

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

American Gospel

Victoria Safford

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651.426.2369 vsafford@wbuuc.org

FIRST READING

Imagine the Angels of Bread

Martin Espada

This is the year that squatters evict landlords,
gazing like admirals from the rail
of the roofdeck
or levitating hands in praise
of steam in the shower;
this is the year
that shawled refugees deport judges
who stare at the floor
and their swollen feet
as files are stamped
with their destination;
this is the year that police revolvers,
stove-hot, blister the fingers
of raging cops,
and nightsticks splinter
in their palms;
this is the year
that darkskinned men
lynched a century ago
return to sip coffee quietly
with the apologizing descendants
of their executioners.
This is the year that those
who swim the border's undertow
and shiver in boxcars
are greeted with trumpets and drums
at the first railroad crossing
on the other side;
this is the year that the hands
pulling tomatoes from the vine
uproot the deed to the earth that sprouts the vine,
the hands canning tomatoes
are named in the will
that owns the bedlam of the cannery;
this is the year that the eyes

stinging from the poison that purifies toilets
awaken at last to the sight
of a rooster-loud hillside,
pilgrimage of immigrant birth;
this is the year that cockroaches
become extinct, that no doctor
finds a roach embedded
in the ear of an infant;
this is the year that the food stamps
of adolescent mothers
are auctioned like gold doubloons,
and no coin is given to buy machetes
for the next bouquet of severed heads
in coffee plantation country.
If the abolition of slave-manacles
began as a vision of hands without manacles,
then this is the year;
if the shutdown of extermination camps
began as imagination of a land
without barbed wire or the crematorium,
then this is the year;
if every rebellion begins with the idea
that conquerors on horseback
are not many-legged gods, that they too drown
if plunged in the river,
then this is the year.
So may every humiliated mouth,
teeth like desecrated headstones,
fill with the angels of bread

SECOND READING

from the book of Psalms, number 15, translated by Stephen Mitchell

Lord, who can be trusted with power,
and who may act in your place?
Those with a passion for justice,
who speak the truth from their hearts;
who have let go of selfish interests
and grown beyond their own lives;
who see the wretched as their family
and the poor as their flesh and blood.
They alone are impartial
and worthy of the people's trust.
Their compassion lights up the whole earth,
and their kindness endures forever.

THIRD READING

from Abraham Lincoln

We are not enemies, but friends.
We must not be enemies.
Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.
The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave
to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land,
will yet swell the chorus of the Union,
when again touched, as surely they will be,
by the better angels of our nature.

American Gospel

The mule is kicking.

That's how the Rev. Dr. William Barber describes our current moment, our political moment, in these late weeks of 2016. *The mule is kicking*, says Barber, who is a brilliant, radical theologian, an extraordinary preacher and political strategist from North Carolina. He grew up in the South and he says he's seen what happens when a stubborn mule can't get its way. He's talking about the presidential race, not just about this candidate or that one, but the millions of enraged supporters, millions of American citizens, at rallies and online, and the rhetoric of rage laced with malice, rage laced with undertones of violence, laced with xenophobia and a race hatred not heard so overtly, so explicitly, in more than half a century.

The mule is kicking, he says- and it's a *hopeful* observation, painful as it is. Rev. Barber is one of many black preachers, white preachers, sociologists, historians who believe the awful "angry mob" mentality of this election cycle is a direct reaction to slow but steady and undeniable shifts in the country's understanding of itself. Something is changing ... maybe. One historian sees in the current vitriol a familiar pattern of call-and-response: black president in the White House calls forth outraged white opposition, from the Congress to the streets; black resistance, visible and powerful, to brutality, to mass incarceration, to voter suppression calls forth outraged opposition and denial; policy and reforms (or even conversation) to address the unmet needs of the poor, the uninsured, or immigrants, or refugees (all mixed-race groups but commonly perceived as black or brown) – and there will be outraged, irrational reaction: ugly, ignorant, dangerous reaction. Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter says this is not new in our history; you think of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the 19th century during Reconstruction, or the rise of states' rights Dixie-crats in the 20th. "*The call*," says Painter, *is any challenge to the status quo of white-people-on-top; "the response" comes as outbreaks of meanness, many merely vile (embracing rhetorical weapons), and many murderous (taking up physical weapons).*

The mule is kicking in response to the collapse of an old order... maybe... and there's hope in that. What threat, what fear, what sense of betrayal does all this hate speech, represent? What fear is underneath? If an old order is collapsing, what new vision is emerging, and how can we talk about it, paint it, describe it, not just with people we agree with, but with others? How can we rise above our candidates to imagine and proclaim a new American gospel?

This is a matter of belief as much as politics, your spiritual orientation as much as your party affiliation. Someone reminded me not long ago that the central focus of Martin Luther King's career, the premise of his ministry, was not "civil rights," per se, but a broader, theological vision called "the Beloved Community." It was, he said, *a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the methods of nonviolence, insisting on the reconciliation of perceived enemies, with the full humanity of everyone intact.* (It was not enough simply to win – a campaign, an election, a struggle. You had to win with no souls overboard, able to see in your enemy a human being striving to be whole, striving to be less afraid. If you can't see that, then your enemy has won, has won your soul.) *Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail.* It sounds utopian, and it is. All religious visions are. But what it also is, is a counter-narrative, a concise articulation of a moral vision that you set as a standard before you. Anything less is substandard. You bend your whole life, your whole heart, toward it. If you can't speak it, can't see it, then you can't believe in it, and no part of it can come about. Perhaps it sounds unreasonable, but no more so than other crazy ideas setting their root in American soil right now. What country is your own?

Poet Martin Espada is able to imagine it:

This is the year that squatters evict landlords...
This is the year that those who swim the border's undertow are greeted with trumpets and drums
This is the year that no doctor finds a cockroach embedded in an infant's ear
If every rebellion begins with imagination, with an idea
Then this is the year...

Richard Hughes is a professor of religion and a historian of religion in the public square. He writes about American mythologies in eclipse. The old myths, he says, are so dear to us as to seem God-given and self-evident, but they are all inventions and all unworthy of us now:

- The myth of the chosen nation, that God chose the United States for a special, redemptive mission in the world
- The myth of nature's nation – that American institutions like democracy and free enterprise are grounded in the natural order of things
- The myth of the Christian nation, that our government is sourced directly from the Bible
- The myth of a millennial nation, that America exists to usher in a golden age for humankind
- The myth of the innocent nation, that America's goals in the world are always altruistic and righteous
- And the myth of white and male supremacy –that the chosen nation was never intended to be black or red or female or gay or any number of other utterly American identities.

Richard Hughes quotes Paul Tillich who spoke a century ago about “the mass neuroses which usually appear at the end of an era, and make the average man a fanatical defender of the established order.”

The mule is kicking... maybe.

So many have said, so many are saying, there has never been a drearier election, never one so shallow, so sordid, so wearying and worrying. We've slogged through the primaries, the debates, and the incessant “breaking news” that isn't news: tweets from one side, emails from the other - but I am not entirely discouraged, and I won't be on Tuesday, *no matter who wins*. I will not be rushing to the online list of UU congregations seeking ministers in Canada (though I've thought about it, paddling up through the BWCA before the lakes all freeze and a wall is built, and never looking back). This is no moment to bail out and no moment for despair, because if we give up, then truly all is lost. This is a moment for people of faith (I'm talking about liberal faith – small *l* – the progressive, open, free-faith tradition, Unitarian Universalists and others, people planted on the side of love) – this is a moment for people of faith to join together with others whose vision is more secular but just as bold, to rise up and show up and speak out, not just on Tuesday, but on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and all the days ahead of us, the four years and more years stretching out in front of us, and in front of our children. Election Day is the *beginning* of the struggle, not the end. We must not be discouraged, must not let our courage be crushed. We need to re-gather our vision, re-collect our story, reconstitute our confidence in the country that is our country, and *say it plain*, as the great poet Langston Hughes said,

*Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--
 Let it be that great strong land of love
 Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
 That any man be crushed by one above.
 O, yes,
 I say it plain,
 America never was America to me,
 And yet I swear this oath--
 America will be!*

Not “great again,” harkening back to some mythical gilded age of prosperity that most people have never known, and privilege that most can never claim, a magical land where security (for some) bludgeons liberty for all, and a certain, sickly, homogenous standard prevails. The dream is not to make the country “great again,” but to make articulate the “good,” the virtues and values that guide us and guard us and help and heal and hold us.

Reverend Barber leads a national interfaith coalition with an unapologetic policy agenda, anchored in the sacred scriptures of many faiths and in a careful reading of the US Constitution. He is inciting what he calls “a moral revolution” to address poverty (including housing, a living wage, labor rights); criminal justice reform; equal education in every district in every state, including access for all to community colleges and public universities; universal and affordable healthcare; environmental justice and climate action; human rights (including the rights of immigrants, LGBTQ communities; women; elders; religious groups); voting rights, the reversal of voter suppression; and the fundamental principle of equal protection. He calls this moment in our history “the Third Reconstruction” (the first taking place just as slavery was outlawed and the country struggled to recreate itself; the second during the civil rights movements of the mid-twentieth century – moments of radical ideals, roiling tension and fierce backlash). He says this Third Reconstruction that we’re in transcends every party line; it is *holy work*.

I say I’m not discouraged, not entirely, this election year, despite these candidates who insist on swimming mostly in the shallows and the muck. Willingly or not, in spite of themselves, they have put urgent issues before us, raising urgent questions. This may be why we feel so tired: the work ahead of us is massive work, and these candidates remind us that the work is ours to do, not theirs. Think of what’s come up, the raw material that we can work with now:

- ✓ the rights of women, the abuse of women, persistent misogyny, everywhere that girls and women go;
- ✓ reproductive rights and abortion rights;
- ✓ immigrant rights, deportation and the splintering of families; the building of a wall;
- ✓ the national response, or lack of response, to millions of refugees;
- ✓ religious pluralism and religious persecution; Islamophobia;
- ✓ racism;
- ✓ crime;
- ✓ the conflation of “race” with “crime” (these must be dis-entwined);
- ✓ the value of truthful speech, and honesty, and honor in public discourse; civic duty; paying taxes;
- ✓ the responsible uses of social media and technologies;
- ✓ freedom of the press;
- ✓ the right to vote, voter suppression, and “rigged elections” (in fact, they are rigged, if we consider the devastating impact of Citizens United);
- ✓ terrorism and diplomacy;
- ✓ poverty / jobs/ wages/ universal healthcare;
- ✓ climate change (hoax or not); fossil fuel; fracking; pipelines; indigenous rights and sovereignty.

We may be disappointed, bitterly, by how our candidates have spoken or not spoken, to any of these issues- but they’ve all been raised. They’re in the air, they’re seething, swirling, all around.

This is where my hope is: I’m sure there is in your neighborhood, as there is in mine, a neighbor with whom for years you’ve had a cordial, wave-across-the-fence rapport; a nice person whose first name you maybe know, but maybe don’t. In recent years you’ve talked three or maybe four times about the Vikings or the Cubs or the snow. Everything’s been fine- except that last week he put up a lawn sign supporting somebody for President. And now you don’t know what to do.

I don’t know what to do... but I do believe that the repair of our divided union will not begin in Washington but can only start on our own streets, with our own neighbors, colleagues, relatives, **preferably in person**. Repair begins in walking over with an open hand and open heart, opening a terrifying conversation that begins, “Hey, I saw your sign. This has been such a crazy election, and I went for the other one myself, but I’d love to hear why you went for this one...” Repair starts clumsily, haltingly, with no agenda but to listen,

century? This year, this week, we need nothing with rockets, no bombs bursting anywhere, nothing the pilgrims or the colonists or settlers or the founders could possibly recognize, but still with some echo of their fervent and imperfect hope, interwoven among many, many, many other beautiful strands.

The song we need now sings a story that is not the we learned in school, but instead a peoples' history, the intertwined verses of everyone, all who all got here somehow:

whether on foot tens of thousands of years ago, the first peoples on the land;

or sailing as conquerors,

or sailing in chains, survivors of the Middle Passage;

whether fleeing persecution in England, or Europe, Syria, Somalia, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua;

or starving from Ireland;

or filled with hope from Sweden or Norway or Germany.

Ours is a story of exile.

It's a story of conquest and genocide and murderous brutality.

Ours is a story of freedom and courage and refuge.

And Tuesday's polling place, the little desk with the pen on a string, its little walls or curtains, is a very small container, yet large enough to hold the whole entire story - all the past and dreaming of a complicated country. You carry all that in, and the place could almost be a sanctuary, the flat paper of your ballot almost sanctified.

Long ago the Psalmist sang in a different troubled time:

*Lord, who can be trusted with power?
Those with a passion for justice,
who speak the truth from their hearts;
who have let go of selfish interests
and grown beyond their own lives;
who see the wretched as their family*

*and the poor as their flesh and blood.
They alone are impartial
and worthy of the people's trust.
Their compassion lights up the whole earth,
and their kindness endures forever.*

No matter what it says on any ballot, we are voting for the people.

AMERICA

My country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the pilgrims' pride,
From ev'ry mountainside
Let freedom ring!

My native country, thee,
Land of the noble free,
Thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills,
Thy woods and templed hills;
My heart with rapture thrills,
Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song;
Let mortal tongues awake;
Let all that breathe partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
the sound prolong.

Our fathers' God, to Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.

-Samuel Francis Smith, 1831

My country, 'tis of thee,
Stronghold of slavery,
of thee I sing;
Land where my fathers died,
Where men man's rights deride,
From every mountainside
thy deeds shall ring!

My native country, thee,
Where all men are born free,
if white's their skin;
I love thy hills and dales,
Thy mounts and pleasant vales;
But hate thy negro sales,
as foulest sin.

Let wailing swell the breeze,
And ring from all the trees
the black man's wrong;
Let every tongue awake;
Let bond and free partake;
Let rocks their silence break,
the sound prolong.

Our father's God! to thee,
Author of Liberty,
to thee we sing;
Soon may our land be bright,
With holy freedom's right,
Protect us by thy might,
Great God, our King.

It comes, the joyful day,
When tyr'ny's proud sway,
stern as the grave,
Shall to the ground be hurl'd,
And freedom's flag, unfurl'd
Shall wave throughout the
world, O'er ev'ry slave.

Trump of glad jubilee!
Echo o'er land and sea
freedom for all.
Let the glad tidings fly,
And every tribe reply,
"Glory to God on high,"
at Slavery's fall.

- A.G. Duncan, 1843

*Note: "Trump" here is an
archaic, poetic variant of
"trumpet."*

My country tis of thee,
Late land of slavery,
Of thee I sing.
Land where my father's pride
Slept where my mother died,
From every mountain side
Let freedom ring!

My native country thee
Land of the slave set free,
Thy fame I love.
I love thy rocks and rills
And o'er thy hate which chills,
My heart with purpose thrills,
To *rise* above.

Let laments swell the breeze
And wring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song.
Let laggard tongues awake,
Let all who hear partake,
Let Southern silence quake,
The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God to thee
Author of Liberty,
To thee we sing
Soon may our land be bright,
With Freedom's happy light
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.

*- W.E.B. DuBois, 1868-1963
(poem undated)*