

Dear Mister President
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
February 1, 2009

Opening Words:

Langston Hughes wrote:

O, yes, I say it plain, America never was America to me, And yet I swear this oath-- America will be!
Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death, The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies, We, the people, must redeem The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers. The mountains and the endless plain--
All, all the stretch of these great green states-- And make America again!

Sermon:

Dear President Obama,

First let me extend my congratulations to you on your election and inauguration as our 44th president, and to extend my very best wishes to you for the coming four years. I was honored to be able to vote for you and support your campaign, and I look forward to your leadership through these challenging times.

I am the Rev Jim Nelson and am the senior minister of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, CA. I know you are aware of Unitarian Universalists. You lived not far from our seminary, Meadville Lombard, in Hyde Park, and I know that your grandmother's memorial service was held at the UU congregation in Honolulu.

Neighborhood Church has close to 700 members and has been a liberal presence in Pasadena since 1885. We are active in our local community and are best known over the past several years for our support of marriage equality and for being a green community – environmental issues matter a great deal to us. Our members volunteer in local service agencies, help build houses in Tijuana, and are looking to establish a program to match professional skills in the congregation with needs in local non-profits. We have an excellent music program and religious education programs for our children and youth. It is a terrific church.

I have been in the ministry for over 25 years, and each time a president is inaugurated, I have written a letter expressing our hopes for the incoming administration, and so I have been thinking about this letter since the election.

Its direction took a turn, though, as I anticipated your inaugural address and the turn was confirmed as I listened to you. It was an excellent speech, exactly right, I thought, and I was moved and convinced that we have entered a time in which we must put away childish things and that we all must assume a deeper responsibility for our country. I was grateful that you addressed your speech to your fellow citizens, because that is the sense we need to claim, or re-claim, that we are citizens. No longer can we be primarily consumers. If we are to rise up and live out our ideals, we will only do so as citizens.

So this letter is not going to be a list of hopes or wishes, nor a litany of what I hope you can do or accomplish, nor a program for the federal government. No, this letter is what we promise you.

As you well know, the history of religious faith is the story of the dance between being and doing, between belief and action, between creeds and deeds. Both are central to religion. We make claims about the world; it is this way and not that way, and then we also make judgments about how we should act in the world: we should do this and not do that. And over history, men and women of faith have sought to understand what it means to live a good life and a meaningful life. I know of no religion that does not have a deep concern for ethics nor of any religion that does not imagine what lies below the surface of reality.

Why are we here and what should we do? These are religious questions, and they were questions you posed in your inaugural speech. The most common answer is that we are here for others. The Buddha emphasized compassion and freeing ourselves from the ego; Jesus taught the golden rule; the Hebrew Prophets emphasized mercy and justice; giving alms is one of the five pillars of Islam. Over and over again, the leaders of faith have emphasized that it is deeds and not creeds that are central to our living. Yet the history of humanity is littered with the corpses of disagreements over creeds.

We are here for others – this is the demand posed by Dr King in his last speech. He referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan. On the road to Jericho, a man is felled by robbers, and people pass him by, not helping. A priest stops but wonders what will happen to him if he helps and so goes on by. Finally, the Samaritan- an outsider in that society – stops and offers help. Jesus then asks, so who is your neighbor?

We are all on the Jericho Road, King suggested. This is all too evident these days. I cannot imagine the burden you feel as you look out at our nation and see the gathering storms as our economy falters more and more. There are people felled on the road of life all over. The other day I was watching a bit of a golf tournament on TV and the commentator, to fill a little extra time, started talking about his retirement funds, and wondered if the golfers on the course could concentrate with their investments falling so. It was appalling.

I almost threw a book at the TV. Yes, my retirement funds have plunged deeply and retirement is probably several years farther away than before, but, like those overly wealthy golfers and TV commentators, I am perfectly OK. It is the poor – the people that Dr. King reminded us of over and over again – that are truly being hurt. There are lots of people down on that Jericho Road and we all need to stop and give support. Our promise of liberty does not mean much when you are cast down at the side of the road; we who can must lend the helping hand. We intend to do something about that.

The search for freedom has been central to our faith from the very beginning. Unitarian Universalists have sought freedom in every way – spiritually and theologically, ethically and morally, psychologically and politically. We have said that only when we are free can we be the best we can be. Unitarians and Universalists were deeply involved in the struggle to end slavery, to give women the right to vote. We walked in Selma and have led the way for equal rights for the LGBT community. Freedom.

You have quoted Lincoln as he talked of a government of, for and by the people and King who affirmed that the moral arc of the universe bends to justice. Both those phrases are from Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister in the 1840s and 50s. He was a champion of freedom. Parker believed that the job of a society was to free its citizens to a better life.

It will take all of us. Thank you for clearly rejecting the truly destructive and false notion that government is the problem. This false belief has held sway for far too long. Government – our government – is of, by and for the people; we elect our leaders after all, and while no one would suggest that the government can or should do everything, the idea that it is the problem is just false. We are the problem, all of us, just as we are the solution, all of us.

We have argued that Jesus taught freedom and sought freedom for others – especially for the poor and outcast. He said that in clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, in housing the homeless, could they, and we find freedom.

And while we have worked for freedom from whatever keeps us in bondage, we have also sought the freedom for Not just the freedom from but the freedom for ... This is the critical difference; we seek the freedom not to do what we want but rather the freedom to do what we should. We are all under a moral imperative to serve our neighbor.

And this is where we are ready to respond to your call to citizenship. Abraham Lincoln ended his first inaugural by appealing to the better angels of our nature. Recently, Parker Palmer, the Quaker educator has wondered whether we have listened too long to the lesser angels of our nature – those lesser angels

that have abdicated public responsibility, have focused on being consumers rather than citizens, the angels of self rather than of public interest, that measures success by wealth rather than service.

We have turned too far inward, which has probably led us to the greed and selfishness that is at so much of the root of our current troubles. The prophet Micah once said that what is required of us is to do justice, and love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Abraham Joshua Heschel suggested that we have lost the importance of that prophetic imperative. John Buehrens, former president of our denomination put it this way:

“Instead we turn the question upside down, asking; ‘What do I require in a God I’d be willing to believe in, in a community, a cause, that I’d give a second thought, much less my heart mind and strength?’” This is the great sin of the modern age, this constant asking ‘What do I require ...? Faith, religion, spirituality, is about surrender, about be willing to give ourselves over to something greater than ourselves, even if we don’t always agree. Freedom is found in giving yourself to something. The paradox is that the more we give ourselves over to something, the freer we are.

To gain your life, you must lose it, the Bible claims. This is surely true. Heschel also said that while not all are guilty, all are responsible. We are indeed responsible for our world. In my faith, we are slowly learning that the arguments we have indulged in for the past number of years got us nowhere. We have argued about whether there is a God, or whether we can say words like holy or sacred. We have acted, all too often, as reverse fundamentalists. We have fought about what music we listen to in worship, or whether ministers can pray or wear robes or not. Should we read the Bible and on and on.

These questions are not wrong, but they are indulgences, fit for times when other needs are not pressing.

This is no time for indulgence. We are in a time of crisis. This we know. In my state, services are being cut – in education and care for the elderly, in mental health and environmental service, in health care. People are losing jobs and have fewer places to turn for help. This is a time when churches and communities of faith will matter more and more. Do we face dissolution as a society? I do not know, but I know that many are very afraid and almost all are anxious.

I know that it is our time – the time for people of faith – to put away childish things, as you reminded us – and take up the work of preserving our communities. It is time to stop arguing and begin believing that we can do, if not great, then good things. It is time to look around and see where our neighbors are suffering and in need.

We collect food for a local food bank each week; we support a program that provides free medical and dental care to school aged children who have no insurance; just yesterday our campus was filled with people at a Green Fair, highlighting our commitment to building sustainable communities. We are involved in low cost housing projects, and lobby at the state level for access to clean water for everyone.

Like you. Mr. President, I have two daughters. Mine are older than yours, through college, just entering into their civic life, and they are ready to take on the task of creating a more perfect union. But they know, and want, companions on that journey. They still look up to those of us still engaged in living for wisdom and for a welcome to work together. And while our minds are still clear and our hands still able, I pledge my congregation’s support to doing what we can to create a community based in the ideals of freedom and justice and mercy.

Here we need leaders, like you, to inspire us and help point the way. Forty years ago as we began to merge from the shadows of discrimination and an unjust war, Martin Luther King reminded us that the way is long and the road is hard. He knew, as you know, as we all know, that we have much to do in the days ahead. He told us to get out on that Jericho Road.

But we have to start with the belief that we can. ‘Yes we can,’ you called out in your campaign. Si se puede, you said, and we shouted it back. Yes we can. And we did. If we begin there, begin not with what we each might believe as individuals, but begin with what we believe together, with what binds us

together, with what we are willing to promise to each other, with what we have in common, if we begin with a commitment to the common good, then yes we can. If we begin with faith in ourselves as a people, as communities, as a congregation, then yes we can.

King ended his great great speech on the mall of Washington –filled with people just like on Tuesday the 20th - with these words:

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

My wife and I watched many of the inaugural activities. The first ball you and Michelle attended was the Neighborhood Ball, and at the end of your remarks you said 'We are Neighborhood people and we do Neighborhood work.'

Well, Mr. President, we are Neighborhood people too, and the members of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church of Pasadena CA pledge our support to building a community committed to freedom and to justice and to mercy. We pledge to walk that road of light, to praise song for the day, to ring out the bell of freedom and equality, to dust ourselves off and get up and put our shoulders to the wheel. We promise to be citizens, bound together for the common good.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
Senior Minister
Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church