

*Justice, Faith, and Leadership*  
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie  
January 18, 2009

The Sunday before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and the Sunday before the inauguration of the first black American president is, let me just say, an intimidating Sunday to prepare for the pulpit. It is with great humility that I offer you a message that is worthy of the occasion. I am also tasked with this being the theological theme sermon of the month, which appropriately, is justice.

Today I'm especially concerned with doing justice to the high emotions that are present within us. I know I feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of my hopes for the future, and the magnitude of inspiration and joy I feel that this moment in American history has arrived. And there is sadness, that Dr. King is not here to see it, or that President Kennedy and Robert Kennedy are not here to see it. And there is fear, oh yes, there is fear for the future, that there will be grave disappointment of some kind.

One thing that helps to allay my fears is to remind myself that, as tempting as it is to believe, Barack Obama is no messiah. While he appears to be such an honorable, capable, and intelligent man, he is not Jesus, and he's not going to fix everything. Obama is a mere human being and he is a leader, a leader the likes of which we have not seen in decades, that I have not seen before in my lifetime, and yet, there are so many ways he could fail. Will he deliver? Will he be able to deliver, or, are the cards stacked against him?

It allays my fears to give Obama permission to fail. I give him permission to fail because, deep down, as much as I believe in the vast effects that brilliant leadership can have, I know that what's going to save this country isn't Obama; what's going to save our country is ourselves. As individuals and as a country, we have to work out our own salvation. We, as citizens, must take renewed responsibility for ourselves, in ways we have been trained out of doing, for so long, for too long.

I don't think the world was ever a perfect place, and I don't think it ever will be. But I believe in justice. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

What the arc of the moral universe is referring to is faith. It is a statement of faith – faith that, as unjust as the world so often appears to be, as small and short as our lives are, we can't always see that in fact the universe and our world within it errs toward goodness – as long as we, the agents of change, are open to this goodness. Progress is slow toward justice, I believe, in part because we don't take responsibility toward developing a viable faith in this goodness. So this sense of renewed responsibility of which I just spoke, is a responsibility toward renewing our faith.

UU pastors are often accused of being meek when it comes to challenging their flock to have faith and I think it's a valid accusation. Today, I'm not pussyfooting around faith. I challenge all of you this morning to further develop your faith; it's an endeavor that both the Rev. King and President-elect Obama would approve of.

Because: it is faith in a moral universe, in justice, that is ultimately going to bring about the changes that will save human society – in our country and in our communities. It is this kind of faith that will deliver the best national security there can be. We all have a part to play – if we believe there is only one leader who can save us, we are in trouble. It's time for all of us to be leaders, that we may lead ourselves. Faith and leadership are inextricably linked.

There's some scripture in the Hebrew Bible that will help me explain how this is so. There is a part of the first book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible that frames the question about where the real power of the best kind of leadership lies.

This part of the Hebrew narrative comes from before the Common Era, when Israel did not yet have a king. There were about a dozen tribes, and when major decision-making was needed it was left to the

judges; these were men who led worship of the people and were wise, often having a direct relationship with Yahweh, the Hebrew god, who instructed the judges.

Samuel was one of the last of such judges and he was well respected. But he was getting old and his sons were not fit to replace him. It was also a time of war – the Philistines were threatening to displace the Israelites. It came to the minds of the Israelites that it was time to have a king, so they could be like all the other nations, who had kings. Samuel, who did not like the request, reported it to God, who also disapproved of the request. He said to Samuel: “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them . . . Now then . . . you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.” [1 Samuel 8: 7-9 NRSV]

And that’s what Samuel did. He warned the people of all the ways a king would rule, with the typical Near Eastern practices of taxation and conscription of workers for his service, and other devices of ruling. “But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! But we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” [1 Samuel 8: 19 – 20 NRSV]

God relented to the people of Israel, and allowed them to have a king. But he was disappointed, because God didn’t want Israel to be like other nations, and he felt that their desire for a king demonstrated a lack of faith in him. One interpretation of the scripture follows this line of thinking: the people of Israel had shifted their definition of justice from one that was divine, and one where God ruled, to one that was worldly, and inferior in the sense that it was limited by its human scope, and therefore, self-limiting in its access to real power.

God didn’t want to see the people forfeit their direct access to this real power; he didn’t want to see the definition of justice cheapened to one that had no guaranteed grounding in divine love. Most of all, he didn’t want to see the people grow content and complacent, with someone else fighting their battles for them.

In order to translate this Biblical narrative and make it useful for today’s context, I think that’s the most helpful metaphor in the story: the people wanted someone to fight their battles for them, and basically, God thought that was pretty lame. It’s another way of saying that God wanted all of us to be leaders, he wanted all of us fully participating in the challenges of life, and all of us developing a faith that would draw upon infinite, divine wisdom, the best authority of justice. While it’s hard for us to imagine a leaderless society, let’s try to come at this from a philosophical point of view. What are the ways we’ve been content to let others fight our battles for us, and how has that been harmful to us?

It seems reasonable that we should expect our leaders to protect us, and to see over good foreign and domestic policies. But what about the day-to-day stuff, the choices and decisions we’re faced with everyday in a free society, and the tougher moral questions about how to live a good life? We know our elected officials can’t fight our moral battles for us, but who does? Who has the authority to answer those questions for you? From what or whom, do you seek ammunition to fight the moral battles of your life? In other words, by what authority do you define justice? How do you lead yourself?

Let’s look at how some of the best leaders might answer this. I know that Martin Luther King Jr. would have answered that God is the final authority of justice in his life, and it’s likely that Barack Obama would say the same thing. In the article “What He Believes” in a July issue of Newsweek, Obama says that in his prayers he asks God for forgiveness for his sins and flaws, the protection of his family, and, here is a quote, “that I’m carrying out God’s will, and not in a grandiose way, simply that there is an alignment between my actions and what he would want.”

I really like the way Obama qualifies his prayer to carry out God’s will, that he does so in order to have humility, as he makes his way through life. He does not imply a blind faith, or a complete submission of his will to God; his spiritual exercise of humility serves as a check on his actions, actions that he understands he is the full agent of. Obama’s faith reminds me of an Arab adage, which is ‘trust in God, but tether your camel first.’

Faith that is based in humility, yet grounded in personal responsibility, is an amazing leadership trait. While George Bush was also a man of faith, I don't think he always saw to the effort of tethering his camel. Things got away.

We can learn from Obama's example of how he leads himself, and we can learn from Martin Luther King Jr.'s example of faith. His was a belief in a divine, loving presence that binds all life. His wife, Coretta Scott King, writes this in the foreword of his book, *Strength to Love*. "This belief was the force behind all of my husband's quests to eliminate social evil, and what he referred to when he preached of 'the interrelated structure of reality' . . ." He wrote in his sermon, "All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

This is the viable faith that we need to work harder toward developing, so that our progress toward justice is swifter. The Rev. King's definition of justice hearkens to a divine authority, and here he articulates its practical application. Whether we are faced with moral questions of greed, of hatred, of wastefulness, or of selfishness, the actions we take matter, and are always related to the question of justice because they affect everybody else. But in a world that has come to exult self-centeredness, we seem to have lost the drive to ask ourselves the moral questions in the first place. When we don't even realize we are fighting a moral battle in our lives, we are in effect content to let others fight those moral battles for us. But even the best leaders can't fight these battles for each of us.

One of the biggest moral battles we face as a nation right now is the one against greed gone rampant. The crisis on Wall Street, when you look at the nitty gritty of what really happened, had mostly to do with greed and unaccountability, and the unviable financial faith that there's no other m.o. than constant economic expansion. We can call it a financial crisis, but I think it's a spiritual crisis, a crisis of unviable faith.

Greed stems from a lack of awareness about our interrelatedness and a false sense of our independence. A viable faith, grounded in humility and personal responsibility, supported by spiritual practice, serves to remind us of this interconnectedness. A faith that justice will eventually prevail would change a lot of behavior on Wall Street.

In the heat of politics of the past 40 years, of right vs. left, I think progressives have shied away from faith, quite mistakenly. We haven't seen many good leaders in so many decades because we've not understood the connection between faith and leadership, in the ways that Dr. King did. For this reason, we have failed to produce more good leaders.

Obama expressed this well in his "Call to Renewal" address in June of 2006. He said, "I think we make a mistake when we fail to acknowledge the power of faith in people's lives -- in the lives of the American people -- and I think it's time that we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy. And if we're going to do that then we first need to understand that Americans are a religious people. 90 percent of us believe in God, 70 percent affiliate themselves with an organized religion . . . This religious tendency is not simply the result of successful marketing by skilled preachers or the draw of popular megachurches."

"In fact," he goes on, "it speaks to a hunger that's deeper than that -- a hunger that goes beyond any particular issue or cause. Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds -- dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets -- and they're coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives. They're looking to relieve a chronic loneliness, a feeling supported by a recent study that shows Americans have fewer close friends and confidants than ever before. And so they need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them -- that they are not just destined to travel down that long highway towards nothingness."

If this hunger that Obama describes sounds familiar to you, then maybe it is time to consider your faith, and some new directions in how you lead yourself. Perhaps there are some moral battles in your life that you are ready to fight. Even a battle against loneliness is a moral battle, because you are looking for new ways to engage the world, and participate in the 'interrelated structure of reality' that MLK refers to.

One of those ways can be service. It is not surprising that Barack Obama would come up with the noble idea to make Martin Luther King Jr. Day a national day of service. Now is the time to consider new ways of being of service, and not just tomorrow, but throughout the year. One of the ways I've chosen to be of service on a regular basis is to be an affordable housing advocate in the city of Pasadena. Affordable housing is just one thing that I know Barack Obama's not going to be able to make a priority, and the advancement of this cause supports my faith in justice and equity and dignity. This is the way I have volunteered to be a leader in my community. In what way might you volunteer to be a leader?

To be of service is always one of the ways we can strengthen our faith. And our impetus to be of service is strengthened by our faith. It is not always hard work to strengthen faith. It can be as simple as walking through a new doorway of possibility.

One of the greatest hopes I see for the new administration is that it's not so much about new policies. Obama simply plans to do things differently – his whole mind-frame is unlike any we've ever seen. Part of his new way of doing things is opening all these doors to people – to participate in holding leaders accountable, to be an active agent of change, rather than acted upon. No, he's not Jesus! BUT – as a good leader, he is offering a glimpse of what is possible; he is opening doors that are putting tantalizing possibilities within reach. And faith will continue to play a role in inspiring the nation in this way. As he said in his "Call to Renewal" address,

"Imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address without reference to 'the judgments of the Lord.' Or King's I Have a Dream speech without references to 'all of God's children.' Their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible, and moved the nation to embrace a common destiny."

May all of us be moved toward this common destiny of a viable faith: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." If ever there was proof that this is so, we are witnessing it this week, in this lifetime.

Let us bend that arc ever tighter, as we seek new ways to renew our faith in a moral universe, one in which we acknowledge that every action matters, one in which every day we wake up knowing we are the leaders, we are the agents of change and justice.

Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Happy Inauguration Week!