

HERE IS YOUR GOD!

December 10th, 2017 by Pilar Millhollen

Readings: *The Third Reconstruction* (William J. Barber II); Isaiah 40:1 – 11

What a time is this, beloved community. So many signs of hope, of stirrings, of movement toward a time where, as our prophet says, the uneven ground shall become level as we see the coming of God in our midst. In preparation for making this highway for our God, I bore witness to such a moment on Thursday evening when I gathered in Washington Square Park with hundreds of other New Yorkers from all five boroughs. The gathering was a rally and march against not one, not two, but three major concerns affecting vulnerable Americans in our time. The demonstration sought to address 1) Congress' immoral tax proposal; 2) to protest the Supreme Court decision to uphold a ban on travelers from six Muslim-majority countries, and 3) to demand action protecting the Dreamers, the many immigrants who came to our country as children but have yet to become full citizens. What made this gathering – and others like it – unique to our time, new and exciting in its vision, is its intersectional nature. Intersectionality seeks to affirm that systems of domination, oppression, and discrimination are not independent, but actually intersect and play off each other to continue to divide and marginalize variant groups of people in a society. This week's trifecta rally was the result of multiple nonprofit organizations working together – these groups all have different needs and different focuses such as immigration, racial justice, Muslim-American rights, anti-poverty work - but they joined together in recognition that each of these issues are not just about one thing, and they do not just affect one group. It was, from my vantage point, a triumph for God's vision of unity through diversity, with the underlying message that none of us is free until all of us are free. How fitting for this week, that marks the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Poor People's Campaign, a mass grassroots movement to heal the wounds of poverty by addressing the intersectional injustices of racism, economic disparity, and militarism in the United States. The roots of the movement started in December of 1967 when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. announced a continuation of the work related to Civil Rights by involving people who were directly affected by economic devastation and war mongering. Tragically, the movement suffered from internal collapse after King was assassinated four months later in the spring of 1968, but the spirit of the Poor People's Campaign, inspired by more than 2000 verses in the Jewish and Christian testaments to raise up the poor and eradicate economic disparity, has only become stronger in the last 50 years. After King's untimely death, the multiracial movement against economic injustice seemed to unearth a deep-seated fear of losing control from those who have gained power at the expense of the vulnerable...and here's what this looks like: in the last 50 years, our economic disparity has gone off the charts because of tax legislation that's concentrated more and more of the country's wealth into a handful of extremely affluent people. I'm going to put this in perspective because, as our dear brother Bill Moyers says, progressives love statistics: since 1968, there has been a 40% increase in the number of Americans living at or below the poverty level. 43% of these people are children. Increased militarization of poor communities of color has birthed the private prison industry and incarcerated 1.5 million people, up from 188,000 people in 1968. Coinciding with this increase, our government now spends 4 times as much on military defense as it does on fighting poverty; in

comparison, in 1968 we were only spending twice as much on defense as on poverty, even in the middle of the very costly Vietnam War.

In such circumstances, as our sacred texts have told, it is only a matter of time before God begins to show up and show up strong. A few years ago in the state of North Carolina, a coalition of leaders from faith communities and secular non-profits organized to appeal to the immorality of the state's legislative decisions to cut public education, healthcare, and voting rights. What began as a gathering of intersectional folks at the capital building on a Monday evening grew into a monthly and sometimes weekly event – advocates from Planned Parenthood joined with faith leaders concerned with growing poverty, public school teachers devastated by budget cuts, and black and brown communities whose water was poisoned by toxic dumping. One voice began to emerge as the kind of face of the campaign – a Disciples of Christ minister who came from a long line of folks whose faith informed their active participation in the eradication of social evils. This minister, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, reluctantly took up the mantle of leadership for this diverse coalition, under the condition that the movement never be dominated by one faith, by one issue, and by one type of human being. The movement erupted in North Carolina and faced much resistance, which Rev. Barber saw as proof of its efficacy – “when they stop laughing and start fighting,” he notes, “you can be sure they are worried that you are winning.” Indeed, like the Civil Rights movement, the new resistance, shaped by Martin Luther King Jr.'s earlier call for a moral revolution of values in our country, took up the name “Moral Mondays,” and suffered its fair share of failures as well as triumphs. One of the biggest risks Barber took was, in fact, making the movement so broad – could such a diverse group put aside their ideological differences to agree that the middle class trans white woman and the working class Latino Pentecostal straight man and the black atheist academic all deserve the same rights to life, liberty, to enjoy the fruits of their own labor, and to happiness?

We are reminded of this radical vision of justice in the towering messages of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the most beloved and influential voices of the Hebrew Bible. He is referenced multiple times by John the Baptist in preparation for Jesus, and according to the gospels, by Jesus himself who used Isaiah's prophetic language as a compass for his own ministry when he walked into the temple, opened the scripture, and declared “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Isaiah's original prophecy took place during the fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrian Empire in the 6th Century B.C., where Isaiah was a personal advisor to King Hezekiah of Judah, the southern kingdom. The first part of Isaiah's written account, books 1 – 39, foretell the hardship and suffering of destruction and subsequent exile from the land that the Israelites called home, while all the while anticipating a coming day of peace, a day where the people would practice war no more, where the lion would lay down with the lamb and the soldiers would beat their swords into plowshares. Chapter 40 begins a secondary message in the spirit of the original prophecy, but speaks more than 150 years later to the subsequent generations who were granted return from exile in Babylon back to Jerusalem under the Persian King Cyrus. This return was, in Jewish history, a landmark moment for God's continual promise to keep showing up in the lives of the oppressed. What makes this second Isaiah's prophecy so exciting is its emphasis on God's love through action in the affairs of humanity, God's tireless investment in the events of the people whom God has called to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly beside their God. It has a

completely different tone from first Isaiah: at last, at long last, the people of God hear good news of a reprieve from their burdens, a respite from their displacement. “Comfort, comfort my people,” Isaiah proclaims, as a declaration that the people have suffered long enough, that God, though seemingly absent in their exile, is returning to triumphantly restore their lives. Isaiah then uses imagery from the ancient Exodus to prepare the people, commanding them to “make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God,” a highway through which both the people can physically journey and God can lead them. While this imagery was meant to Isaiah’s listeners to evoke the parting of the Red Sea, as we read these ancient words, may we glean in that image another meaning for our time: what does it look like to have every valley lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low, to see the uneven ground become level and the rough places a plain? Much as we work to see the child-of-Godness in all people, to hear the voice of God speaking anew to us in our time, I cannot help but see the inequality of the high mountains and the low valleys evening out; I cannot help but see in my mind’s eye the graphs of income inequality – with the wealthy few tracing a towering line like mountains over the great many dipping low like valleys. I cannot help but take note of the preacher inspired by Isaiah who warned us that the first shall be last and the last shall be first, a time where the playing field finally is made level. In such a vision, in that level-playing-field celebration, Isaiah preaches that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,” which, in English, doesn’t fully illuminate the prophet’s intent. In Hebrew this phrase “glory of the Lord” expressed not just God’s grandness, God’s goodness, but God’s activity in human history. Isaiah chooses to emphasize this because Yahweh, as God was called, was no stand-aside-and-judge-from-afar God; though the text in our English translation reads, “the word of our God stands forever,” again, the English falls short here in the breadth of the message, for in Hebrew, the word used for word is *dabar*, which has a more expansive meaning than in English. *Dabar* refers to spoken word, but it also refers to the activities related to that spoken word. Thus when Isaiah muses in verses 6 and 7 on the inconsistency of the people, their inability to remain steadfast as people of such a dynamic God, he resolves this musing with, “the grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever.” Here he is convinced that even when humanity falls short of its high call, when we fail to do the work of God and end up hurting each other, the actions – the work of God does not falter. And this work is the anchor upon which the people of God can always return, even when they fall short. Thus Isaiah proclaims, “herald of good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, and say to the cities of Judah, ‘HERE IS YOUR GOD!’”

It’s as if he was saying, “no matter what mistakes you’ve made, no matter what you’ve suffered, or where you have gotten lost, you are children of the living God, the God who acts for your wellbeing, the God who humbles the elite and lifts up the lowly. Here is your God, who will walk with you when all the valleys are lifted up and the high places made low. Here is your God, who delivered your ancestors from oppression. Here is your God, who has, and is, and always will be the God of freedom.

This past week, in time for the 50th Anniversary, Rev. Barber joined with Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis of the Kairos Center here in New York City to announce a revival. This revival will not happen in a tent; this revival will not happen over a weekend; this revival, beloved, is going to be in our streets, in our pulpits, in our schools and in our government buildings. This revival will join young with old, rich with poor, gay, straight, black, brown, white, Democrats, Republicans, Independents. For this revival, to quote Rev. Barber, “is not about

saving a party, it's about becoming the nation we've never yet been. It's about possibly saving the soul of this country." Revs. Barber and Theoharis have declared this revival the New Poor People's Campaign, working at the grassroots level as in 1967 with people directly affected by the trifecta of racism, poverty and militarism – with the additional issue of ecological devastation, which is in our age deeply intertwined with the previous evils mentioned. The campaign calls for a moral revolution of values, because ideology will always fall short of the framework needed to do what is actually right. And although many pundits have described it as an uphill battle, its legacy has already been felt in North Carolina where Moral Mondays action was attributed with bringing down a corrupt governor, and the heat will be on in 2018 with forty days of direct action and civil disobedience planned, culminating with a march on Washington in June. This is just the beginning, beloved – like for the listeners of Isaiah's prophecy, we know all too well that the good news will ultimately prevail; that, as Rev. Barber reminds us, "their resistance is our confirmation that we are on the right track" ...that we must not fear, no, but run up to the mountaintop and lift up our voices with strength to declare, "Here, here is our God."