

## KEEPING HOPE ALIVE!

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

Oh, What a privilege is ours this day! To honor the legacy of a great prophet, a man who gave his life for freedom- to praise and give thanks for the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr....

and to celebrate – 45 years after the March on Washington- 45 years after King's "I Have a Dream" speech...

We here gathered, live to see and to celebrate the inauguration of the first African-American President of the United States of America!

Oh, what a privilege is ours this day!

How many of us lived through segregation, through Jim Crow, through unequal opportunity, through racial violence and prejudice...how many of us today are touched personally by the miracle of a dream fulfilled!

How many of us live today in families that are blended and mixed in so many ways...with so much diversity of race and culture. How many of us were there...marching and risking during the civil rights movement...how many of us struggled mightily to keep hope alive...to help make Dr. King's dream of racial equality a reality.

We won't be singing..."We Shall Overcome Someday...not this day...because this is not a someday...this is a new day...when we see Barak Obama with Michelle holding the Bible, standing on the steps of the capitol to take the oath of office....when we wake up on Jan. 21<sup>st</sup> and know that a young, Black man sits in the oval office...when we take in the reality...that still feels like a miracle...then...we will know that this is a new day...this is the day that we have overcome.

Barak Obama- First African American President of the United States of America! A day some of us thought we would never see.

What does it mean to Mr. Obama to fill the position of such an historic first?

He refers to himself as part of the Joshua generation...acknowledging that he stands on the shoulders of the great leaders that have gone before- the leaders like King, the leaders that were of the Moses generation.

The Joshua generation describes those who inherited the dream and the work of taking the next steps. Moses led the people out of slavery...he led them into the wilderness, it took forty years of wandering in the desert to get to the land of Canaan...Moses didn't live to cross the river into the promise land...that was left to Joshua...Joshua and his generation were given the covenant to carry on the work. And we have all inherited the covenant to carry on the work of anti-racism.

Wouldn't Dr. King be amazed...this week would have been his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday...wouldn't he be amazed to see how far we have come...how far we have moved from the static, barrier of the color line.

The Joshua generation, those in their thirties and forties.. don't see or think in black and white...they are mixed...like Obama himself, Brown is the new white. And Hope HAS been kept alive.

Let's think for a moment about it means...to be the first in something. What does it mean to be the first to cross a barrier...the first to achieve beyond your raisin, the first to break down walls of prejudice, hate, and inequality?

If any of us have held that role, in our families of origin, in our small town or community, ....if any of us have been the first woman to lead in a "man's profession", or the first in our family to go to college, or join the military, or become a doctor, or perform at the Kennedy Center...or play professional baseball...or be elected to public office, or "come out" as a gay person...or leave the Catholic church, or marry across racial boundaries...or adopt a child...what has it meant to us to a first?

You might think these kind of "firsts" are incomparable to becoming the first African American President...and I suppose they are...but still...being a first...I submit...is a big deal, is a life change, impacts those around us...and it isn't easy.

It might look glorious, or be perceived as success, it might put you in a better pay grade...it might have a prophetic quality...or pave the way for the next generation...but it isn't easy.

Being the first...takes courage...like the courage of little Ruby Bridges...it takes courage because to be a first...you have to leave something behind...you have to sacrifice something...you have to give up your previous place...your prior identity...the easy road.

Being the first means taking on a mantle...representing...

It's a privilege and it's a burden.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed always aware of the privilege of his ministry. He lived his life as a witness to the finest and best that lies within all of us. He reflected often on the path he walked.

Dr. King wrote these words:

"Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. This is the judgment. Life's most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others?"

To be first...in something...means that our lives become a witness to those to follow....to our brothers and sisters, to our children and grandchildren, to our nieces and nephews. That's part of the privilege and the blessing of leading in some way.

During the civil rights movement and in the decades following... Dr. King inspired many of us to take first steps...in our communities, in our churches, in our schools, in our families. First steps in reaching across racial boundaries, first steps in living as witnesses to a new paradigm...he led us to a renewed realization that all men are our brothers, all women our sisters.

Many of us learned to ask ourselves, what are you doing for others. And we thought of this question in very personal and sacrificial terms.

Leadership in the cause of racial equality, was for King and his family a life of sacrifice. He shouldered a great burden. Continuous death threats, and huge expectations. I think of those photos of him walking at the front of the great civil rights marches...how vulnerable he sometimes looked...and how alone...in a prison cell...in a church pulpit...even behind the podium at the edge of the reflecting pool...on the mall....

One burden of national leadership is isolation....standing apart.

Any of us who have stepped out to be a first...in some way...we too often experience a kind of loneliness...a separation from our past, and from the embrace of those who stay behind. We face fears...that are unpredictable....and confusions that we have to handle alone.

In his book "Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance" Barack Obama writes of returning to Kenya, to sort out his identity and his relationship to his extended family.

As a person who had already achieved a number of firsts...First Black president of Harvard Law Review...much as his father, had been in 1959 the first African student at the University of Hawaii.

He had confusion and a sense of separation from his past...from his father, and his Kenyan relatives.

His was a spiritual journey in which he was reminded that the name Barack, the name he shared with his father, meant in the African...Blessing of God.

At the end of his book...Obama sits near his fathers' grave...and acknowledges a journey he shared with his father...a journey toward self-understanding...a journey toward finding the place where one truly belongs....and the place where we can live out Dr. King's question....what are you doing for others?

Barack Obama returned to the promised land of America...the land where Africans were brought as slaves...and the land where Africans come today for the promise of a new life.

And now Barack Obama...will be the president of this promise land...not only has he crossed over the river Jordan...

But he has inherited the mantle of leadership...as another first...with all the privilege and burden of that reality.

Yes, there is much to celebrate today...but also there is confusion and anxiety...and perhaps our hopes are too daunting..our expectations too high....

I can imagine that our next president feels a bit like a ministerial candidate feels....that he is supposed to represent all things to all people...that he will be expected to be a savior, expected to walk on water.

And so I was glad to re-read the passage in Matthew where Jesus ....sent his disciples off in the boat to the other side of the lake, while he went up the mountain to pray. And in the morning, when the boat was far from the shore...he walked out on the sea...and the disciples cried out in fear...but he said..."take heart, do not be afraid..

But the best part...in the Matthew account, is that he commanded Peter to get out of the boat and come to him...and Peter did, and he too started walking on the water toward Jesus.

What good news...isn't it...that it wasn't only Jesus who could walk on water...and it isn't only Obama that can fulfill the promise of his Presidency...that Peter could also participate in a miracle...that as long as he focused and held to courage...he too could walk on water....

And that we all are people of faith and courage...and we all can walk alongside President Barack Obama...keeping faith and courage...all participating in the miracle of this great first...all sharing the privilege and the burden...

All living from a deep commitment to the words ...

We hold these truths to be self-evident...that all men, all women, are created equal...and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights...to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

So May It Be/Amen