

KEEP ON MOVING FORWARD

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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READINGS

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing- human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

e.e. cummings

from Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, 1860

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

SERMON

What an amazing time to be alive. Last Tuesday, ee cummings' poem kept arising in me, unbidden. "i thank You God for most this amazing /day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees / and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything / which is natural which is infinite which is yes"

Even before the election results were in, I felt a vibrant spirit in the air. Something historic was happening and I was, we all were, a part of it. This was an historic even in American history. Even if you are among the millions of Americans who voted for John McCain, I hope that you sense the significance of this moment and know that you are part of it, too.

An African American will be the President of the United States. In just over two months' time, it will become natural for us to say President Barak Obama. As in, President Obama will hold a press conference today, or, President Obama will be attending the G-8 summit in Helsinki. I have worried all week about how I could speak to, capture and communicate the momentousness of this time. But I realize that in a very real way, I cannot. Many public voices are trying to, but there are way that we simply cannot fully fathom now all that it means for the future.

I have seen so many crying tears of more than joy. From the tears of African Americans – famous faces and those unknown to me – to the woman in my circle who was shaking as she cried with joy, with relief, with a hope that simply could not be contained in her body.

Somehow, it felt important to check in with my niece and oldest nephew who are among the young people inspired by this election. Abbie is in her first year of study for a Ph.D. in chemistry and her voice bubbled with excitement and enthusiasm. Alec works for an international non-governmental organization in Washington, DC. He told me about the packed local bar and the party in the street later. We couldn't think of another election that inspired Americans to celebrate in the streets.

Yet even as we struggle in the present to understand the import of this election, and as we wait for the perspective the future will bring, perhaps we can look back to someone who called it a year ago, before a single primary. Andrew Sullivan a gay, British, conservative, libertarian political commentator who really defies all labels, wrote *Why Obama Matters* for the Atlantic in Dec. 2007. He argued then, even though it seemed an unlikely outcome, that Obama could help us transcend divisions.

"At its best," he wrote, "the Obama candidacy is about ending a war – not so much the war in Iraq,... but the war within America that has prevailed since Vietnam and that shows dangerous signs of intensifying, a nonviolent civil war that has cripple America at the very time the world needs it most. It is a war about war – and about culture and about religion and about race. And in that war, Obama – and Obama alone – offers a possibility of truce."

Sullivan continues, "Consider this hypothetical. It's November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man – Barak Hussein Obama – is the new face of America. In one simply image, America's soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, in now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama's face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can."

And it is no longer hypothetical.

I have hear some people say that they are proud of America for the first time in a long time. I can't put it quite that way for my pride has never really faltered, and got a boost when I lived in Canada during some of our less than stellar moments – the 2000 election and the start of the war in Iraq. I loved Canada, but even at just a slight remove, I could see more clearly all that I love about my own country. I think the Constitution and Declaration of Independence are marvels of human wisdom – practical and transcendent. I love Americans for our ingenuity, for our great and generous hearts, for our kindness and honesty. I am proud of America precisely because an election like this one is always possible. We may not always live up to such possibility and promise, but this moment has been nascent in us as long as we have been a county.

I am also proud and happy that we are living into and up to our promise on an international stage. I agree with Andrew Sullivan – just his face and the words President Barak Hussein Obama will do much to repair our tattered reputation in the world. I am proud that the rest of the world can see that sometimes we actually do live up to our grand ideals. So proud that we can once again, in a very important way, be an example to the world of how people can govern themselves and can grow and change and become better as a nation and as a people.

There is so much in Obama's victory speech on Tuesday night that I am grateful for. Grateful that he actually uttered words like service, humility and sacrifice. Grateful that he gently chided us for our immaturity and called to us all to grow up.

He called us to live up to our promise.

"So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other, Let us remember that if this financial crisis taught us anything ... in this country, we rise or fall as one nation; as one people.

"Let us resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long. Let us remember that it was a man from [Illinois] who first carried the banner of the Republican Party to the White House – a party founded on the values of self-reliance, individual liberty and national unity. Those are values we all share, and while the Democratic Party has won a great victory tonight, we do so with a measure of humility and determination to heal the divides that have held back our progress. Lincoln said to a nation far more divided than ours, 'We are not enemies, but friends...though passion may have strained it must not break the bonds of affection.'"

At first, I thought his speech was understated. I wanted more rhetorical flourish. I wanted to shout, Yes we can! from the tops of buildings. Yet over these last few days, his speech has grown on me profoundly. This was not a time for the grand rhetorical gesture. Obama's more quiet persistence, knowing that he spoke to more than just those who voted for him, but to those who decidedly did not and even to the world. In challenging times, he spoke to us all soberly, humbly and with a clear resolve. He knew that he spoke to the world for America.

"To all those who watch tonight from beyond our shores, from parliaments and palaces to those who are huddled around radios in the forgotten corners of our world – our stories are singular, but our destiny is shared, and a new dawn of American leadership is at hand. To those who would tear this world down – we will defeat you. To those who seek peace and security – we support you. And to all those who have wondered if America's beacon still burns as bright – tonight we proved once more that the true strength of our nation comes not from the might of our arms or the scale of our wealth, but from the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and unyielding hope.

"For that is the true genius of America – that America can change. Our nation can be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."

Obama called to us with the closing words of Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, words of reconciliation and unity to a deeply divided nation. Yet even as Obama didn't complete the quote which calls upon "the better angels of our nature," it was as if those words are still echoing through our national psyche, and his speech called to those better angels all the same.

I wish to speak to those better angels as well.

There is a saying that we get the leaders we deserve. A hard thing to hear for those who voted in opposition and yet have suffered through the presidential leadership of the last eight years – a president who lived up to the worst fears of his opponents, time and time again.

And now, if we do have the leader we deserve. What do we do now? First, those who voted for Obama *must* be gracious. It does feel like a storm has passed over and the hallelujahs are just bursting forth. And it's good to sing them and even do a little dance. But please, resist the temptation to gloat.

I know that many feel like you are waking up for an eight-year nightmare. But you must also remember that for some it feels like they are falling into one. I believe that, over time, they will find they are wrong. Yet I also know how scary and dispiriting it is to think that your neighbors have just voted for someone who will lead our country to disaster. And then there are those who are legitimately disappointed that the person they thought would be best to lead the country in a time of great peril, did not win.

I still hear angry and vindictive voices on both the right and the left. And some of those voices have been yours. Indeed, now is the time to "resist the temptation to fall back on the same partisanship and pettiness and immaturity that has poisoned our politics for so long.

Listen instead to the better angels of your nature.

And now that we have a leader that so many of us did choose and who we all deserve and who we do want to lead us, we must do the work we are asked to do. And we cannot think that the work is done. We may have elected an African American as president, but we must stand still with our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers who have once again been denied full rights in this land. No matter who you voted for, now is a time to keep on moving forward. I knew I was going to teach you that hymn no matter what the election outcome. Because that is what we must do. And if we move forward together, we most certainly will be weaving shining thread into the fabric of our lives and the fabric of our nation.

My time in Canada also gave me a far clearer perspective on how the Civil War and racism is a gash, an open wound across our national character. In electing a black man as president we have done more than even before to heal that wound. Yet no one thinks the work is done.

Obama also echoed Dr. King in his speech, in saying that we can put our "hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day." Yet both King and Obama are echoing Theodore Parker a fierce abolitionist and Unitarian minister who wrote in the 1850s: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but a little ways. I can calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see, I am sure that it bends toward justice.

Parker, who died in 1860 before Lincoln was even elected, had confidence that our nation would eventually move beyond slavery. The moral arc of the universe is long and yet it does bend toward justice. This is another of our foundational American beliefs that can bring us to our highest selves, that calls to our better angels.

Let us all take heed of the words of our president elect. We must get past our anger and divisions. This election was not a landslide, it just feels like one because the last few elections have been so darned close. This is not a mandate. Obama knows it and so must we.

Yet we have been called beyond ourselves to service and sacrifice. At last! A president who is asking me to make sacrifices, asking more of me. Yet even as he asked, Obama's tone was understated and serious. For even as we sing hallelujah for this most amazing day, there is work to do My niece and nephew are ready for it. So, too, I hope are we all. The road ahead will be rocky and will require sacrifice. Yet this is how we keep on moving forward, and this is most certainly how we weave our lives with shining thread.

Amen.

Blessed be.

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