Katrina vanden Heuvel [00:00:00] Thank you all for joining. May you and yours be safe. We welcome you today to our series. We're part of a community of compassion. As Sarah said, we have more than 300 on the call. We at The Nation are working to expose— the pandemic has revealed pre-existing injustices and cruelty. The cruelty of our health, economic social systems, savaging communities of color, communities of the poor. We also serve as a frontline for bold ideas needed to rebuild a more just, equitable, fair, peaceful country in the world.

[00:00:36] We are deeply honored to have Reverend William Barber with us today. In the past few years, as so many of you know, Dr. William J. Barber II has become an indispensable figure in the Civil Rights landscape, the racial justice landscape, the architect of a broad-based political and moral movement, countering the divisiveness of Trumpism. I had the good fortune to be at Riverside Church in April 2017, when Dr. William J. Barber II delivered an extraordinary sermon, “When Silence is Not an Option.” It was 50 years to the day since Reverend Martin Luther King delivered his 1967 speech against the Vietnam War calling for a radical revolution of values and opposition to the intertwine evils, which Dr. William J. Barber II speaks out about today: racism, extreme materialism, militarism, and Dr. William J. Barber II adds catastrophic climate crisis.

[00:01:36] Many of you on this call may remember the ferocious, fierce disapproval King confronted. His allies in the civil rights movement in the liberal community attacked him. 150 newspapers denounced him. The New York Times rebuked King, arguing, “To divert the energies of the Civil Rights Movement to the Vietnam issue is both wasteful and self-defeating.” The Nation, instead, wrote that King (who had been the magazine’s Civil Rights correspondent from 1961 to ’67), “King’s Riverside Church speech will rank as one of the most significant of his career, laced with eloquence, and morally uncompromising.”

[00:02:12] Why do I say this? Because Dr. William J. Barber II, who is very much his own person, but like King understands that the prophetic role of the preacher or religious leader is to challenge the soul and the heart of the nation. Dr. William J. Barber II understands that the moral and constitutional crisis we confront in America is not just about Republicans versus Democrats or Liberals versus Conservatives. We’re in a struggle for the heart and soul of this nation.

[00:02:40] For half a century, political operatives who paved the way for Trumpism used Nixon’s southern strategy to pit black, brown, and white people against each other. They’ve hijacked our moral narrative to frame narrow cultural differences as the only moral issues in public life.

[00:02:55] Dr. William J. Barber II’s work has refused to allow today’s know-nothings to hijack America’s narrative. He has done so wearing many hats, cloths, and duties: Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina since 1993, as the founder of Moral Mondays, an extraordinary fusion coalition first organized in 2013, to protest the right-wing agenda of North
Carolina state legislator legislature. He's largely credited with salvaging voting rights, LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights, and health care rights in that state. He's president of Repairers of the Breach—which seeks to reclaim the idea of morality for progressive activism—and co-chair of the relaunched Poor People's Campaign, a national call for a moral revival, King's last and most radical campaign. This campaign is engaged in widespread acts of massive, nonviolent, moral, civil disobedience. There will be a digital march on June 20, which I know the Reverend will talk about. It has stood for economic justice and challenged poverty, systemic racism, the racializing of voter suppression, the cruelty of our immigration system, and our impoverished democracy.

[00:04:08] Dr. William J. Barber II is a key architect of The Third Reconstruction. In fact, he wrote about The Third Reconstruction. He files scores of dispatches from the frontlines of the racial justice movement, many for The Nation where we are proud he’s our civil rights correspondent. In 2015, the Reverend received the Puffin Nation Prize for creative citizenship. That same year, he was a speaker at The Nation’s hundred and 50th-anniversary celebration with Senator Elizabeth Warren.

[00:04:38] I cannot think of anyone I would rather hear from at this time than Dr. William J. Barber II. So we're very, very grateful to you, Dr. William J. Barber II, for taking the time. On the call, before people got onm you spoke about what you are dealing with in your community, with your extended family, your family. So, again, we're so grateful. Thank you.

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:05:00] Thank you so much, Katrina. Let me thank you for the historic and powerful liberation legacy of The Nation magazine. I’m just humbled every time I think about having the opportunity to be a part of this family. I decided, this morning, not to wear my per se clerk attire, but to wear this shirt that says, “We Rise Together: June 20, 2020,” for the Mass Poor People's Assembly & Moral March on Washington—digital and mobile—that we had been planning to engage physically this June 20. And there were some that had said, “Call it off.” But then people from the frontlines said, “No, we need to gather more now than ever before.” Right in the midst of this pandemic, we need to have the largest gathering online of poor, low-wealth people, moral leaders, media, and people who are determined not to let this nation, in the midst of this pandemic, once again, walk over– walk by the poor and the low-income of this nation.

[00:06:20] My speech may be somewhat slow this morning because I’m in a lot of emotional pain right now. And I’m being very honest with you, as I know many of your audience. I’ve been living with this scripture overnight that I want to read to you. It causes me to tremble for America right now (the world, but America) and it says in Ezekiel 22, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says. The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor, and the needy and mistreat the stranger. And they deny all of them justice.” Verse 30 says, “I, the Lord, looked for someone among them who would stand in the gap on behalf of the people of the land so I would
not have to destroy it, but I could find nobody to stand in the gap for those who are facing injustice.”

[00:07:30] When I think about this pandemic, in the midst of poverty, we have to deal with this reality: that there was a pandemic of greed, a pandemic of distortion, and political divisions before this pandemic ever existed as a biological reality.

[00:08:00] Before this pandemic hit, there were 700 people a day dying from poverty and low-income, which means we're wrong when we say that we're having the highest number of people dying right now. We're having another 700 or 800 on top of the 700 that were already dying every day from poverty and low-income, according to studies by groups like the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Policy.

[00:08:30] Prior to this pandemic, we had 140 million people living in poverty—43 percent of this nation. Twenty-six million African Americans and 66 million people who are Caucasian, but the 26 million African Americans represented over 61 percent of child poverty in this nation prior to the pandemic. At grotesque levels for a country that claims the level of the amount of wealth that we have.

[00:09:07] We had 30 some million people without health care 80-some million people who are underinsured, 62 million people working every day without a living wage, many of them without sick care, without unemployment. One of the things that we also faced was 4 million families who, every day, can buy unleaded gas but can't buy unleaded water before the pandemic. Gross amounts of people who could not find shelter; you have to work at least two– in no county in this country, a person could work a minimum wage job and afford a basic two-bedroom apartment before the biological pandemic.

[00:09:53] We've been talking to some scholars, some public health advocates. My daughter's a Ph.D. Public Health from Harvard. Actually, we've been working with Mary Bassett, who's at Harvard, a public health specialist, Dr. Ford from UCLA. And they said to us something right off the bat that has not been really discussed in this nation: They said pandemics have a biological and sociological reality. That pandemics spread through the fissures of our society caused by inequality. That pandemics exploit the open wounds of a society caused by racism and the criminalization of power. That you cannot ultimately deal with a pandemic as long as those inner inequalities are open and those wounds are not cared for. That the wounds will extend the life and the reach and the depth of a pandemic. That you might even be able to flatten the line but a flat line does not mean the poorest among you will still not be suffering, and if the poorest among us suffering, you will continue to have the pandemic alive and well for the rest of us in a society, because pandemics exploit those inequalities.
So, what this pandemic has been for this nation, in some ways, is kind of like the dye that they put inside your body when you're going to get an X-ray. The dye makes you see more clearly what was already sick. That if we had close some of these gaps—we know we've been crying out about them over three years now—that if you if we had closed some of these gaps in health care and homelessness and the inability for people to afford water and living wages and health care. If we had closed the gaps prior to the pandemic, the pandemic would not be so horrific, but because the gaps are there, the pandemic is so horrific. So the pandemic hits.

And we see the exploitation. And what hurts so much. Why I told you early on in this mood this morning is because we've had four bills passed. And all of them have been done from the perspective of the wealthy, from the perspective of corporations, from the perspective of business.

We passed four bills a month or so ago, in this nation. Some of the voices were saying we don't have the money. We can't do certain things. But then, all of a sudden, in the middle of the pandemic, before we even had the high levels of death that we knew were coming, we found $2.5 trillion for business, corporations. And probably now, another almost half a million, trillion, billion dollars, which means somewhere in the neighborhood of $3 trillion. And we pass a bill that is considered “care.”

Now, I'm not unmindful that some people have fought. I'm not unmindful that some Democrats have fought against these odds with Trump and McConnell. But still, even some of our Democratic friends have not done some of the things that they should do, have not gone to the mat (as we used to say in wrestling) on some of these issues. And so, we end up passing a bill. The bill does not guarantee health care. The bill does not guarantee living wages. The bill says you can get free testing, but you won't get free health care if you are found infected. The bill does not guarantee rent forgiveness; it only says that your rent is forgiven for three months, but on the fourth month, the three months will be owed. The bill does not guarantee that utilities can't be shut off, even water when the one thing you need in this crisis is the ability to wash your hand.

The bill says we're going to ignore 11 million undocumented workers. We're going to talk about 500,000 homeless people, but not the millions who are either homeless or on the verge of homelessness. And we're going to call people essential workers. And we're going to say that they are the soul of America. And the question I've been raising is, when are they going to see the soul of America? Or have they?

Because, as Fannie Lou Heyman says, “If this is the soul of America, then I question America.” If this is America, that you can give nearly $3 trillion to corporations and treat
corporations like people and people like things. That with all this death—every day, death, every
day, death—if we can't guarantee health care now, if we can't guarantee protections now, then
that says a whole lot about those in leadership and it speaks to why we have to have a movement
of the people.

[00:14:58] Many of the people that I'm around, we've been really wrestling with this question in
the movement: If you knew you only had 48 hours of breath left, what kind of world would you
use your last breath to fight for? What kind of justice, what kind of love, what kind of mercy, what
kind of health care, what kind of living wage? Well, that's the moment many people are saying
we're in. The only way we can honor those who have died is to use every breath we have, from this
point, to fight for the kind of world we know must be possible. Otherwise, we don't have a world.
We have a war between the haves and the have-not. And it's a constant war.

[00:15:34] And so, early on, the Poor People's Campaign, we actually put together an agenda your
audience can go to moveon.org/poverty. And we have over 100,000 people that have already
signed on to this. And we said if this nation is serious—and I wrote– I'm gonna– I'm writing today
on behalf of the campaign to Pelosi, Schumer, and all of them and saying, wait a minute, now. Four
bills?! And we've not had a major, major fight?

[00:16:00] You know, sometimes, the thing that bothers us is not what we don't win, but what we
don't fight for. What the leaders go in the backroom and they compromise. And I said in
meditation last night, one of the great struggles I have—and this magazine in its founding, in some
ways, raised this question or this concern—and that is that one of the ugly psychoses of America
that we continue to see played out at this moment is when too many in power are too comfortable
with other people's death.

[00:16:38] That's a psychosis of America, a part of our history that we have to constantly battle
against. It's what allowed the genocide of Native– of First Nations people. Too many people in
power comfortable with other people's death. It's what allowed slavery. It's what allowed
lynching. It's what allowed, at the turn of the 20th-century, industries not to have certain
protections for workers and child labor laws. Too many people in power too comfortable with
other people's death. It's why we went to Vietnam with all of the lives—too many people in power
too comfortable with other folks' death. And at this moment, when we see these bills that
constantly are passed, too many people are too comfortable with other people dying. And they're
not fighting as they should in the public arena. And we have to change that.

[00:17:35] We said that what we need if America is serious about this pandemic, if America is
serious about dealing with it, we must have immediate, comprehensive, and permanent paid sick
leave for 100 percent of employees. We need immediate Health Care For All, including 100 percent
free COVID-19 testing and treatment. We need that. We have to have protection for all of our workers. We need a national moratorium on worker and utility shut-offs, a waiver of all late payment charges, restitution of any services that have been cut off due to nonpayment. We need an expansion of resources and funding for FEMA. We need to end work requirements on all federal benefits, including SNAP, Medicaid, and increased SNAP. We need resources to keep rural hospitals and community health centers open and put field hospitals where many hospitals have been closed in urban and in rural areas. We need permanent protections for Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. We need to protect people in mental health facilities, prisons, juvenile detention centers. When we talk about essential workers, we need to talk about nurses and doctors and janitors and orderlies and maids.

[00:18:50] We need to use the power of all of the resources in our military, but not put it in the hands of the military, put into the hands of public health specialists, and public health experts. We must fight for these things and the fight will not be over April 30. The fight will not be over in May. Many public health experts tell us that this battle with this pandemic is a long fight.

[00:19:20] And I believe as I go back to that first scripture, you know, in Ezekiel 22: When God said, “Who can I find that will stand in the gap?” That God said, “I could find nobody.” But if you keep reading 15 chapters over, God found somebody to stand in the gap. And guess who they were, the people in the gap, the people in the valley? In the Bible, it’s called the Valley of Dry Bones. And it was there, that God raised up a movement of people who had nothing else to lose, who said we're not going to give up on this nation yet. And they rose up and became a mighty instrument of transformation and liberation.

[00:20:02] And I believe, in many ways, that is the only hope for this country: those who are dying, who've seen others die, to begin to stand up and say, if it takes our last breath, we're not going to accept this America. We're not going to accept people being comfortable, too comfortable with other people's death. We have to be better than this.

Katrina vanden Heuvel [00:20:33] Reverend, thank you for your humane rage and your demands, which are real and we must fight for. Reminding us of what we must fight for is so extraordinarily important. I'm going to turn it over to the questions because I can see that so many want to ask you about what you've just spoken up and other fights, issues you've been engaged with. But thank you. Thank you.

Erin O'Mara [00:20:59] Thank you. Dr. William J. Barber II, we have a lot of questions coming to you. And I know you like to answer them. And I think this is going to be extraordinary. We have several people wondering what we can do now. You know, we don't accept this America and
would like to take some action. And Janet Bell asks, “How do we convince white people that racism kills them, too?”

**Reverend William Barber** [00:21:29] That’s a powerful insight. And I think one of the things that has been a power of the Poor People’s Campaign is bringing people together across these false lines of division, but are very divisions. Remember, it was in 1965, at the end of the Selma to Montgomery March that Martin Luther King said these words that are very often were often excluded from remembering about him in the movement. He said that any time (and I paraphrase here) there is a possibility for white and black people to come together and change the political power structure of this nation—white and black poor people, especially. Suburban class, those divisions. It has always been that way. And he was trying to say, then if that’s the case, we must recognize that much of the division we see, much of the pushback we see, many times is a sign of fear by those who know what can happen if we come together. And the question is, do we know it?

[00:22:32] So, what we do in the Poor People's Campaign to help bring people together is we go, number one, to the places where poor whites, poor blacks, and we put people in the same room. And then we teach. And what we do—the first maps that we put up and we show people (we call them the “open your eyes” maps) is a map that shows first racialized voter suppression. We show where all the racialized voter suppression is. The next map we put up is child poverty. Then the next map is poverty. The next map is women in poverty. The next map is the states without health care, the states without living wages, the states that have the worst laws against LGBTQ people and immigrants, and the states that have the worst laws to regulate corporations from polluting our environment. And then we step back and we say, look at that map. And people say, wait a minute. Let's flip back to the beginning. Look at the voting rights, the racialized voter suppression maps, look at all the other and they say, but it’s the same states. And we say that’s the point.

[00:23:34] When we teach people, particularly something as tangible as racist voter suppression, that the same persons that use racialized voter suppression to get elected, to rig elections—once they do that, they pass laws that hurt mostly white people. Now, I didn’t say most of the white people in terms of the Senate. And I recognize that poverty among black people has a whole different reality because of racism. But people have to understand that my grandmama used to say, if you scratch a liar, you find a thief. If you scratch a racist, normally you find an anti-health-care person, an anti-public-education person, and an anti-LGBTQ person. And so we have to show people in tangible, empirical ways that they are being played against one another. But that’s not enough.

[00:24:31] Next, then, we have to show them that if they came together what power they have. So we’re about to release a study that shows what would happen if just 5 to 10 percent of black and white people around an agenda that addresses systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological
devastation, the war economy, and the false narrative of religious nationalism would come together? Not 50 percent, not 60 percent. If just 5 to 10 percent of them would come together and build a voting bloc, they could have fundamental, transformational power, even in southern states.

[00:25:09] I'm convinced that one of the reasons we see such an ugly rise of Trumpism and Trump Evangelicals and McConnell stacking the court is not power, but fear. Fear, because they know that we are, right at this moment, that we can come together and that's why we're calling on people to join the Poor People's Campaign in *A National Call for Moral Revival*. Join us on June 20 when we show America not me speaking; but we're going to put coal miners from Kentucky on the digital stage with black folk from The Delta who are going to say to America, it's time for us. This unlikely coalition, this counterintuitive coalition to come together and build power and change America. I believe that's the only hope we have in this nation.

**Erin O'Mara** [00:26:03] Gary Spencer wonders how church social action committees might be able to help. What could they do?

**Dr. William J. Barber II** [00:26:12] We need every church social action committee. And let me just, first of all, say Gary, I'm glad you have a church social action committee. You know, it's alright to have a church fellowship committee. It's alright to have a church cookie baking committee, and all of those things, but we need church social action because the church ought to be about social action. We need every one of them to go to our website—on *poorpeoplescampaign.org* or *www.breachrepairers.org*—and to sign up. We need thousands upon thousands of people to join this digital march, this digital assembly, and that's not going to be an end.

[00:26:54] Actually, one of the things we're going to do on June 20 is talk about the kind of things we need to do this year to reshape the political landscape and show people in power that we have to do that. And why we have to have a nonpartisan movement that is nonpartisan, but very political and will drive this narrative to the point that the politicians we sometimes know are too weak to get some backbone, because they know that we're here. We're not going anywhere.

[00:27:23] So, we need churches. This is a moral movement, a moral fusion movement. We welcome all religions, we welcome all people, even people not of faith. Go to our website, sign up, and help us mobilize for June 20 of 2020, so that, during that mobilization, we can not only have a big gathering, but we can have the continuation of a mass movement that will continue to be felt in the halls of Congress, in the communities in statehouses, and at the ballot box.

**Erin O'Mara** [00:27:52] We have a few people who are wondering about voter issues: John Howard and Tennessee Timothy Smith are both asking a similar question: What can we do? And
how worried are you about new methods of voter suppression? Wisconsin is an example. And, you know, what can we do to make sure that everybody gets their vote?

**Dr. William J. Barber II [00:28:21]** That's a serious question because let's be honest: Trump did not win. Trump was, in many ways, elected president by the continuing racist reach of the Electoral College, but also by voter suppression. In the three states that took him over—Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—he won by something like—they claim 30,000 votes in Wisconsin, but 250,000 votes were suppressed. In Michigan, it was 10,000 votes, but we know 100,000 African Americans in Detroit alone didn't vote. And similarly, in Pennsylvania. And then, inbound and outbound through the south, we know that voter suppression has been a major problem.

[00:29:07] And it's been a big problem ever since 2010, even before Trump was in office. 2010, we saw 26 states since 2010 have passed racist voter suppression laws. And now, in the midst of this pandemic, we have additional problems because some people are going to have to—if we don't have mailing—risk their lives to vote. That's another reason why these candidates gotta be bold. They gotta give people some reason to put on a mask and go stand in the line other than, I'm nice. I mean, really, they have to hear that.

[00:29:41] Because here's the other thing: One of the things that also cause Trump to win was 100 million people didn't vote. And when we did our analysis, we found out that a great number of that hundred million are poor and low-wealth people that aren't ever talked to. They just don't vote. We found that when we've gone into the mountain of Appalachia, some of them say nobody really cares about them.

[00:30:04] We know, for instance, in this country, that the margin of poor and low-income people who are eligible to vote who didn't vote actually represent the margin of transformation. And we know that people who make under $50,000 a year did not vote for Trump. That's a lie when people put this on poor white people, most of them did not vote for Trump. Most of them didn't vote, and then those who did, voted in a different way. So what must we do?

[00:30:31] We must mobilize everybody we can do but we can't have a democracy where 100 million people stay home and don't participate. We can't. We must push hard on every person that's in power to get this in balance. We must push hard. We must push hard to get the $2 billion right now that's necessary to protect voting in democracy. Now, they've only put $400 million in the last bill.

[00:31:00] This is another one of those things that I'm saying Democrats ought to fight in public about. Not in the back room where nobody sees it. They have to fight in public about it and make
McConnell have to vote against it in the public space, the money that we need to protect this democracy. And we need to be using every avenue we have to say to people, you cannot sit out. You cannot sit out. That has to be our mantra because 100 million people sitting out on top of voter suppression, on top of the attempts to keep people from the polls, is nothing but a formula for continuing to have an authoritarian rule in the Senate and the White House.

**Erin O’Mara** [00:31:49] And, Dr. William J. Barber II, I just want to let you know that in our comments, there are so many people who are so grateful that you're here today, and they're so grateful to hear your words and share this moment with you. I wonder if you could explain your June event a little bit and how—I believe it’s a virtual event—how does that have power? How are you going to help that resonate?

**Dr. William J. Barber II** [00:31:50] The June 2020s, [Mass Poor People’s Assembly & Moral March on Washington](https://www.mpp.org/events/mass-poor-people-s-assembly-moral-march-on-washington) was going to be a physical event. We've been organizing now for three years all over the country. We were on a tour called [We Must Do M.O.R.E.](https://www.mpp.org/solidarity), mobilizing, organizing, registering, and educating people for the movement to vote. And one of the things about things organizing tells us and moving around this country tells us is three things have to happen if we really want to see a transformation in this country. And this pandemic has made it even more of a necessity.

[00:32:52] Number one, we've got to put a face on top. We got to put a face on the hurt that’s caused by systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, and a war economy. Because too often the faces are not seen. As I said, 700 people were dying a day before this pandemic. Seven people died from vaping and it was a national emergency. White House hearings, congressional hearings. 700 people dying a day from poverty and low-income, but no hearings. We must put a face on poverty.

[00:33:20] Second thing we must be in power. So every state, every one of our coordinated committees is connecting 30,000 people to the 43 coordinating committees. That would be over a million people that will be connected to this movement, will be connected to registering people for the movement who vote, will be connected to building power that can challenge at the state level because so many problems that we face happen at the state level.

[00:33:45] And the third thing: This is not a march. It's a Poor People's Assembly because it will be a generationally transformative event that will send people forth with clear steps and actions to move after June 20. We had planned for it physically. They shut that down early in DC, they said no big gatherings, we know we couldn't have that now. But we need— this event is a massive national call. We're getting calls from people around the world saying they're going to join that day. We
have over 100-and-some organizations now, 43 state coordinating committees, and 16 denominations; that didn't happen in the former Poor People's March in 1968.

[00:34:32] This is a moment where people can come together and see this nation and hear the tears and hear the hurt, but not just the hurt, the people who are experiencing this pain; they're also going to put an agenda on the table. We're not inviting people just to march and be mad. We're saying let's mobilize around this agenda and then build the kind of power that can't be ignored. That can't be ignored anymore. One of our songs is: Somebody is hurting our people “and it’s gone on far too long, and we won't be silent anymore.”

[00:35:06] Another thing we're going to be lifting up is that everybody has a right to live. If we don't, then nobody does. And what I mean by that is, if poor people aren't living in a pandemic, if they're dying, the rest of the nation's going to die. Because if you don't close the wounds and close the gaps, then everybody is susceptible to being infected.

[00:35:25] And so, this gathering is– every era of history required some major gathering that finally sounded the alarm, whether it was abolition marches, whether it was the Bonus Marchers in the 1920s, whether it was the march against lynching, whether it was the Civil Rights Movement, whether it was the Peace March. Because they weren't just marches. And that's why this is a Poor People's Assembly.

[00:35:55] Lastly, I would like to say to the folk online, think about it: When is the last time you've seen, in the media itself (except for in The Nation), when have you seen in the media poor and impacted people of every race and color laying out their condition and having the demands for an agenda? When have you seen politicians have to look in the face of people who are dying without health care and tell them: Well, we're going to go back and work out a good compromise, but you might be left out.

[00:36:28] This is a time for radical realization. And the first thing that we must undermine in this nation is attention violence. The attention violence. Attention violence: the refusal for this nation to truly look at and see and do policies for what's real. Because too often, even our political leaders are inside the walls. And they do so much inside the walls and inside the walls—and I know I'm being a little long—but being inside the walls will make you compromise on something, and feel like you've done a lot. Because you are not looking at the people who your compromise leaves out.

[00:37:14] We've had four deals, and hundreds of millions of Americans have been left out. They've been left out. Where those people are saying, you might have left us out, but you're going to have to see us now. On that day, we will have some sophisticated social media that's going to tap into every legislator's, every congressperson's, every Governor's, every senator's email and
Twitter. We’re working on a way to check to see if we can—come here to hear your people, we don’t want you to come to talk. We want you to come to listen and hear and we’re sounding this alarm from June 20, forward.

[00:37:55] You know, the 21st of June is the beginning of summer, when the sun—the light is the brightest on Earth. We’re saying after June 20, the light on poverty and racism and ecological devastation is the brightest.

[00:38:11] And we’re not an organization. Lastly, we’re an organism. We’re saying to all of our friends, look, we have our silo. But there comes a time when everybody ought to come together, not for William Barber to be the leader, or Liz Theoharis to be the leader. But there comes a time that we have to say the same people against fixing the environment are the same people against public education, are the same people against health care, are the same people against living wages, are the same people that are pro-voter-suppression. And if they are cynical enough to be together, we have to be smart enough to come together. And be a force together. And that’s what the 20th is gonna be all about.

Erin O'Mara [00:38:47] Thank you, and you should be as talk as long as you want. I think everybody’s hanging on your words. I know I am.

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:38:55] So I’m going to the website. You know, normally I would have on a clergy column. I’m gonna put my collar around this T-shirt from now on. It’s movement time.

Erin O’Mara [00:39:08] Well, and then to that, we have two questions about our leadership going forward. And so how can the organization that Bernie Sanders put together, the movement he’s put together, be most effective in fighting for the issues that you’re bringing forward? And then, related to that, what can we expect from Joe Biden? How do we push him?

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:39:37] Well, here’s what we say in the Poor People’s Campaign: By the way, we’re organized of, you know, two, five, six, or three groups. We didn’t endorse, but we are very political. So we talked to every campaign. We talked to Bernie’s campaign, Biden’s campaign, and what people need to say now, is—I think Bernie said something the other day—not being engaged right now would be irresponsible at this moment. That is not to say any one candidate has everything that we think. But we do know something about the current presidential candidate and the current leadership of the Senate.

[00:40:17] We need to stop just saying president, too. We need to connect the two. Because it’s not just a presidential election, we’re going to elect every member of the United States House of Representatives and a third or more (or maybe two-thirds) of the United States Senate and the
person who is currently the leader of the Senate. We’re gonna be electing governors, and so forth and so on. Here's what we believe when we take an honest look at history.

[00:40:48] In 1965, we forget that it was not an election year. The Voting Rights Act was not won in an election year. The Voting Rights Act was won in a nonelection year, when you had a president who had been a segregationist, even though he was a Democrat in the main zone. The movement decided that they would elect to change the political landscape and force politicians, who before they began the movement, were being practical. The movement decided we’re gonna make you a great president. We’re gonna push the United States Senate and Congress to do what they otherwise would not do. There was not what we call positive and creative tension.

[00:41:53] The best thing we can do at this moment, we know what we have to do in terms of folks that need to get homes. But I said to Vice President Biden, the other day, on a podcast—I was on Easter. And I said, you know, my brother Vice President, there are things you said a few months ago that may not work now. Your thinking needs to shift if you become the person who learns. And this is the moment that it can happen. The pandemic has shifted everything. I said this is like a Great Depression moment. A lot of things Franklin Roosevelt did not intend to do. In fact, one time he told one of the leaders of the Civil he said go out and make me do it.

[00:42:40] And I said to him, two or three months ago, we were talking about we couldn't afford health care. Well, that's been shot to hell, now, because we found $2.5 trillion overnight. So, we have to decide in the movement, now—number one—what we're not going to take that already exists. And then we have to have a movement that pushes people to be better than they ever imagined. Better than they ever imagined. Right? And we show our power at the ballot box, before the ballot box, and after the ballot box. So we're not backing up on this agenda.

[00:43:21] That's why we have this gathering on the 20th of June, so that whenever they have the conventions—whether it be by digital or whatever—they're going to have to respond to these thousands upon thousands upon thousands of people. And we're saying you don't have to tell people who to vote for you. What you do is work for them, they'll know who to vote for. If people understand that, if they put you in, they're going to get health care, you don't have to worry about people voting for you. Not now. If people understand that they're going to get a living wage, you don’t have to worry; they will vote.

[00:43:52] So what we have to do is not back up on our agenda, not back up on our agitation, not back up on bringing awareness to this nation of what's at stake, and make these people who are running for office, see us, hear us, feel us, and know that—this is bad English, but it's good movement—us ain't going nowhere.
Erin O'Mara [00:44:16] So, Gloria Davis, she's an educator, she teaches the sociology of race and gender. And, building on what you're talking about, what she's wondering is, how does she get her students more involved in the fight for racial justice inequality, so that they become part of the solution? And she points out that her white students certainly understand or are aware of, I should say, racism and sexism and classism. But how does what tools should she be using to bring them deeper into this fight?

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:44:56] I'm gonna sound somewhat like a broken record because— and let me say this: the young people, in many ways, get it.

[00:45:05] I never forget: When we were in the backwoods of Kentucky, in Harlan County, Kentucky, and people said don't go back there. You go back there, and 89 percent of people back there voted for Trump. And what I found out is 89 people of the people who voted, may have voted for Trump, but it wasn't 89 percent of the people. There were a lot of people that just didn't vote. And a lot of people that used to vote Democrat but, what they told me, they said the last time Democrats came back, it was when Lyndon Baines Johnson announced the War on Poverty in Holland County, Kentucky. Since then, they just feel abandoned, and a lot of people are voting out of hurt and pain.

[00:45:40] But what got me that day was the large contingency of young people that were in that room, back up in the mountains. Everywhere we go, there are large numbers. So now, what we've done in this campaign is we've commissioned a whole group of young fellows, young people who are doing deep-dive organizing. And we have two powerful leaders: Dr. Cole Cohen and Reverend Erica Williams. And if those young folk go to our website: poorpeoplescampaign.org or www.breachrepairers.org, they can click on how to get in touch with that portion of the work.

[00:46:29] But here's one difference: We're not separating the work out. For instance, we did training at Howard University, and it was the elders and the youth together. One thing we push is moral analysis. That's where you use your deepest religious values and your deepest constitutional values as a grid by which you examine all public policy. If that policy doesn't bring the establishment of justice and promoting the general welfare, then we say that it's constitutionally inconsistent, morally indefensible, and economically insane. If it doesn't line up with caring for the poor and the immigrants, then it's theologically unjustified.

[00:47:13] But the other thing we do is we believe in moral organizing, moral fusion organizing. And we build this from actually with 1865, -66, -67, -68 in American history, when black and white people—poor people, particularly—post-Civil War found a way to come together and reshape the political landscape. So, we are very sensitive to the vision.
For instance, I don't go to any meetings that are just black meetings anymore. Or white meetings. Or just Southern meetings. Or just male meetings. That's not moral fusion organizing. We don't have a young arm that's kind of over here, and then there's an old arm. Uh uh. What we need is [indistinct] because extremists and authoritarians exploit our division. They always have. They bet on them.

Right now, every extremist in office from the South, the thing they fear the most is a few people finding that they ought to be together. Because most of them are not winning by large numbers. You know, they're not winning as they used to buy the 20 and 30 percent. Some of them just winning by 1 percent. And they are afraid. That's why they do so much to divide.

So we need those young people to become involved in this movement but recognize when they come in, yes, it’ll be with other young people, but we do not see young people as the leaders of tomorrow; we see them as a critically necessary part of the leadership right now. That's why every step that we do of the Poor People’s Campaign is we desegregate it. We desegregate by race, we desegregate by age, we desegregated by geography, because we want people to understand we’re talking about you. We’re talking about you.

Erin O’Mara [00:49:10] That's very powerful. Thank you. We’re almost out of time. And I would just—if I can—I would just like to ask two more questions from our audience. Gloria Leventhal wonders, How do all of us deal with the anger and frustration that comes out of the inequality and injustice that comes out of this moment that you’re talking about?

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:49:37] You know, I'm dealing with it, but not alone. And I was– many of us in this campaign were hurt. I’m struggling with the word anger because we’re working with the Apache people now who are facing the destruction of their land in Arizona, and they have said to us, they don’t have a word for anger in the Apache language because they too often associate anger with losing your mind or doing something evil.

Now, I don't necessarily go that far, but I'm trying to hear what they're saying. And they do have a pretty language for frustrating, being hurt deeply in the soul. They have all kinds of language around that.

In my own faith tradition, it says something about being angry, but then not. And there, it means to be angry, but don’t use the tools of that which has made you angry lest you become what you fight against. And so, in some ways, for me there are three disciplines.
You've heard me, a lot in The Nation, talk about the history and the ugly sides of history and the American psychosis. But I will never talk about those ugly sides without also saying there's always been another side of it. There's always been another side.

Yes, there was the genocide. But then there was another side of people who stood against it. Yes, there was slavery, but there was another side, where black and white people like Frederick Douglass and like William Lloyd Garrison and others came together. Yes, there were the ugly monopolies of the turn of the 20th century in the industry of oppression, but then there was the social gospel movement. Yes, there was lynching, but then there was the Civil Rights Movement that began with white people leaving the NAACP. Yes.

So, in every moment of history, there's been this rise-up of wrongness and oppression, but there's been something else that has brought up another standard.

So, what keeps me and many of us at this moment is that every generation has its Edmund Pettus Bridge. Every generation has its Civil Rights Movement. Every generation has its Middle Passage. Every generation has its Jericho Wall. Every generation has its Red Sea. Every generation has its Calvary.

The question is, what do you do when you've been chosen to be the antithesis to those things? Do you remain frustrated? Or do you become more faithful for the gratefulness of, number one, not being on the side of that wrong, and having the sense enough to get up every morning, knowing that you're not on that side? And knowing that you have to use those last breaths that you have. If you only have 48 hours now before you're on a ventilator, what would you use those last breaths for? What kind of world? What kind of grace? What kind of mercy?

The second thing that keeps me is looking at the people every day, who have been facing this pandemic of poverty and lies, and they've not given up! The greatest hope that I get is when we go into The Delta, when we go into Appalachia, when we go into San Francisco among the homeless, and got out of a car and one of the guys says, hey, Dr. William J. Barber II! We're organizing with anyone on the street, and we've got to fight back! And it was a brother living on the street. I don't even know who he was! He took the time to talk.

But he had not lost hope. He had not given up. She doesn't give up. I've met with coal miners who were dying from black lung and were saying until I go die, I'm organizing this movement. So, how can we give up when they have not?

Finally, I just don't believe that evil has the last word. I just do not believe it. I just do not believe it. And I believe something the pope said the other day. He said he was praying and he
said, maybe this moment is not a moment of God’s judgment on us, but a moment when God is calling us to make a judgment. When God is calling us to decide to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing. Choosing what kind of world, what kind of community, we will settle for.

[00:54:30] So, for me, as a person of faith, I just came through Easter. Most people run to Easter, but they don't know Easter’s good news doesn't begin with the resurrection; it begins with crucifixion. It began when the witnesses of the crucifixion don't give up. They keep looking for the resurrection. They keep looking for the possibility. And they find it.

[00:54:58] The good news is that those who, even if it means being crucified, they will not succumb to the oppressive forces of this world. It is somebody believing so much in what's right, that if it means dying as a revolutionary for love and truth and justice, they would rather die like that than live apathetically. And live without any concern. And when folks get that kind of determination, it always leads to some form of resurrection, to some form of transformation. It always leads to a moment where the Valley of Dry Bones—people who've been pushed down end up getting up.

[00:55:38] And so, let me close with this prayer. And we're praying because part of the work of staying focused is praying in our tradition. And it says this: May we come to know justice and compassion, and repent for those who have let the viruses of greed and lies make the situation worse. May we come to know pandemic spread through the wounds and the fissures of society, and seek to close them. May those, who have gone along with the lies just to please narcissism, break free, and tell the truth. May we, who are merely inconvenienced, remember those whose lives are at stake. May we, who have no risk factors, remember those most vulnerable. May we have the necessary righteous indignation, at this moment, to fight for transformation. May we, who have the luxury of working from home, remember those who must choose between preserving their health and making their rent. May we, who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools are closed, remember those who have no option. May we, who have to cancel our trips, remember those who have no safe place to go. May, we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of economic markets, remember those who have no margins at all. May we, who settle in for quarantine at home, remember those who have no home? As fear grips our country, may we be the kind of people who stand up and who refuse to lay down. May we choose love.

[00:57:35] During this time, when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God for our neighbors and let us recognize that we cannot give up at this moment. No matter what it takes, let it, at least, be written down in history, that with our last breaths, we fought for the world as it ought to be.
Katrina vanden Heuvel [00:58:07] I think people on this call could stay here for the rest of the day, for many days, listening to you. Thank you for the power, the passion, the urgency of your words, and your deeds. I guarantee you that everyone on this call is going to be joining on June 20 for the struggle to realize a new America, a different set of values. You remind us of the struggle, remind us of why we need to fight, you remind us why we need to stay engaged, and you do it with such humanity. And we’re so grateful.

[00:58:40] I wanted to say that *The Nation* covered the Poor People's Campaign in ‘68. We will be there shoulder-to-shoulder digitally covering the march. And for those on the call, the Reverend spoke so eloquently about history—the underside and overside of history—and *The Nation* has been there at different times, as the Reverend knows, through Reconstruction, and it’s countering today’s Third Reconstruction.

[00:58:09] So Reverend, we’re so grateful to you. I have a– with humility, I have a proposal. I wish you would consider a 15-minute briefing every day, as an antidote and a counter to what we hear. You would give people solace, hope, engagement, and reason for the struggle which must go on to make America what it can be.

[00:59:34] I want to thank those on the call for supporting *The Nation*. I hope you’ll continue support in these times when we try to lift up, as best we can, ideas to transform as the Reverend spoke of, to bring attention to those who have seen pandemics of poverty before, and to try and think how to reimagine, rethink, and realize a revolution of values in this country. Thank you so much.

[01:00:01] We have Representative Jamie Raskin—who I think the Reverend knows—we have Bill McKibben, Zephyr Teachout, Ai-jen Poo coming for these great conversations with people, the force of humane wisdom needed so much in these times. Thank you, Reverend.

Dr. William J. Barber II [01:00:17] Thank you. And I will consider it. Let’s talk about that with some epidemiologists.

Katrina vanden Heuvel [01:00:24] It would be very powerful. Alright.

Dr. William J. Barber II [00:60:26] God bless you. Thank you all.