his labeling of John the Baptist as "my mother in drag," and the fictional apostle Jim created, the very Jewish Murray who shows up

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asking very human questions, not having gotten the memo of where he was supposed to be!

It is these stories through which God speaks, not stories about God's doctrines or the church, but a God who outrageously really loves us, who, as Jim says, "gives himself generously and with abandon, like some crazy sower who throws seeds everywhere, like some crazy father who forgives his Prodigal Son everything under the sun just for the joy of having him home again," a God Jim likened to a commercial about Crazy Eddie's Auto Sales, that Crazy Eddie God of ours whose low prices are just ridiculous!

As a collection of sermons, it is, of course, incomplete. I often run into people who say "Do you have the one about . . . ?" Those have a vibrant life of their own through oral storytelling. One in particular is Jim's recollection of what he called the best Easter sermon he'd ever heard, given by a local African-American preacher, who got at the essence of God's love: "It's like you be cryin' and there ain't nobody died; you be laughing, and nobody told a joke; you be running, and ain't nobody chasing you."

Finally, the words here bid us to remember, to remember all those who came before us and touched us and were Jesus to us in ways we often overlook. As Jim puts it, "We need each other. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own, but you cannot, I think, become fully human on your own."

In collecting and offering these words, then, we remember Jim's ministry. And memory is not nostalgia but

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an active reclaiming: “Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer. It’s a looking deep into another kind of time altogether, where everything that ever was continues not just *to be*, but to grow and change with a life that’s in it still. The people we loved. The people who loved us. The people who taught us things. Dead and gone though they may be, as we come to understand them in new ways, it’s as though they come to understand us, and *through them*, we come to understand ourselves in new ways too.”

The book opens with a sermon Jim preached out in Montana about coming home to Georgia and what that meant, and it ends with the final sermon he did on his last Sunday at St. Margaret’s. In between, there are multiple sermons about some of the same gospel passages (John the Baptist and Advent, the feeding of the five thousand), and I have grouped these together so readers can enjoy the different lenses through which he talked about the same topic. Otherwise, the ordering of the sermons is mine—a rhythm of tones, moods, messages, and life stories that take readers into the “givenness of things.”

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Come Unto Me

“Come unto me, all ye who labor, and are heavy laden . . . and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

To what sort of weariness does Jesus speak? And to what sort of burden? Is it a word of comfort to old pilgrims—the discount of grace given to senior citizens or battle-weary saints? I think not. I think rather that he speaks to whatever *weariness there is* in whoever his hearers are. To whatever it is in you and me that *listens* and *bears*. I believe that he speaks as much to the weariness that comes when our hearts are broken and our dreams shattered in *growing up* as he does to the fatigue and despair that sets in when we have grown old. I believe that he speaks to what grows old before its time in the youngest of us—faith and hope and love—and which must be resurrected every day of our lives if it is to remain fresh and alive and real.

I recall my encounter with a shattered looking youth in Central City Park. “What’s wrong,” I asked. “Everything,” he said. “Are you all right?” “No.” “Can I help?” “Probably not.”

As I mentioned to you before, I came to Montana with an old Boy Scout need of mine to recognize and be able to identify many of the trees that grow so wondrously in this great region. To the embarrassment of my family, I think, I took on all the postures of Tommy Tourist with my little manual in hand, checking out needles and leaves and

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bark. You see, before I came out here, I was like that lovely Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas, at least in this one respect: “All trees are oaks—except elms; all birds are swans—except geese; all flowers are roses—except chrysanthemums.” If you were of a cynical mind, you could say of me what one of my English professors said of the eighteenth-century Romantic poets. He called them “city-spawned youth who went slumming through Nature.”

Well, whatever. I simply wanted to know their names. And now that I am leaving, I want them to know mine. Or assuming that trees don't go in much for naming things, at least to know that someone with my ordinary name and less than memorable face stood in awe of them, wondered at them and felt humbled in their presence, and will remember them forever.

Come unto me, all ye who labor . . . and I will give you rest. I will give you the oaks and the elms, the tamaracks and the firs, the spruces, and the beautifully shimmering leaves of the aspen who dance for their sister, the *wind*.

Since I have been here, I have thought a great deal about a speech of Caliban's in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Half monster and madman that he is, he tells two of the shipwrecked survivors who people this lovely play, who are washed miraculously upon the shore of Prospero's magical island, this. Caliban says to them, in Act 3, scene 2:

“Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum about mine ears. And sometimes voices that if I then had

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waked after long sleep will make me sleep again. And then, in dreaming, clouds methought would open and show riches ready to drop upon me, that when I waked, I cried to dream again.”

“Be not afeard.”

But now we go home to our own island, with its own noises, sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. To hills and mountains not so majestic as yours, to summer mornings not so cool and invigorating as yours, and to oaks and elms and pines not quite so tall or stately as your towering evergreens. But, I suppose that the things in them that call us back, make us even hungry and yearning to return, is that whatever their own special beauty is, or whatever beauty they lack, they are, after all, *our* hills and mountains, *our* fields and streams; they are our children and parents and friends and adversaries. In a simple word, they are *home*. Not too different, I suspect, from the houses to which you return every day—from your labor and from your being heavy-laden.

“Home,” as Robert Frost says, in “The Death of a Hired Man,” “is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

Come unto me, ye that labor—and I will give you *home*. Not just a heavenly one, either, if you’re lucky. An earthly, incarnate one—where there’s always something to be fixed, always something wearing out, always taxes to be paid, where there’s sometimes as much laboring as being heavy-laden, as much agonizing and unrest on the inside as

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there is on the outside, maybe even more. But home it is, nevertheless.¹

And he calls us as much to that home as he does to the heavenly one, and our journey to it and in it and through it is as sacred and shot-through with meaning as our journey to Paradise. *It is, my dear friends, our journey to Paradise.*

It's like Caliban's little island home—full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. It's a place, for me at least, where there are books to be read and poems to write, and people to love; where there is grass to cut, and a living to earn, and neighbors to care for and fuss with, and things to be gloriously put off till tomorrow . . . or never! And things to be put *on*, and risks to run and losses to suffer. And if we're lucky, little victories to be won.

But there are other noises, too—noises, sounds, and not-so-sweet airs that give no delight and hurt like hell. Someone we love suffers. Someone we adore and depend on dies. And as Mark Twain says, “When someone you love dies, it's like when your house burns down. It's years before

¹In alternate notes for this sermon, Jim added here, “A self to be, other selves to love and work to do, but when we have found that, we discover that there is also something crucial missing which we have not found and search for that too. . . . My stay here has been at a time in my life in which this quest, this sacred and foot-sore journey, has been or is being greatly renewed. . . . What I have not found, I cannot name, and for the most part know of only through my sense of its precious and puzzling and haunting absence. And maybe we, all of us, can never name it by its final, true, and holy name. And maybe it's largely through its absence that, this side of Paradise, we will ever know it.

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you realize the full extent of your loss.” We fail a friend. Or a friend fails us. And we’re appalled at the capacity we all of us share for estranging the very people in our lives that we need the most.

Or maybe nothing extraordinary happens at all. Just one day following another, helter-skelter in the manner of days. We sleep, we dream, we wake, we work, we remember, and we forget. We have fun, and we are depressed. We laugh, and we get fed up.

I saw a crazy T-shirt in one of your gift shop windows the second day we were here. Below a picture of what looked like a medieval version of one of the Rolling Stones, it said, “I don’t like glaciers. I don’t like Park Rangers. I don’t like grizzlies. And I’m not crazy about you, either, Pal.” If I hadn’t known it before, I knew then that I was going to love Whitefish [the town in Montana] if for no other reason than there was somebody here as crazy and sick as I was!

It’s part of the *givenness of things*, that makes us one with park rangers and grizzlies, so that we can laugh at each other and at ourselves, at the park ranger in all of us who likes to tell people where to go and what to see, and at the grizzly in all of us that would devour and wipe out the whole township for a taste of honey or an unmolested feast at some garbage dumps!

It’s the humbling knowledge that when we are at our most dazzling, there’s always *somebody* who’s not too crazy about us, either, Pal!

To simply despise that is to despise the world that God died to save. It is, in fact, to despise yourself and your

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own incarnation. For apart from that world—the *givenness* of things—you and I have no being and make no sense. For it is just the *givenness* of things—this sadness and sorrow, this all too fleeting pleasure, this boredom and fear and terror, and this laughter and these tears—that are *the thick of it into, or out of* which God speaks.

“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 lonely and despised, even things that are not, to put to nought the things that are” [I Corinthians 1: 26-31].

The foolish shaming the wise puts me in mind of some others of God’s natural creatures, crows and larks. There is a wonderfully courageous—and somewhat comic—little scenario that gets frequently played out in Nature. You can see it along highways, usually in open fields. When a bird of prey, like a hawk, or an otherwise mischievous, large bird, like a crow, flaps his winged way through the domain of other smaller and less malevolent birds, most of them scatter and take cover wherever they can. But a few species are not so easily intimidated, in my part of the country, mockingbirds and kingfishers. They flit along always above the invader, and with great audacity dive down and peck him on the top of his head—this to a creature ten times their size, this to a creature who carries sudden death in its talons or its sharp beak. They never seriously damage the great bird. But they give him quite more than his share of consternation, goading him out of their territory to more friendly and unperturbed skies.

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Well, I have seen this little air show a thousand times in my life, I guess, and have delighted—even wondered—at each one. Such courage! Such audacity! But never before had I seen it played out to the end, or rather, to an intermission until I came here to Montana. I was coming back from taking my son John to the airport. The sun was just above the mountain as I drove into town by way of Dillon Road. A huge, black crow was doing his early morning, lazy reconnaissance across a misty field, when the dive bombers flew into action. There must have been five or six of them—sparrows or larks, or whatever they were—making that old bird wish he had stayed in bed or that he had picked some other field. He soared low, just above the ground, and finally came to rest on the post of a barbed-wire fence, struggling, I suppose, to regain his composure. To my amazement and great laughter, his assailants called off the attack and came to rest on the same barbed-wire fence, not two feet from the crow. There they all sat for a few moments, the old crow shaking out his much battered head and the larks, or whatever, preening themselves or checking for lice, or whatever larks check for. They all looked like a group of *chums* sitting around a bar rail, the crow the oddest member of the bunch! Then, after a moment's respite, the crow took off again, and the battle resumed until they all flew out of sight as if in an airplane commercial: "Delta is ready when you are."

I rode on into town laughing awhile—and then wondering if the crow would miss the larks if they weren't around, as I was beginning already to miss my son. Or if the larks ever grow lonely for the crow.

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I went back to my rectory, and while my wife and daughter slept, I wrote it all down. It was one of the things I had come up here to Montana to see, without knowing it. God sent ahead of my coming to prepare—as one finds rooms made ready for one's lodging.

You see, we can survive on our own, we can grow strong on our own, but we cannot become human on our own. Let us call it God's *declaration of interdependence*.

That's why, I think, in Jesus' sad joke, the rich man has as hard a time getting into Paradise as the camel—because with his checkbooks in his pocket, the rich man is so effective at getting everything he needs that he doesn't see that the thing he needs most can be had only as a gift.

Come unto me, all ye that labor—and I will give you each other.

John the Baptist I

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand...’”

And what are the words that pierce our hearing and disturb our hearts? The *wilderness*—repent—a coat of camel’s hair—a leather girdle—locusts and wild honey—you brood of vipers—repent!—an axe, a winnowing fork—the chaff burned with unquenchable fire—repent!

And so, here he is again, John the Baptist, that fierce old Knight of the Woeful Countenance, grim old Puritan, and everybody’s least favorite Dutch Uncle. Coming to prepare us for something we are not sure we want to be prepared for. *Preparation D for Doom*, if you please. We thought that we had outgrown him, that he had somehow been dispensed with in form criticism or the doctrine of progressive revelation. But, here he is again, and here we are feeling perhaps strange in his company, and uncomfortable, not so much because we are afraid as because we are somehow disenchanted. The mask that got left over from Halloween doesn’t scare us as much as it provides a sense of intrusion. Here we are waiting for the Christmas Parade to begin, and who shows up on the very first float but a sort of Jewish version of Ebenezer Scrooge!

His camel’s hair coat with part of the camel’s hide still attached, with the remnants of locusts and wild honey dried in his bushy, tousled beard, with weeks in the wilderness unwashed, we can all but sniff his coming before he arrives, before we can see him, but not before we hear his bugle

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blast of warning: “REPENT! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Bow-legged and bent from the heat of the searing desert sun, gnarled and wild-eyed from staring at the stars in the cold desert nights.

[“You, sir, would you mind moving over and making room for him? Thank you.”

“Now, what is it, John the Baptist, you wish to say?”

“REPENT!!!”

“You don’t have to say it so loudly. I will tell them. Goodbye. Thanks for dropping in. We will see you next week, perhaps, certainly sometime during the holidays.”]

You see, we really will. We always do. There’s not enough holly in the world to hide him. There’s not enough “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” in the world to drown him out. There’s not even enough incense or the smell of plum pudding to quite remove the vaguely disturbing odor.

The truth is, my beloved people, he didn’t come from the outside, any more than he just left. He is a part of the Truth that comes from deep within each of us. He is that part of the Good News that first sounds like bad news before it can become Good News.

And the bad part of the Good News is that there really is something for us to do. No matter how He has taken the initiative, no matter how He has emptied Himself and become one of us, and one with us, and one for us, we must, nonetheless, see the wonder of that. Feel the wonder of it deep down within ourselves, from that deep down place where John the Baptist always comes . . . and to where he leads us. We must repent; we must turn from feverish

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and non-believing ways to the way of surrender and acceptance and belief. We must risk making fools of ourselves in order to know true wisdom; we must turn around in the road and ask what road it is that we are on, and what direction we are taking, and whether that direction takes us ever closer to Him, or ever further away in our own mistaken sense of adequacy. I remember that wonderfully funny and telling line that one of you gave me about your suffering from a *great delusion of adequacy*.

If John the Baptist said nothing else, if he bellowed until he was blue in the face, about nothing else, he told us this, and he keeps on telling us, that until we recognize *the empty place in our hearts where God wants to be*, we are like so many Christmas inns—packed full and busy but devoid of anything that could save us all from the cold, having no room for anything that might save us and make us free.

When I think of John the Baptist, and his unlikely, doleful appearance on the scene, I think of Thomas Hardy, my favorite of all English writers, and of his wonderful little poem called “The Darkling Thrush.” In his own time, Hardy found little cause for believing much in mankind or in God either, for that matter. And yet, and yet in all of the gloom of nineteenth-century Wessex, he could write:

“The Darkling Thrush”

I leaned upon a coppice gate
When frost was specter-gray,
And winder’s dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.

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The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings from broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The century's corpse outleant;
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth.
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervorless as I.

At once a voice burst forth among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illuminated;

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,

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That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

What an image! That crusty old bird with its feathers askew in the chill wind, in blast-beruffled plume, a darkling thrush indeed . . . but hidden in its heart a hope, and in its song a message of new life to come. It is a wonderful symbol for John the Baptist and for Advent.

Advent. The time just before the adventure begins, When everybody is leaning forward to hear what will happen, even though they know already what will happen and what will not happen, when they listen hard for meaning . . . for *their* meaning, and begin to hear, only faintly at first, the beating of unseen wings.

Is it a plane? Is it a bird? No! It's Super-Jew!! John the Baptizer.

