

At Night

by William Bittner

The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II has a very clear idea of how the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. should be remembered. Not the way one remembers a lost hero, an "oh, well, he did more than enough with the time he had." Not the way one remembers painkillers before surgery, a "felt good, but hope it's not needed again." Not the way one remembers a martyr, because who gets anything from *remembering*.

On a heavy-skied Friday night inside Birmingham, Alabama's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II called for *re-engagement*, not *remembrance*. He asked if Dr. King would be satisfied when Washington, D.C. descended on Selma a few weeks later, vultures feasting on the corpse of a movement they killed again as often as they rolled back rights and shoveled Medicare-For-All money into the great furnaces buried beneath the Pentagon. He asked how to remember a martyr, and then he told us.

Flannery O'Connor, the great writer and observer from Georgia, said, "While the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." As I listened to the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, as I rode home under the pregnant clouds, as I lay awake in bed that night, I felt the weight of ghosts over the city.

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A gospel choir stood nervously behind the pulpit as we entered the church proper. There were maybe a dozen singers, all but one people of color and, ironically, the single white member was positioned front and center.

The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church feels to me like the heart of our state. In 1963 the Ku Klux Klan bombed the church, killing four young girls at Sunday school. Doug Jones, who would later become the first Democratic senator from Alabama in two decades, prosecuted the terrorists. With \$300,000 in donations and a Welsh gift of stained glass (depicting Jesus as a Black man, one hand oppression, the other

mercy), the Church rebuilt itself. Now, it rebuilds others with the cheek-turned-ness of their God, an optimism outsiders like myself often read as forgetfulness.

In this strange place, the city's refuge and Heaven's waiting room, it felt disrespectful to ask where the bathroom was.

Of course, the choir, when they began to sing, didn't make it easy to accept that this was a church, not a temple. In a church, God listens when you speak; in a temple, when God speaks, you listen.

The Lord our God is omnipotent, they sang. As I took my seat, they looked again and again to the organist. Like a new driver looks mirror, mirror, speedometer, and so on, they looked organist, us, each other, and the God on the roof who we were all supposed to be okay with, as though the ceiling wasn't about to collapse under his weight.

I've always found it strange when churches have an American flag next to the pulpit. I don't know how they do it in the North or—God forbid—Europe, but they've been conspicuous in my time south of the Mason-Dixon Line. It's contradictory, right? To place a symbol of anti-monarchism in the court of a heavenly king. They repeat that word, *our loving king, our king in heaven, the memory of Dr. King*. Perhaps they ought to dump manna in the harbor.

I didn't say that, of course, with the Holy Ghost peering through the stained glass.

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I remember passing the pastor's study. It was the closest I ever felt to standing before the Ark of the Covenant. I walked away, imagining the Ten Commandments lying inside, the miraculous golden glow as I am struck down for my curiosity, instead of a flaking desk and an orange blanket of lamplight.

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The first I knew the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II was in the building was when a woman a few rows back loudly whispered, "Look! There

he is!" A couple days later, I said the same thing when Hamilton walked on stage while I was seeing *Hamilton*.

The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II plodded to the pulpit. Through the gauze of history, it can be hard to remember that young men age. He was a heavy-set man, walking with a cane and tragedy on his back. He wore a mask, the real kind that doctors and old people wear, with straps that hung down over his shoulders like wires. I immediately thought of a background character in a *Star Wars* cantina. I don't remember the color of his hair; I got the message by that point.

I was not encouraged by the state of the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II. It seemed I was a few decades late. I tapped my mom on the shoulder and asked her if we should find a closer seat, or if I should just strain my ears when he inevitably began mumbling. I was mired in that jelly of skepticism as a college student read out the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II's resume, only perking up when he got to the unusual bits. A typical LinkedIn profile doesn't put "seventeen arrests for nonviolent civil disobedience" at the top, next to education. What I at first thought was the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II nodding off was in fact a man's silent revving, the runner ready for the gun and tired of the ego stroking.

Over the course of five minutes in which he didn't say a single word, my perception of him changed so greatly that even he would call it radical.

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"Concussion ghosts, traveling in waves, touched our tent walls and made them quiver. Ghosts were shaking the ground ever so lightly. Ghosts were stirring the dogs to hysteria. Ghosts were wandering in the sky peering for us in our cringing hideout. Ghosts were everywhere, and their hordes were multiplying as every hour added its production..."

—Ernie Pyle, *Little Boys Lost in the Dark*

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The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II began his speech with a message about peace. He called for cutting the military budget, always tossing in an "and it would still be more than Russia and China combined!" to soothe the racing nerves of white moderates. He was militantly anti-militant, the kind of man who missed the Vietnam protests and had

to run to catch up. What made this plank of his platform, what he called the "Moral Budget," stick out was something I saw a few hours earlier.

I had eaten a cheeseburger and was walking around Railroad Park in downtown Birmingham, petting dogs when their owners would let me. An elevated railroad runs alongside this grassy expanse, cutting into the heart of the city like a bullet before exiting into the iron-red countryside. An Amtrak passed. Half an hour later, cargo piled high on rolling stock passed, and after that, tanks of natural gas. Then, as the sky grew orange like the pastor's study, the last train of the day appeared, painted brownish-green. For minutes, car after car after car rolled through the city. They were loaded with armored vehicles and field ambulances, big guns pointing ahead and red crosses painted every so often on the side. It continued like that until the moon hung low, long after I had left. They were headed to Ukraine.

I was a little more humble when the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II spoke about peace after that. I wonder if he saw the procession.

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"How do we remember a martyr?"

A good question.

"We don't remember," the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II continued, his voice booming and swaying like a crane in a windstorm. "We re-engage. Luke 11:47 states, 'Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your father killed.'"

He spoke, again, of the annual delegation from Washington, D.C. to Selma, to retrace the footsteps taken on Bloody Sunday, the ones who would then leave, return to their offices, and retrace the footsteps which made America a nation that spilled blood on Sundays in the first place.

"Would Dr. King be satisfied with that?" he asked. "That's the problem with remembrance. Everyone wants to get in the blessings line, no one wants to get in the cross-bearing line, but that's where the power is. Do you think Dr. King was satisfied when they told him, 'You've done enough - now go be a professor'? A lot of folks don't know this, but the March on Washington, one of the things they wanted was a two-dollar minimum wage. Do you know what that is in today's money? Fifteen dollars! Would Dr. King be satisfied?"

I wondered if he asked himself that in the mirror every morning. He had it to a tee, the way a diabetic pricks himself so deftly they don't feel pain.

"Would Dr. King be satisfied to know that we spend more on our military today than we ever did in Vietnam?"

Thus began the platform pitch, the bullet points on the Poor Peoples' Campaign website, which he was before us to represent. I appreciated the name. Simple and true.

"When the Amazon plant over in Bessemer was voting to unionize, do you know where Dr. King would have been? Right there with them! And when Amazon intimidated those workers and no one batted an eye, would Dr. King be satisfied?"

I wish we used Dr. King's memory more centrally in the labor movement. My interests, my outlook. Contrarianism. *Used.* The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II rifled through the rest of the platform, met with cheers and choruses of *mmm-hmm!* after each bullet point. He finished by asking us to send a text to the Poor Peoples' Campaign, to put us on their donor list.

Used.

There was something deeply melancholic to me about the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, even at the heights of his righteous anger. It could have been the latent human sadness upon seeing a young man made old, the weight on the body and soul. Time dilated around him, a man who, like Dr. King to an early grave, was pulled into the history books before his story was done. But to say it stops there would be to sell short the man who stood for two hours, who asked us to support a cause we should have supported by default since we first learned about brotherly love in Sunday school, and who walked back through the thorns of memory to grab a rattlesnake and show us how it bit.

I don't think the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II thinks I have forgotten Dr. King. I think he knows how godlike a man becomes when he is only known for his legend. I think he knows that, if I couldn't ask for a bathroom in a church I don't go to because of a harrowing hallowing sixty years before, I'm sure I will sink in Dr. King's footsteps.

I think the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II went home afterwards and felt, as I did, the weight of ghosts. I learned later that he is my parents' age. To the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II, like for

everyone in that church, Dr. King was a hero, not a friend. He stayed on the roof with God.

Perhaps that is the great tragedy of the legacy of Dr. King.