

“The day the heavens rejoiced”

January 25, 2009

Text: Isaiah 65:17-25, Ephesians 4:1-6, 14-16

I.

Making our way into our nation’s capitol this past Tuesday, for the *Inauguration* of President Barack Obama, was like no other experience. There was nothing about it that was easy. At the same time, everything about it radiated with joy.

Waking up at 5:30 a.m. in *Falls Church, Virginia* (about ten miles from Washington, where our daughter Erica lives with husband, Cliff), it was cold ... around twelve degrees with the wind-chill probably about ten degrees less.

With literally five layers of cloths on, we were off to the metro which would normally have been about a twenty minute ride into the city. However, with the unbelievable throngs of people (we were packed into the metro like sardines), about two hours later we exited the metro station about a mile from the capitol. Again, people everywhere ... and it was cold and there was a brisk breeze.

When we at last made our way onto the mall grounds, gazing out to the Washington Monument some four or five hundred yards away, everywhere there were masses of people gathered under a mostly sunny blue sky. It was majestic and surreal ... and words from **Isaiah 65** began to sound out in my mind ...

For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating ...for I am creating a new Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

The day the heavens rejoiced ...

II.

Speaking of joy and delight, one of the things that immediately struck us was the sheer, uncontainable happiness of the people. Everywhere about us, there was an unmistakable vibe ... an impulse ... a spirit. As the reality of this began to settle in, for the first time in my life time, it seemed that our nation was no longer *we* and *they*. It was now *we* and *we*.

Barack Obama is President of the United States, the most powerful and influential person in the world.

- He’s half black ... his father was born in Africa.
- He’s half white ... his mother is Anglo and from Kansas.
- He was born in Hawaii, a melting pot of ethnicities.

- He lived for four years as a child in Indonesia (the most populous Muslim nation on the planet).
- And he has relatives of multiples ethnicities and religious persuasions all over the earth.

Everybody can identify. There's room for everyone. No more WE verses THEY. From now on, it's WE/ WE. No more *in-group/ out-group*; no more *us* verses *the man*. For all Americans, it's a new day.

Around the world—everywhere—televisions were turned on. In London and Paris and across Europe; in Johannesburg, South Africa, where Nelson Mandela had risen to similar heights; in Nairobi, Kenya (the birth country of President Obama's father); in India, Iran and Baghdad.

From nearby the D.C. area, Jerome Short, 63, could not hold back his glee: *This is history ... I never thought I would see the day. Never.*

Ella Mae Johnson, 105, from Cleveland, made it to the Mall, wrapped in a sky-blue sleeping bag and propped up in her wheelchair by her nurse. *I just had to come, she said, just had to come. Praise God Almighty!*

And Beverly Fleming, from Chatsworth, CA: *I used to tell my children that they can be anything and do anything they want to in their lives. And now, can you believe this? For my children, my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren, anything is possible ... anything.*

That doesn't mean that the evils of racism and bigotry and prejudice have been eradicated from the human spirit (that may never happen, totally). But it does mean that the landscape has been forever changed. For, indeed, it has. You could see it and sense it on the faces of the people.

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III.

As the letter to the **Ephesians** reminds us ... again, this was a circular letter written, no doubt, by a member of the Pauline School ... a letter sent out to be read in the churches when they gathered for worship:

I therefore beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And then, GET THIS: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

More than anything, the Inauguration this past Tuesday, January 20, 2009, was a day of hope realized. It was a time of unstinting unity. There was a palpable sense that, at last—thank God almighty—we are ONE.

ONE body, unified by ONE spirit ... called to the ONE hope. And this ONENESS is God's vision, God's dream.

President Obama's Inauguration was more than a mere event. It was a richly symbolic happening, symbolic of a purification and redemption of the American spirit.

IV.

As the truth shall set us free, we must be bold and humble in telling the truth about ourselves.

Our nation's role in slavery has forever been a malignant cancer in our soul. From its inception in the early 17th century, its story has been a shameful one.

- Its darkness and evil have diminished us all; and, sadly, we've known it from early on and through the buoyant days of our Founding Fathers.
- They knew it was wrong ... but felt that without an awful compromise, our nation's birth story could not have been written.

They may have been right, but at an awful price.

As we declared our independence as a nation and began to grow—acquiring new land and new wealth—slavery's insidious reality gnawed away at our national conscience. At last, there was no way out save from a horrific civil war, a war that brought us to our knees as a nation; and then the decades of segregation and Jim Crow that followed.

From the civil rights movement of the sixties, spearheaded by Martin Luther King, Jr. and symbolized in his famous ***I have a dream*** speech in August of 1963, gradually, incrementally, we've been inching forward ... making progress ... seeking, however haltingly, to redeem ourselves of this wrenching and insidious wrong.

In this backdrop, President Obama's Inauguration was a landmark event.

As he laid his left hand on the sacred text (the revered Bible of Abraham Lincoln), and spoke the words of the presidential oath, how many thousands, even millions of voices

sounded out across our nation and the world? *Never thought it would happen ... not in my lifetime ...*

As the tears flowed and memories upon memories were evoked, it was a sacred moment. A moment suspended in time when, somehow, we were all elevated to a higher place. To a place where we were a little more redeemed and a whole lot more hopeful.

It was as if the heavens had opened and God had spoken: *America, America, at last, you are fulfilling your destiny. You are moving closer to the highest ideals spelled out in your Constitution ... that all people are created equal.*

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V.

In the reading shared earlier, the prophet Isaiah refers to a time when a new day is on the horizon—the new day that God envisions; a day that marks a noted break from the past; a day that is, indeed, a new day.

On that day—and for us here in the United States of America, it *is* a new day—a day when ...

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox And they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

Part of the symbolism unveils the unflinching truth—rooted in our past and yet, while sustaining us over years of toil and struggle, alive for us today ... foundational truth:

- that good will triumph over evil, virtue over deceit ...
- that generosity will rise higher than the clenched fist of greed ...
- that the exalted morality of divine purpose cannot be diminished ...
- and that the voice of an enduring *peace with justice* will never be silenced.

Friends, we are Americans. And at our best—Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, non-believer ... all that we are—we have within us the capacity and the will to embrace the highest ideals of our Constitution and our most sacred biblical writings.

We have it within us to aim high, to reach high, and to live out—together—the true meaning of our creed.

To be sure, we Christians come at this with a particular story—a story rooted in a love that welcomes everyone and that will not let us go.

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VI.

As the end of the day, this is ultimately not about **President Barack Obama**, in spite of all the hope and promise we attach to him.

As he himself has been telling us—through his campaign and now into his Presidency—it's about us. It is time, now—now that the heavens have opened and joy is beaming on the faces of the multitudes ... it is time for each of us to stand up and do our part. It's time to live out the rich inheritance God has given us.

Hope is all about; possibility is everywhere. With the right spirit and the right purpose, together, we can lift up our nation once again to a more lofty place; a place where persons are seen and valued and dignified, no matter anything about us.

Together, with God's guiding hand upon us, we the people can do great things. Let the words of Abraham Lincoln echo through the years ... words from his Second Inaugural:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right ...

Let the dream be realized. And let every man, woman and child be drawn into its glow ...

That one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be a plain, and the crooked places made straight ... and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all the peoples of the earth shall see it together.

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For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth, said the prophet Isaiah, ... the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind ...

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating ... for I am creating Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.

So let us determine—each of us—to lift the hand of cooperation and shared dedication. With sweated brow, let us labor together, in the spirit to which **Ephesians** calls us ...

*To lead lives worthy of the calling to which we've been called ...
With all humility and patience ... bearing with one another in love ...
Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

May God's holy name be praised ... our God who is above all and through all and in all.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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