

## Reflections

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### Brandon Dennison:

A reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3. *Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. The Lord called Samuel a third time and he got up and went... and said Here I Am.* And indeed Samuel was there for God, becoming one of the great prophets of our faith.

“Visions were not widespread,” reads the text for today. Such a statement could be made for our nation. America has been wondering in the wilderness for quite some time now. It’s not the democrats fault; it’s not the republicans fault. Maybe we entered the wilderness when dreams collapsed along with the twin towers. Some would point to the 60s and Vietnam. An African American would say we’ve been in the wilderness ever since the first slave was shipped across the Atlantic in shackles. Regardless of when it started, we have failed to thwart disturbing trends of poverty, war, and environmental degradation. Voter participation has declined, the gap between rich and poor has increased, politics have become more polarized than ever, and I could go on and on. Spiritually, we have experienced nothing short of decay. Selfishness, materialization, and corruption seem to have taken hold.

In the wilderness it’s hard to hold onto the vision of what good things are possible. Take Moses and his followers for example. How tired, frustrated, and depleted of faith they were. Sound familiar, America? Today, 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 3 translates: *visions of hope were not widespread.* When a nation loses its vision of what’s possible it loses its identity, its sense of purpose, its motivation to do good. Weary citizens lose interest in making their visions of the promise land reality; causes once passionately advocated for lose steam; we surrender to frustration and fall captive to that awful yet powerfully tempting trap called apathy, forgetting that a promise land even exists.

Every now and then, however, we get a glimpse, a glimpse, of what *is* possible. We see that there is a promise land and that we can get there. To think that Jim McDonald threatened in a jail 40 years ago just so a man Barack Obama’s color could enjoy basic rights and now Barack Obama has risen to the highest office in the land is truly remarkable. It is a glimpse of what is possible.

“We are one nation. We are one people. And our time for change has come.” These were then Senator Obama’s words after winning the Iowa Caucuses. Watching from home, I leapt into the air pumping my fists and clapping my hands. The following morning I was in a car with three friends headed for New Hampshire, the next primary. How could I stay on the sidelines of history any longer? These are words from my journal:

*And so here the four of us are traveling through snow covered Massachusetts on our way to New Hampshire to volunteer for Barack Obama’s campaign. Never have I been filled with such hope for my country.*

Perhaps it's clear now, that when it comes to politics, I'm not exactly without bias. I'm not trying to change any minds, or make a political statement today. Church is *not* the place for that. But church *should* be relevant. It is right to take a moment to view such a significant event through eyes of faith. I cannot do that honestly without telling you briefly about my experiences in New Hampshire.

We knocked on over 300 doors, made many phone calls, waved signs for hours, and even set up a late night campaign rally. I remember a group of African American ladies writing songs about the campaign as we worked: *change, change it's time to make that change/we are the ones who can do it*. College students created cheers: *Obama 08, Be a Part of Something Great*. Hope could physically be felt.

I somehow found the time to hear other candidates speak too. Standing on a seven foot snow bank I listened as a truly great American, Senator John McCain, called on Americans to serve a purpose higher than themselves. I saw how passionately Hillary's supporters worked for their historic cause. That same day, I shook Barack Obama's hand, yelling over the noise of the crowd: "Come to West Virginia."

On Election Day we lost. But we West Virginia boys, as some campaign workers dubbed us, were not going home until we heard our candidate speak. Little did I know as I stood on stage just behind the podium, I was about to witness one of Obama's most famous speeches.

*We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics...We've been asked to pause for a reality check...But in the unlikely story that is America there has never been anything false about hope.* He stood cool, calm, and collected. Hands folded, except for when he wanted to emphasize a point (motion with finger). *For when we have faced impossible odds, we've been told that we're not ready, or that we shouldn't try, or that we can't, generation upon generation of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people. Yes We Can.*

The truth is we can. Not him, but we. This moment in history is not about one man. Barack Obama is not hope itself. Only God is that. Obama is only riding a wave propelled by the cries of millions hungry for something better. And he still may let us down yet. But his incredible story-the grandson of a Kenyan goat herder, the son of a single mother, named Barack Hussein Obama-has given us a glimpse of what is possible.

What purpose greater than ourselves, as John McCain puts it, will we serve? Well, as Christians we serve none greater than the building of the Kingdom. So let us build that kingdom with a renewed belief that we really can do it. Let us work harder than ever to fulfill our purpose in life, whatever that purpose may be. When called to lead a wounded people, Moses said, "Here I Am." When called to speak the truth, Samuel and Isaiah said, "Here I Am." When called to conceive a great son Mary replied, "Here I Am." When called to lead America to the mountaintop, Martin Luther King Jr. and people like Rosa Parks answered, "Here I Am." When millions eager to break that highest of glass ceilings, Hillary Clinton responded with gusto, "Here I Am. When John McCain was called to serve his country, he said with honor, "Here I Am." When a

desperate country cried out for change Barack Obama responded, "Here I Am." In a sense, they all responded with a simple creed: Yes We Can.

Let the chorus of cynics sing on. For they sing the same song of those who told Moses his people would never make it. Let the chorus of cynics sing on. For they sing the same song of those who told Martin Luther King Jr. a black man would never be president. Let the chorus of cynics sing on. No more complaining, no more grumbling, no more "I can't." This is the Joshua generation. Now is the time to say "Here I Am." Now is the time to fulfill our purpose. Let us take this glimpse of what's possible, translate it into visions of hope, and make those visions reality. The more people start to say "Here I Am" the more we start to believe we can. The more we believe we can the more we do and the more we do the closer we get to the promise land.

## **Fulfillment of Prophecy?**

### **Thoughts on the Upcoming Inauguration of Barack Obama as 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States**

Rev. Dr. James G. Macdonell,  
SPC, January 18, 2009

*(Note...the following format of the remarks I delivered at SPC on Jan. 18, 2009 appear as I typed them. The underlining and enlarged size of some words is intentional and is a style I employ to make my manuscript easier for me to read in public delivery)*

Today's New Testament reading from the lectionary comes to us from the **Gospel of John**, chapter **1**, verses **43-51**....which reads in part:

The next day **Jesus** decided to go to **Galilee**. There he found **Philip** and he said to him..."Follow me!" Now **Philip** was from the town of **Bethsaida**, the town where **Andrew** and **Peter** also lived. One day **Philip** encountered his friend **Nathanael** and he said to him: "We have found him about whom **Moses** and the prophets wrote....**Jesus**, son of **Joseph** from **Nazareth**." Then **Nathanael** asked him, "Can anything good come out of **Nazareth**?"...And **Philip** replied and said...."Come and see!"

This passage from **John's Gospel** describes **Jesus** calling **Philip** to "follow" him as a disciple....and then records that **Philip** was so excited over being called by the **Messiah**, that he recruited his friend **Nathanael** to also come and follow **Jesus**.

This morning **Brandon Dennison** and I have been asked to share some personal thoughts and reflections with you about next Tuesday's historic **Inauguration** of our nation's **44<sup>th</sup> President**.

This week, at a time when our nation is so excited over the **Inauguration** of a new **President**.....while I do believe that our President-Elect has the potential of becoming one of our nation's truly great Presidents.....I don't want you to misinterpret this morning's New Testament reading as to in any way suggest that **Philip** was prophesying the future election of **Barack Obama** as the Messianic next President of the **United States!**

That would be an outrageous "stretch".....and it would also be blasphemous! This reading, while interesting and significant, has no connection with what we are about to say to you. It just happens to be the lectionary reading assigned for the church to read today.

Both **Brandon** and I strongly believe in the essential and important **American** principle of "**The Separation of Church and State**".....and we also both understand that not all of you in this congregation feel the **same way** about last **November's** election, and that some of you, in fact are not excited or enthusiastic at all about last fall's election results.

So.....our **shared-reflections** this morning will be delivered from a **non-partisan perspective**.

Interestingly.....**last** Sunday after **Randy** announced what **Brandon** and I would be **talking** about this morning...a member of **SPC approached** me the coffee fellowship hour.....a person whom I consider to be a good **friend!**..... and he **said** to me:

“**Jim**.....I **sure** hope that when you are speaking to us next **Sunday**....you will keep in mind ...that **not all** of us in this congregation necessarily **look** upon **Barack Obama** as the **Savior** of this country!”

**Well**.....fair enough!.....In fact, the author of an article in a recent issue of **Presbyterian Outlook** .....obviously **agreed** with my friend’s perspective when he **wrote**:

“While **Barack Obama** may be **Superman**, he certainly is **not** the **Messiah!**”

**Amen to that!**.....So **my** shared-thoughts with you this morning will be intentionally **a-political**.

I do honestly believe that there **are** many poignant, **dramatic** aspects involved in the impending **Inauguration**.....that are **so** historically **significant**.....that **all Americans** **ought** to be able to **celebrate** them.....**irrespective** of personal political **beliefs** or **preferences**!

I would like to comment on some of **these** this morning.....and so **whatever** your personal **political persuasions** and **choices** **might be**....I

hope that there are exciting, positive aspects about the upcoming **Inauguration** that we can all agree upon.

For instance.....I think that we can all agree that next **Tuesday's** historic **Inauguration** will be an event which most of us would have thought to be an absolute social and political impossibility .....just a few years ago!

Let me be frank.....when I marched with **Martin Luther King, Jr.** in **Selma, Alabama** back in **1965**.....I never dreamed that I would ever live long enough to see the **United States of America** elect an **African American President!**

**Tuesday's Inauguration** would have defied the wildest thoughts and expectations of our country's **Founding Fathers** .....and also the thoughts and beliefs of a lot of us here today!

And here is something else I hope we can all agree upon.

Tuesday's **Inauguration** is an amazing indication that while our nation has not yet totally overcome its long, historical flirtation with bigotry and racial intolerance.....the **Inauguration** of **Barack Obama** suggests that the **United States**.....has certainly made significant progress in its long, painful struggle with racism!

**Clearly**.....the **American people** have come a long, long way towards fulfilling our too-long-untested but still precious **American Claim**.....that "All men and women in this country are created Equal!"

So.....whether or **not** you **agree** with....or are **pleased** with last **November's** election **results**.....today I would **hope** that **ALL** **Americans** will be filled with **awe**, **wonder** and **pride** over what is about to **take place** in our nation next **Tuesday!**.....For this is a truly **significant** step forward in our nation's **history!**

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Let me try to place the upcoming **Obama Inauguration** in a proper historical **context**.

First of all, I firmly believe that the **life** of **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**.....whose birthday our nation will celebrate **tomorrow**.....and the **election** of **Barack Obama** as our nation's first **African American President**.....are inexorably **linked** to one another!

The **latter** could **not** have taken place without the **former!**

This past **Thursday, January 15, 2009** was the anniversary of the **birth** of **Dr. King's**....the astonishing **American** hero of whose short-lived leadership of our nation's civil rights movement lasted only **13** years.....**King's** life ended **tragically** when he was **assassinated** back in **1968**.....when he was only **39** years old!

**Unbelievably**.....had **Dr. King** **lived**.....today he would be **80** years old!

While **Dr. King's** great "**Dream**" for our nation has **not** yet been **fully-realized**..... our nation **has** taken some astonishing **strides** during the

past **4** decades.....making enough progress in race relations that we have now even elected an **African American President!**

Today, as we continue to mourn **Dr. King's** tragic death.....who could have imagined **40** years ago at the time of his death.....that **4** decades later the **United States** would inaugurate a **47 year old Black Man** as our nation's **44<sup>th</sup>** President?

Certainly not me!.....in fact, I don't believe that even **Dr. King himself** could have imagined what is about to take place in our country next week!....although Dr. King was always a hopeless optimist!

Anyway..... this is a cause for real celebration!

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Four decades ago, on **April 4, 1968**.....a terrible event took place in **Memphis, Tennessee!**

**Martin Luther King, Jr.** had gone to **Memphis** to support the strike of local sanitation workers.....and there on **April 3<sup>rd</sup>** ....the **last** night of his life....**Dr. King mesmerized** a local **Baptist** congregation with a very moving sermon.

He began his sermon by stating his firm belief that in the not-too-distant future, our nation would finally defeat the powers of **racism** and **bigotry**.....thus ensuring that all Americans would someday get to the **Promised Land** of full-freedom and equality!

But.....his concluding words sounded very much like a somber, forecast of his own impending death,....as he said:

My friends....I don't know what will happen to me now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But that doesn't matter to me now.....because I've been to the Mountaintop!.....Like everybody else, 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....and He's allowed me to go up to the Mountaintop.....and I've looked over ....and I've SEEN the Promised Land!.....and while I may not get there with You.....I want you to know tonight that WE as a people WILL someday get there!"

It was a tragically-prophetic statement!.....The next day he was gone!.....killed by an assassin's bullet as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in downtown Memphis.....King never lived to see the Promised Land of full-equality for all Americans that had worked so hard to make happen!

That terrible day, the citizens of this country were left reeling in self-doubt and sorrow.....wondering if the American people would ever realize Dr. King's inspiring Dream of a society in which Black and White brothers and sisters could actually live peacefully together in a community free of racial hatred, intolerance and bigotry!

Back in 1968, the answer to that question...was severally in doubt!

Yet.....40 years later, on election-day last November 4<sup>th</sup>, the actions of the American people.....reflected some other prophetic words of Dr. King from his famous "I Have A Dream" speech.....as our

nation elected a new **President**... ..“not on the basis of the color of his skin.....but because of the content of his character!”

Today....that too is a cause for **great** celebration!.....because this election provided the **American** people with hope that we had finally ended our long, bigoted nightmare with racism!

And so....while **Dr. King’s Dream** has not been fully realized yet.....perhaps the **American** people have finally begun to “glimpse” what **King** saw from the mountaintop in **Memphis, Tennessee**.....**40** years ago!

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I believe that someday our nation’s most respected historians and social scientists....will declare that last November’s election could never have occurred in our lifetime.....without the preparatory, social, moral and ethical contributions made on behalf of our nation a half century ago by **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.!**

Last **November’s election** was a fulfillment of one of the significant prophecies of **Martin Luther King, Jr.!**

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Interestingly enough....in his own words, our President-Elect **Barack Obama** poignantly acknowledged the great debt the **American** people owe to **Dr. King**...who began the task of turning our nation around...and away from its bigoted, divisive past!

In a sermon preached to this congregation last **November 9<sup>th</sup>** **Randy Tremba** reminded us that back in **2007** Candidate **Barack Obama**, speaking on the presidential campaign trail in **Selma, Alabama**.....painted a poignant parallel between **Dr. King** and the great Old Testament leader **Moses**

He talked about **Moses** bravely leading his people out of **Egypt** and through the wilderness for **40** years.....right up to the banks of the **Jordon River** on the very edge of the **Promised Land**.

But **Moses** never reached the **Promised Land himself**.....he died at a point where he could look across the **Jordon River** and SEE the **Promised Land**.....but death prevented him from ever getting there himself!

**Obama** then told the crowd in **Selma**.....that just as **Moses** influenced the future of the **Israelites**....in the same way **Dr. King** provided hope and vision to the **American** people....ensuring them that one day they too would achieve full freedom, prosperity and equality!

Without the contributions made by **Dr. King** and other heroic leaders of the civil rights movement who paved the way for us...there is no way we would be where we are today!.....Yet again.....like **Moses**.....**Dr. King** didn't live long enough to benefit from those frights and equality he worked so hard to establish!

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As a democratic society.....we have indeed come a long, long way!

...including living long enough to see the **astonishing** election of an **African American** President of the **United States!**

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And so **again**.....I believe that, **irrespective** of partisan political **preferences**.....the **Inauguration** we are about to celebrate in two days is such an historically **significant** event.....that **all Americans** should **celebrate** it!.....and give humble **thanks** to **God** that it is happening!

**Next Tuesday**.....when **Barack Obama** **assumes** his presidential duties in the **Oval Office**, he will **face** an **unbelievable** array of **extraordinary challenges!**

Reflecting the words of **Charles Dickens**...our nation may **indeed** be about to **face**.....**“the Best of times...and the Worst of times!”**

The economic crisis facing our nation today.....is **so serious**.....that the **American** people **shouldn't** be surprised if we heard **Mr. Obama** mutter in the moments after being sworn-in:

**“What in the world have I done ....to deserve this?”**

And what is **our** responsibility in all of this? ..... **think** about **it**:

If the **American** people **elect** new leaders and ask them to **change** the course of our nation's **destiny**.....and then **refuse** to **support** our leaders when they call on us to **work hard** and to **contribute** to the effort to **save** our country.....then **shame** on us!

And if our elected leaders provide us with “**the Good Life**” without also requiring personal self-sacrifice on our part.....then no President.....however eloquent.... or however dramatic his or her election victory might be.....can take us where we refuse to go!

Hopefully in the days ahead, the **American** people, **Republicans**, **Democrats**, and **Independents**.....will unite behind our new **President**.....working together to overcome the serious challenges we all face!

This morning, in the face of great new opportunities and scary new challenges.....let us pray that **Almighty God** will guide and protect our new **President** and also help us to do our part in making this nation the best it can possibly be!

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I invite you now to join me in prayer for our new **President** and also for the **American People**?

Let us pray:

**Great, Good and Loving God**.....we pray today for a new dawn of courage, wonder, self-sacrifice, and nobility for our native land, and we pray for our **President-Elect**.

We beseech you to endow him with such high qualities of leadership that he will be able to tirelessly serve all of the people of this nation with excitement, wisdom, strength, and high-purpose. Bless him and also bless his young family!

We ask you to **provide** our new **President** with the necessary **strength**, **courage**, and humility in these **challenging** times, so that he can **rise above** the ranks of selfish petty-party-**politics**.....self-interest.....and the **abusive** use of **power**.....Provide him **instead** with faith and insight enough to **inspire** him to **lead** this nation into a **new beginning** of **hope** and fresh **possibility!**

We pray that our country may rise **above** and **beyond** the confines of **narrow vision**, dominating **pride**, self-interest, **greed**.....and political **partisanship**.

May the **future** of our nation be **filled** with the promise of **fresh** new **ideas**. As a nation may we **fulfill** our **destiny** to be an **inspiration** for **all** humanity.

May we become people **devoted** to honor, nobility, and **love** and **understanding** enough to embrace **all** the peoples of **your** creation!

.....And **finally**, in a world that desperately needs **all** of the love that we can **create**.....may we have enough love that there will be enough left-over to **pass--on** to our neighbors **everywhere**.

In the days to come, **provide** us with daunting, challenging **hills** to **climb**.....and new **noble** pathways upon which to **walk!**..... For we pray all these things in **your Holy name!**

Let **all** of **God's** people say.... "**Amen!**"

- **Amen!**