

“A New Dawn...Is At Hand”

A Reflection on the Presidential Election

*Isaiah 43:18-21 Jeremiah 29:10-14 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa November 9, 2008*

Change and hope. What a powerful combination. It's a message that has the capacity to inspire and transform. Thus was the platform used by... the prophets of old, including Isaiah and Jeremiah.

As recorded in **Isaiah 43:18-19**, the voice of the prophet proclaims the word of the Lord to the ancient Jewish people during their captivity in Babylon:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

Change and hope. Whether in times ancient or modern, **we are asked to be willing to release our grip on the past enough to take in the signs of something else – a future that is about to be open before us.**

The Old Testament prophet, after reflecting upon the significance of what had come before in the life of God's people, and after acknowledging the current difficult situation that the people now find themselves in while in exile, proclaims this profound message of hope – that **God is about to do a new thing.** In fact, change is at hand. The prophet reveals that it has already begun to spring forth. He asks the people, **“Do you not don't perceive it?”**

Yes, change and hope are indeed two themes that have the power to move hearts and minds. **And regardless of which side of the political spectrum people found themselves on during recent presidential campaign, it cannot be denied that Barack Obama did indeed offer an effective and transforming vision of change and hope for our country.**

While I want to try and remain true to my desire to never get too political from the pulpit, I find it impossible to avoid spending some time this morning reflecting upon the significance of this presidential election.

After reading and watching countless hours of news coverage and commentary, I agree with those who declared that **as a country we experienced nothing less than an historic and even transcendent event.** Political commentator David Gergen, a former advisor in the Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton administrations, said as the results rolled in Tuesday night and the outcome became increasingly evident, “I think this is the passing of an old order. I think what we see... is a new coalition, a new order emerging.”

Now, if you're wondering if I'm just simply one of those who has partaken of the "Obama Cool-aid," I'm actually among those who are taking a wait-and-see stance to see if Obama's words – no matter how powerful and inspiring – will actually be transformed into actions and reality.

If they can, then one of the greatest hopes is that **voices that have long been silenced may now be taken more seriously in our nation's discourse**. Or to put it into terminology often heard in progressive churches, there is now a better hope that all people will find a welcoming place at the table.

However, many are not yet convinced that we can indeed move beyond the extreme politics of exclusion and partisanship that have become so dominant in our modern culture. And I think it's fair to be reminded that the politics of exclusion and partisanship can cut both ways.

There's a reality to the phenomenon that when victims becomes the victors, they often assume the same role of victimizing the opposition. So in his acceptance speech, Obama warned, **"Let's resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long."** And he called for "a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress."

So yes, I am among those who call upon the President-elect and the Democratically-controlled House and Senate to **avoid the temptation of following the same tactics of demonizing and excluding those characterized as the opposition**.

Perhaps we can take this even further. I think it is crucial, as Christians, that we learn how to apply this to those with whom we disagree theologically as well. **It's perfectly okay, of course, for people to have even profound differences of opinion on theological matters, but not to the point that it leads to a near sense of hatred of and contempt for the opposition. For that's not loving our neighbor.**

Even within our own denomination many feel that we are yet again at the brink of division. For far too long we have been speaking only *at* each other rather than speaking *to* and *with* each other. Therefore, I have been longing for a message of change and hope in the religious realm as well as in the political realm. But enough of theology, lets get back to politics. ☺

One real hope for change in this country, as so powerfully expressed by Barack Obama, is that we step back from the brink of such hateful partisanship – that we see ourselves not as red America and blue America, but as red, white, and blue America; that in the United States of America we may indeed find some reason to feel united. Admittedly, as a result of this election, there are many of us who are more hopeful of making progress in this area of **unity** than we have been in a very long time.

In addition, there is no doubt that many found that the oratory of Obama's message of change and hope reached near prophetic biblical proportions. In his acceptance speech, he asked, "is there anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible." He

responded, “tonight is your answer... It’s the answer that led those who’ve been told for so long by so many to be cynical and fearful and doubtful about what we can achieve to **put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.**”

After he called this election a “defining moment of change,” he went on to warn, however:

This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It can’t happen without you, without a new spirit of service, a new spirit of sacrifice. So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other.

After words like that, it’s no wonder that some political commentators and pundits joked about Obama being a messiah figure. One even referred his upcoming cabinet selection process as the choosing of the twelve disciples.

Let us pause and remind ourselves, however, of what happens when a people project all their hopes and expectations upon someone whom they think will save them from all ills. Yes, even Jesus was crucified. But **I am among those who have heard reflected in Obama’s message an echo of the words of Jesus when it comes to striving for peace and unity, and for acceptance and care for one other.** And like the prophets of old, Obama included the prophetic words, “**a new dawn...is at hand.**” And he reminded us of another biblical promise, “that while we breathe, we hope.”

Speaking as a pastor of a Presbyterian congregation, however, I must admonish us that **it is not in any person, but rather in God that we put our faith and hope.** And yet, is it not through people and organizations, whether it be a new administration for our country, or through this congregation that includes you and me, that God can work to bring change?

Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine, is a self-proclaimed evangelical Christian, yet with a strong progressive social agenda. In his response to this election he wrote:

Most elections are just power rearrangements; this one was a transformational moment in our history. **A fundamental shift is taking place in America,** and we saw the evidence on Nov. 4. It is a political shift, a cultural and racial shift, a generational shift, and a religious shift...Racial and economic justice, creation care, peacemaking, and a more consistent ethic of life will be the keystones of this growing shift.

Perhaps this is true. Yet again, I am among those who anxiously wait to see what this new dawn will bring, who wait for the response to that all-important question, 'Now what?'

In the meantime, I find inspiration for change and hope in the words of **Jeremiah 29:11**, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." And in a few moments we will read in the Affirmation of Faith the words, "Hope gives us courage and energy to contend against all opposition, however invincible it may seem, for the new world and the new humanity are surely coming." (*A Declaration of Faith*, 1977, PCUSA)

So at least for now, **it does indeed seem that a new dawn is at hand. And for many, the new sunshine feels warm on our faces.**

Amen.