





# UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS

Reflecting on God's power  
after the election

BY DANIEL CAMACHO

**W**hen I signed up to do pulpit supply, I hadn't realized I would be preaching the first Sunday after the election in November. It was my fault. Of the available slots, I chose November 13 without considering the possible weight of this date. The church lacked a pastor and was relying on a steady stream of guest preachers, including seminary students. It was located just south of Durham, and I didn't know a single person there.

I found myself tasked with preaching in front of a mostly white congregation that had been evenly divided in their support for the two candidates, something I learned when—trying to calm my nerves a few days after the election—I asked a pastor familiar with the church's members for his best estimate of their political leanings. The Gospel lesson was Luke 21:5–19, which is about the end of the world and Jesus' followers being persecuted, imprisoned, and betrayed even by family and friends to the point of death, felt appropriate.

In the sermon, I talked about how far we seemed to be from the new heavens and new earth described in Isaiah 65. Instead, we found ourselves in a Luke 21 scenario in which we had the responsibility to bear witness. I acknowledged the election, the fact that there were deep divisions in our nation, and told the congregation that our current moment transcended partisan politics. The essence of our faith was being tested, and we needed to return to the basics. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ? What does it mean to love your neighbor? Who is your neighbor? These questions needed to be answered today, in our context, with actions and not just words, because the vulnerable were under assault. To do nothing would be to turn away from Jesus.

The congregants gave me a generally warm reception. They were nice and did not say much about my sermon. Surprisingly, I felt comfortable. Maybe it was because guest preachers have the luxury of an easy escape route. But there was one experience I did not escape. After my sermon, as I was shaking people's hands, a man approached me. He put his hand on my shoulder and said: "You don't have to worry. The big man upstairs is in charge." His words felt as comforting as ice down my back.

This comment continued to claw its way under my skin. It was not just what was said but how it was said and who said it. It came from a place of security, from someone far removed and with little to lose from the potential fallout of a hateful political platform come to power. It also carried an air of passivity right after I had delivered a call to action. Don't worry because God is in charge? How was this supposed to reassure the millions of vulnerable

people across various groups targeted by the policies of the incoming administration? What does it mean to tell people who face deportation, travel bans, and losing health coverage that God is in charge?

#### **"GOD IS IN CONTROL"**

Theologian Willie Jennings has said that four of the most dangerous words in Christian theology are "God is in control." This political season accentuates the danger. Nevertheless, the danger has always been there. The tragic irony of saying "the big man upstairs is in charge" is that this kind of language has often been used to justify and advance white propertied men over others.

This language has also provided a national script. From Manifest Destiny to the notion of the United States as a "City upon a Hill," the belief that God is somehow guiding this particular nation toward greatness has been used to justify actions such as the genocide of Native Americans and military interventions. The "City upon a Hill" phrase, which was coined by John Winthrop, has been adopted by presidents such as John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. In recent months, the script has been slightly modified. According to a zealous religious base, God is using our newest president to restore the nation's declining greatness.

Those words—"You don't have to worry. The big man upstairs is in charge"—also disturbed me because a part of me thought maybe that man was right. The big man upstairs was in charge—and he was white. I would not be the first person to come to this conclusion. Anthea Butler rekindled Bill Jones' question, "Is God a White Racist?"; after George Zimmerman

was acquitted after shooting Trayvon Martin. James Baldwin recounts in *The Fire Next Time* the sudden epiphany he had while lying on a church floor that God is white. Duke Divinity School professor of theology J. Kameron Carter has advocated for a Christian atheism which rejects America's reigning god of white supremacy.

The election—and life after it—has highlighted the link between theology and action. What good is it to talk about God's power if we let those in power oppress God's children? Questions about God being in control run deeper than debates about Augustinianism versus Pelagianism, Calvinism versus Arminianism, or process theology. We must ask how theological language concerning God's power functions inside of power relations, alongside material realities, and explore how this language is wielded to justify the status quo. Just as political theorist Hannah Arendt once said that the only valid argument under certain conditions is to promptly rescue the person whose death is predicted, so the only valid theological argument under certain conditions is to protect those under attack. Otherwise, any claims about God's control are like a clanging cymbal.

#### **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

After November, there was no time to wait. I was part of a group of students that pressured the Divinity School to support sanctuary efforts for undocumented immigrants. It was a small step but reflected the powerful ways in which church leaders can respond.

I see this power at work in people like the Rev. Traci Blackmon, who, standing alongside the Rev. William Barber outside Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's office

in protest of inhumane healthcare proposals, proclaimed: “It is time to stop calling God by other names when you really want to call God ‘capitalism.’ It is time to stop cloaking your greed in religious language. I’m here to tell you that there is nothing right about the religion that is happening in these halls.”

We should not confuse God’s rule for the rule of wealthy elites. In that sermon I preached after the election, I recalled one of my field education experiences in a community west of Asheville, N.C. A factory in the area used to employ a large percentage of the town’s residents. Years before, the factory had left, and many in the community had not recovered economically. Part of my summer involved working with churches that distributed food and other forms of aid to trailer-park communities. In these settings, I witnessed a kind of poverty that I had never seen before. These people were often forgotten by both major political parties. The people themselves often blamed their problems on immigrants and foreigners. I wondered why. Latino migrant workers had not taken the factory away. Trade agreements and corporate power had not only destroyed many jobs in that community but also destroyed jobs on the other side of the border. It’s true that racism had deep roots in the community, but racism was also a politically expedient tool. If the problems were not conveniently blamed on immigrants and Muslims and African Americans, then the blame would rest on the ruling classes and on the systems that exploit and divide the majority of us.

#### **THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD**

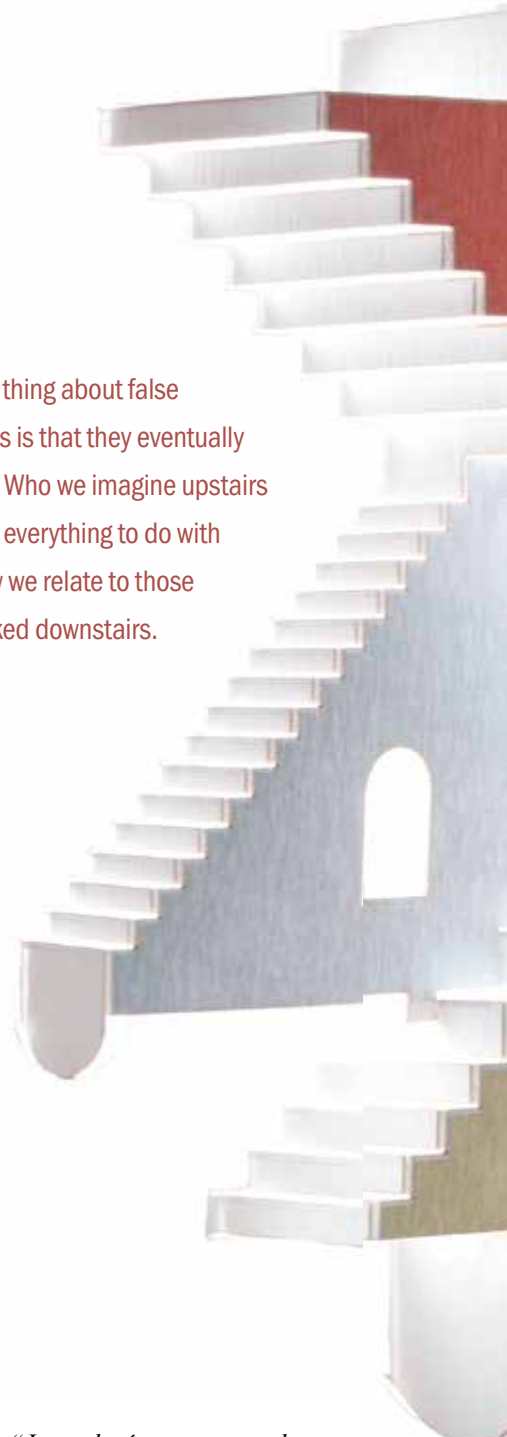
Faith without works is dead, and theology without action is empty. This

is how I have learned to deal with my own anxieties about our future in this nation and the wider world. By ourselves, we cannot change the course of the world. But the course of the world cannot change without people taking action. Describing the ways in which God is present in the midst of inequalities is good, but changing those inequalities is even better. This is what it means to seek the kingdom.

Confronting the challenges presented by our nation’s politics and the threats to our survival on this planet will require a wide net of solidarity and a truly social gospel. The Latino liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez reminded us that theology is a critical reflection on praxis. Theology should not stop with reflecting on the world but should participate in the world’s transformation. Likewise, theologian Emilie Townes has argued that a womanist ethic is never content merely to react to the situation; it seeks to change the situation. Dealing with the changes in our society will also require us to process the various forms of suffering taking place in this moment.

Poet Audre Lorde describes a helpful distinction between suffering and pain. Suffering is unmetabolized and unscrutinized pain. Pain, on the other hand, is an experience that is named and recognized and then used in some way for strength, knowledge, or action. To say blithely that God is in control in this political season is to leave God’s people in their suffering.

It is probably better to think about God’s faithfulness than God “being in control.” Even still, I remain agnostic about describing God’s control in relationship to our unfolding political events. What I do know is what God calls us to do and that Jesus is present with us in our acts of solidarity. I was



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taught, “*La teología sana sana y la teología enferma enferma*”—theology that is whole brings wholeness, and theology that is sick brings sickness. For me, the litmus test for all theology is whether it brings life or death.

Who is in charge? The thing about false gods is that they eventually fall. Who we imagine upstairs has everything to do with how we relate to those locked downstairs. ■