

**February 5, 2023**  
**"Repairers of the Breach"**  
**Isaiah 58:6-12 / Matthew 5:13-19**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

You may be familiar with Rev. Dr. William Barber II. Perhaps through the powerful speech he delivered at the 2016 Democratic National Convention right here in Philadelphia. Or perhaps as the co-founder and convener of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival – a movement begun in 2017, almost 50 years after the original Poor People's Campaign launched by Dr. King and others. Just before he was shot and killed on a hotel balcony in Memphis.

That was the Dr. King, of course, whose vision had been expanding beyond the initial push for civil rights to confront racial segregation and ensure voting rights for Black and brown people in the South, to a focus on human rights – calling out, in particular, the three evils of racism, poverty and materialism, war and militarism.

He was strongly opposed to the Vietnam War, but only began to speak out publicly in March of 1965. He traveled to cities around the country to draw attention to the plight of urban ghettos created by racist policy and practice.

In a keynote address delivered August 31, 1967, at the National Conference on New Politics in Chicago, King linked those three evils: "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy."

The original Poor People's Campaign, carried out after King's death, called for a "revolution of values."

In 2014, Rev. Barber founded a nonpartisan nonprofit called "Repairers of the Breach" – what would become one of the two anchor organizations of the new Poor People's Campaign. Repairers of the Breach seeks to build, "a moral agenda rooted in a

framework that uplifts our deepest moral and constitutional values to redeem the heart and soul of our country.”

A revolution of values.

Their expanded mission statement is worth hearing: “We challenge the position that the preeminent moral issues are prayer in public schools, abortion, and property rights. Instead, we declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. Our deepest moral traditions point to equal protection under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home.”

A revolution of values.

As King's life and leadership came to a violent and tragic end in 1968, Barber's was just beginning.

Born in Indianapolis in 1963, his parents moved to Washington County, North Carolina to participate in the desegregation of the public school system – his mother, Eleanor, as a secretary and office manager, and his father, William Sr., as a physics teacher.

He was in kindergarten at the time, called at a very young age to become a repairer of the breach. That expression originating in our reading from the prophet Isaiah, as Gerry just shared with us.

If you were around last Sunday, you'll note that we are very much picking up where we left off with our Cliff Notes of the divine mandate to do justice, love kindness and mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Following the prophet Micah's reminder last week that God is not interested in burnt offerings, in attempts to win God's favor, we hear this week from Micah's contemporary, Isaiah, calling out the practice of false worship and fasting as a demonstration of personal piety: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break

every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Only when you do such things will you be called "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

This is the divine call upon all of us.

Last week we heard Jesus' pronouncement of the beatitudes, the description of divine blessing, emphasizing the value of soft-heartedness and right relationship with God, with each other, with ourselves. This week we hear a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, and yet more metaphors for what the divine calling looks like.

"You are the salt of the earth" and the "light of the world," Jesus says.

Salt to enhance flavor and add texture; salt to preserve life, to bind together, to maintain balance and wholeness.

Light to nurture life and reflect beauty; light to lift shadows and reveal truth. As The Message translation puts it, "You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world."

So be careful, intentional, Jesus warns, not to lose your God-given saltiness, or hide your God-given light under a bushel basket. Be true, be faithful, to your saltiness and your light. Be who you are, deep down, authentic, unmasked. Let your light, your unique and critically important light, "shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your (God) in heaven."

So that they may share in the riches of the (realm) of heaven. The kin-dom of God. The kin-dom of love.

This is the Jesus who came not to abolish the letter of the law, but to fulfill its spirit. The law is not about burnt offerings to win God's favor or fasting to prove personal piety, it's about love.

It's about justice. It's about kindness and mercy and compassion. Loving each other and loving yourselves as I have loved you. As I love you.

Choose this fast, Isaiah says, and then "your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the (Holy One) shall be your rear guard."

"If" – again, IF – "you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speak of evil, IF you offer your good to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, THEN your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday."

IF you practice compassion and justice, THEN you will be repairers of the breach. When you do, you ARE repairs of the breach.

You are restorers of streets to live in. You are the salt and light the world needs, the earth needs, to heal.

In a couple of weeks we'll focus worship on our need for healing, individually and collectively, as we do from time to time. But this week, the focus is on the divine call to be healers – albeit wounded healers, as Henri Nouwen puts it.

To loose the bonds of injustice and break the yokes of oppression. To bring water to parched places.

To be the light, to shine the light, to reflect the light that brings and nurtures LIFE and all that is life-giving. To be the salt that preserves and enhances life and all that is life-giving.

To restore violent and increasingly deadly streets, ensuring streets where everyone is safe and free to live and thrive. Criminal justice reform, for example, to end gun violence and police brutality, and RESTORATIVE justice to end mass incarceration – primarily of poor Black and brown bodies.

To repair seemingly irreparable breaches. REPARATORY justice, for example, to intentionally and meaningfully and tangibly redress, or at least attempt to, the legacy and continuing impact of white supremacy racism and slavery in this country.

Take your pick of metaphors for the divine calling, but hear and respond to God's clear and resounding call just the same – echoing through the prophets, from Micah and Isaiah to Jesus. From Dr. King to Rev. Barber.

From Deborah and Esther and Miriam to mother Mary. From Sojourner Truth and Rosa Parks to Stacey Abrams and Valarie Kaur.

Take your pick of metaphors, but hear and respond – with prophets past and present – to God's clear and resounding call to join the ongoing, intersectional movement for justice and peace. To join in the revolution of values.

That, we are reminded again and again, is true worship. That is the fast that God chooses.

May it be so.