

Fulfilling the Hope
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Abraham Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address"

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

March 4, 1865

We have all witnessed this past week what I never thought I would see in my lifetime, the election of an African-American to the office of the President of the United States. Whether you voted for President-elect Obama or not, no one can deny that we have been witnesses to a unique historic event this past week. Mr. Obama is not going to the White House as a valet, or cook, or janitor, or grounds keeper. He is going as the Commander in Chief and Chief Executive Officer of our country.

Not since the presidential campaigns of Gene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy have I seen young Americans so excited and so hopeful with the election of Mr. Obama. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described Bobby's presidential bid as "an uproarious campaign filled with enthusiasm and fun...It was also a campaign moving in its sweep and passion."¹ I have encountered several people this week who did not vote for Mr. Obama but expressed the hope that he would do well and help solve so many of the problems the nation is facing. John Stewart quipped the other night that New Yorkers are actually making eye contact this

¹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. as quoted on the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial website, also, www.jfklibrary.org.

week. And perhaps you saw tears streaming down the faces of Oprah Winfrey and Jesse Jackson in Grant Park in Chicago on election night.

My nineteen-year-old daughter, Jamie, called me a few weeks ago to tell me that she had voted for the first time. She wanted to make sure that I was going to vote. And my thirty-three-year old daughter, Heather, called me a week ago Saturday, having stood in a voting line for an hour, with another two hours of waiting to go. Both were excited. They were witnessing history and they were making history. They were caught up in something larger than themselves. Their citizenship meant something to them and they were proud to be Americans.

Friends of ours from England became United States citizens earlier this year. Last Tuesday they voted for the first time. Maggie wrote, “Now I’m happy I am a US citizen. It was awesome.” She also reported that her oldest son cleaned his room.

Bobby Kennedy’s campaign was that of bridge building. I am sure that many of you recall the great divides that fractured America in the 1960’s. Bobby wanted to build bridges between the races, the poor and affluent, young and old, between peace activists and Viet Nam war proponents.² I sense that same kind of hope in Barak Obama, a visionary who wants to change what is broken and wounded in America into a future of wholeness and opportunity.

And I will go ahead and say what many of you are thinking, what many of you have said to me, and what I have dreaded. I fear for President Elect Obama’s life. The contemporary heroes of my childhood and youth, Jack Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Bobby Kennedy, were carried out on the bier of my innocence. I pray that my children and

² Ibid.

the many who so highly esteem the young senator from Illinois are spared from such a tragedy. I pray for Mr. Obama's safety and that of his family. Such a tragedy is always a possibility. Dr. King said upon his arrival in Memphis that people warned him about the threats on his life.

“What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.”³

Dr. King was just 39 years old when he died the morning after he gave that speech in Memphis, eight years younger that Barack Obama is now. These young black leaders always bear the burden of danger.

But they cannot be concerned about that now. Nor can we. The challenge before us all, Democrat and Republican, Independent and Libertarian – is the fulfillment of hope and promise. Regardless of whoever would enter the White House in January, 2009 the challenges of bringing the war in Iraq to a responsible conclusion, bringing closure on the search for Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, reorienting the world's economy toward prosperity, offering thorough health care for our wounded soldiers and their families, and restructuring the health care delivery system in this nation are almost overwhelming. The government reported on Friday that 240,000 American jobs were lost in October, the ten consecutive month of job losses. Since January we have lost 1.2

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I See the Promise Land,” *The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harpers San Francisco, 1986), 286.

million jobs, with an unemployment rate of 6.5%. Winning the election was the easy part. Now comes the onerous work of hope and promise.

The work of hope is not simply a job for President Obama, but the responsibility of us all. We elected him to lead, but we must follow with our ideas, our time and commitment, and our labor. It is not enough for the Obama campaign to have created call lists with millions of email addresses and phone numbers. It is not enough to text message or gather together in Internet cafes. The work of hope will require commitment not only to direct services, but commitment to reshape the policies and practices that promote the health and welfare of this nation. What are the best practices, the practices of excellence, that we need to reinstitute in our banking and financial systems that stabilize and protect retirement funds, home ownership, and responsible credit management? If you want people to have hope about their financial future you have to create the kind of system that protects their investments from greed, speculation, and stupidity. That is the work that hopefully President Obama will lead us in. But it is finally the work of the United States Congress, state and local government, and the individual household.

It is the kind of work that you and I can initiate, promote, and monitor. We are all in this together and very often the initiative of government cooperation comes at the insistence of private citizens. Every challenge before us is a collective challenge. And each of us has to be prepared for the vigilance that democracy demands. It was not enough for us to have voted on Tuesday. That was the easy part. Now, like President Elect Obama, we have to roll up our sleeves to share the burden of hope. We need to keep informed, engage our legislators, and insist from the President to our local City Council member, on excellence in leadership

and policy. Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Colonel Humphries, a distinguished Revolutionary soldier, wrote: “There are rights which it is useless to surrender to the government, and which governments have yet always been found to invade. These are the rights of thinking, and publishing our thoughts by speaking or writing; the right of free commerce; the right of personal freedom.”⁴

One of Thomas Jefferson’s greatest fears was that American leadership would devolve into narrow, anti-intellectual politics that had lost its deep philosophical foundations in democracy. There have been many examples of that throughout American history. Now is the time for us to turn, not to think tanks in Boston or New York, but to thinking Americans: Republicans and Democrats, white and colored, blue collar and white collar, women and men, old and young, rural, suburban, and urban. No president of any party can carry the day without the involvement and work of thinking Americans. This is our birthright as citizens and it is the responsibility of each of us.

As important as thoughtful commitment is, it is equally important that we stay connected. I am not speaking simply of political networking. I am not speaking of simply building social capital. I am speaking of genuine relationships with people of all political persuasions, people of color, people of various cultures and religious perspectives. For as remarkable as it is that we have elected an African American to the Presidency racism is far from being resolved. Prejudice still holds power and influence in the hearts and fears of too many Americans. Institutional

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Colonel Humphries from Paris, March 18, 1789; *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Adrienne Koch and William Peden eds. (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), p. 466.

racism is well established in the halls of commerce, government, and religion. I admit that even though I understand the term “white privilege,” I seldom think about it and I certainly take it for granted.

We have put a black man in the Oval Office. But there is a disproportionate number of black men in prison and on death row; a disproportionate number of people of color who are out of work, who have no health insurance, and leave schools barely literate. We have made great progress in race relations in this country. Barack Obama is a testimony to that. Mr. Obama’s own life is a testimony to what hard work and family endeavor can do to lift a child of color to the highest office in the land.

But it is only a fool who thinks that equal opportunity has come to each and every person on American soil. Be well assured that questions such as the economy, the war in Iraq, and immigration are well laced with racist fears and assumptions.

I believe that we must stay connected or get reconnected with people of every race, class, and religion. I am not talking about taking a class in world religions or reading a book on race relations. Take time to listen to the fears and hopes of neighbors, fellow workers, teenagers, single moms, and veterans. I am talking about personal relationships where values are honestly shared, religious faith honored, and economic priorities are expressed.

I also believe that we need to reconnect with the very fountain of life that some call God. Some call it the Spirit of Life, a higher power, the Source, or the Force. You see, I do not believe that we can really engage the powerful issues of our world and nation unless we have an abiding relationship with the Power that made each and every one of us brothers

and sisters. I do not believe that we will value one another without the core value that knits us into one interdependent web of existence. If we are not open to the vital sources of life can we be open to one another? In other words we cannot simply pass laws and policies like they have been spit out of a computer. Everything that we do as a nation is profoundly personal. It matters to people's lives, their well-being, and their dignity. Every political policy requires deep humility and should be offered in both houses of Congress on bended knee.

Now you might be wondering why I am offering these ideas today. I could say that a survey of Congregational history reveals high standards for education and an educated clergy. Congregationalists founded our beloved Wichita State University as Fairmount College. Congregationalists believe in the place of reason on all matters of faith. The call to thoughtful commitment is consistent with the value that we give to intellectual prowess. I could also say that in the history of Congregationalism sails the ship of justice. Congregationalists opposed the slave trade and were involved in the Civil Rights movement. We were one of the earliest churches to ordain women and raise the flag of environmentalism. I could also say that we are a people of faith rooted in the Christian tradition. You would expect a Congregational minister to claim the place of faith in the public square. I could also tell you that my wife, Mimi, demanded that I preach on the subject of the presidential election. But the truth of the matter is I had already made the decision.

I offer this sermon for all of these reasons and more. I offer this sermon because I do believe in providence. I believe that freedom, especially as it is expressed in democracy is a gift of God. Please do not misunderstand me. I would never want this democracy to become a

theocracy. Yet democracy is like any other gift. You have to unwrap it and learn how to work with it. The first time you got a bicycle for Christmas somebody had to put it together and you had to learn how to ride it; how to take care of it; how to be safe on it; and how to fix it.

I firmly believe that God calls for the freedom of every human being. It is the story of Torah. It is the story of the Carpenter. We are meant to be free persons. Democracy is the best vehicle of freedom that humankind has ever known. We have to know how to build it and repair it, how to ride it and how to teach others how to ride it. We have to learn how to care for it so that others can take a long ride on freedom. This is a sacred gift. The pretty packaging or the bright bow on the handlebars cannot overwhelm us. We can enjoy it and we must be responsible for it.

There is much excitement on the part of many people with the election of Barack Obama, not only in the United States but also around the world. By all means congratulations and celebrations are in order. But we cannot be tricked by the flourish of fireworks, military flybys, the national anthem or martial music. Change requires the commitment of the citizenship of this nation. Hope is fulfilled by hard work. Indeed, buy that inaugural ball tuxedo and evening gown. Then roll up your sleeves and be prepared to do the work of hope. In the immortal words of President Lincoln, “let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who has born the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

And really and truly, may God bless America.

Faith