

Reflections on the inauguration of President Barack Obama Jan. 20, 2009

- 1) Jenny Anderson, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kennebunk, Maine
- 2) Pr. Angela Freeman, First Lutheran Church, Malden, Mass.
- 3) Pr. Jim Hazelwood, St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Charlestown, R.I.
- 4) Pr. Tom Maehl, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, Mass.
- 5) Brad Nederhoff, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, Mass.
- 6) Pr. Joel Neubauer, Christ Lutheran Church, Middletown, Conn. (see separate reflection)
- 7) Ruth Nunnally, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Dorchester, Mass.
- 8) Janna Vrlik, St. Paul, Arlington, Mass.

1) Jenny Anderson, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kennebunk, Maine

Jenny Anderson now lives and works in the Washington, D.C., area.

I will say that being at Barack Obama's inauguration was an amazing experience – more so that I actually expected – being part of 1.8 million people, and witnessing history, the permeating message and the energy of hope. I also was overwhelmed by the sense of healing and reconciliation that seemed present on so many levels – healing for the pain caused by injustices rooted in years of racial discrimination; healing for the injustice caused by the greed that was allowed to fester. On a spiritual level, it was absolutely infused with this sense of the Spirit. “Yes, we can,” and not, Yes, I can.”

I also was struck by how pleasant everyone was. We were cold, and crammed in there, but I really did not hear anyone complain. One of my friends stood in line one hour for coffee, and he never heard a single complaint. On the contrary, he quickly became acquainted with those around him. Pretty cool.

2) Pr. Angela Freeman, First Lutheran Church, Malden, Mass.

“As much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break...” (Inauguration speech of President Barack Obama)

I heard these words of encouragement and hope spoken by President Obama as I stood in a newly-renovated home of a resident of the lower 9th Ward of New Orleans. Alvin had been working day and night since April on his home, which was destroyed in the floods following Katrina in 2005. I was there the week of Obama's inauguration with a group of ELCA mission developers working with Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) to help Alvin paint the outside of his house and finish the hard work he had been doing.

Just as President Obama offered the words of encouragement for a new world and new way of being American, I was aware that Alvin's freshly renovated and painted home offers hope to the community still struggling to recover. Alvin's story of recovery and President Obama's

reminder of what is required of us as we go forward touch my life and stir my heart to more actively serving in the communities where I am. Thanks be to God for my two hands and two feet that can help to answer prayers of those in need.

3) Pr. Jim Hazelwood, St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Charlestown, R.I.

Silence speaks loudest to R.I. pastor as he witnesses history

He had a video camera, and looked as if he might work for a television station. Sure enough, moments later I was looking into the lens, answering questions about why we were going to Washington. D.C. "I fully expect to be standing in the freezing cold surrounded by massive crowds, but I wouldn't miss this chance for witnessing history."

In some ways, that does capture our experience, yet does not even come close.

We had planned the trip for months, purchasing our plane tickets in October 2008, and reserving our hotel room at the famous Benjamin Hazelwood Suite, located a couple blocks from the Lincoln Memorial near the George Washington University Law School. It's only available for small gatherings, and you have to know the tenant personally. Over the next few months, more people made their reservations, and, in the end, my wife Lisa and I were joined by Valerie Lucas and our friend, Erik Bell, and his 10-year-old son Tyler. After much debate, we chose to awaken at 5 a.m. and by 6 a.m. we had bundled for the 19 degrees and headed out. Instantly, we found ourselves among thousands of people walking across the Mall in the early morning darkness.



We stood in massive gatherings of people, not exactly lines, but orderly movements of hundreds of people into different sections. While waiting to get in to one of the main viewing areas on the Mall, we experienced the great breadth and depth of humanity. A diverse gathering of citizens eagerly anticipated the day's events. It was close quarters, claustrophobics had a difficult time, yet the closeness also kept us warm. We made our way through security and found a perfect spot. We could see the Capital building before us like a mountain rising from the prairie. Our viewing of the inauguration was aided by a giant Jumbotron screen – the best of both worlds.

Then we waited, in the cold of the morning. The hours went by quickly, though slowly our toes and fingers began to feel the freezing temperatures. People danced to keep warm. But, when the ceremonies began, a silence came over the thousands that were with in ear shot. Of all the experiences of this day, it was the silence that spoke the loudest to me. Yes, there were cheers and jeers at times, but mostly a reverential silence.

The rituals of our democracy unfolded - the peaceful transition of power - an amazing and unique aspect of our form of government.

For many gathered on the Mall between Lincoln's Memorial and the U.S. Capital, we were participating in a ritual that was for me, an experience in American Spirituality. I'm not saying it was religious, not even church, and not necessarily worship. No, but it was an expression of our collective American spirit.

There were prayers at the beginning and at the end. Bookends if you will, unfairly characterized by one TV commentator as a prayer from the right and a prayer from the left. No, it was a reminder that there can be an appropriate public display of faith that articulates our better designs. The Rev. (Rick) Warren and the Rev. (Joseph) Lowery spoke to a breadth of faith, a call to justice, equality and the values that can hold us together in a diverse land.

The President spoke, and as he began, again, all around me, all I heard was silence. From the infant sleeping in his mother's arms, to the college students and on to the many senior citizens including several in wheel chairs – a quiet eager anticipation of what this new young president will ask of us. The crowd cheered at moments, but quickly, ever so quickly, returned to the posture of eager listening. We were waiting, eager to hear, eager to be led.

Then suddenly it was over, the crowds dispersed. We walked back across the Mall, this time facing the afternoon wind. After warming ourselves in my son's little apartment, we ventured out for dinner at a local pub, and a toast in honor of 44. That night, we returned to Rhode Island.

The same news reporter who had accompanied us down on Monday, boarded the airline with us. He smiled and said he was headed directly to the Channel 10 (WJAR NBC, Providence, R.I.) station, when he got off the plane in Providence. That evening, friends reported they had seen me interviewed: "I fully expect to be standing in the freezing cold surrounded by massive crowds, but I wouldn't miss this chance for witnessing history."

And yet, it was so much more than that.

4) Pr. Tom Maehl, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, Mass.

For me, it is important to acknowledge that this is a huge step forward. I am reminded of the scripture passage that reads, "I am about to do something that will make both ears of anyone who hear it tingle." Who could have dreamed, even one year ago, that we would, as a people, vote an African American as our president? We are not where we used to be!

At the same time, I believe it is important to acknowledge that we have far to go; that we are not yet where we shall be. I looked at the 2009 version of *The State of the Dream* (http://www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/state_of_dream_2009.pdf) and read that more than 34 percent of African American children continue to live in poverty; one in three – compared to 28 percent of Latino children and 9.7 percent of white children). Also, the report indicated that at

the end of 2008, 12 percent of African American men were unemployed; that number is expected to jump to 20 percent in one year due to the economic crises affecting those on the margins most severely. We are not yet where we shall be.

As we consider the election of President Obama and celebrate how far we have come, let us beware of those who would say that we are now, "post race." If one travels to any so called "black" sections of any major U.S. city and if one looks at the school systems and the health care systems, one will see that we are not post race. Also, I recently heard author and activist Tim Wise in Boston, asking what about those African American men who choose not to "Bring it like Obama;" that is, who choose not to speak like President Obama, dress like President Obama or who choose to wear dreds. (All of the previous sentence is a rough quote of Tim Wise).

I thank God for how far we've come – we are not where we used to be; and I pray that God will continue to lead us and guide us as a people still struggling with the legacy of slavery and segregation, a people who are not yet where we shall be.

5) Brad Nederhoff, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, Mass.

"It was a beautiful, joyful and peaceful expression of unity and love on a vast and unprecedented scale."

I found myself on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., early in the morning on Tuesday, Jan. 20, 2009, Inauguration Day. I had traveled to D.C. to march as an "alumni" in the Colts Drum and Bugle Corps from Dubuque, Iowa – my wife Geri and I were members of this group in the 1970s and met there. Although I was signed up, ultimately, I was not allowed to march in the parade because of strict security rulings on the size of the groups allowed. But I joined up with the Corps on Sunday night and slept for two nights on a gym floor at Gallaudet University in downtown D.C. I say "I found myself on the Mall" because my original intent was to view the parade with others from the group not marching. But after being separated from my group because of bad crowd control directions – an officer ordering us to walk through the 3rd Street tunnel for half a mile in the wrong direction – I decided to join the vast masses on the Mall. I was leery of the unpredictable size and mood of the crowds that were already packing the surrounding streets at 6:30 a.m., trying to find an access point through the barriers that surrounded the area, but I decided to become a part of the scene anyway.

What I experienced was unexpected and truly remarkable to me. It was a very dark and cold morning. The biggest challenge (besides the crowds) was to stay warm. Everyone was bundled up as best they could, but no matter how many layers you wore, it was simply not enough for the many hours of sitting or standing. But despite the cold and crowd problems, I heard very few complaints and saw no one actually leave to go home. Instead, what I witnessed, and participated in, was the truest sense of community and solidarity that I have ever witnessed on such a grand scale. Even though most of us present did not know one another, there was no reluctance to talk openly and freely with each other. No one had a ticket, had to pay any money, or did not need to "know someone important" to get into this event. For

this vast group, you only had to be willing to brave the crowds and the cold – and the potential unspoken dangers – to become a part of this makeshift community of literally millions. My guess is that about two thirds of this crowd were people of color. My sense is that this event had special meaning for them.

I chose to wait out the time before the ceremony – about five hours – sitting on an out-of-the way park bench in front of one of the original Smithsonian Buildings (the Arts and Industries Building, built in the 1800s for an inaugural ball). While I waited, many small groups and individuals sat for a time on the seats around me, each willing to talk openly about their backgrounds and reasons for coming. We shared food, scarves and the all-important hand and feet warmers. We saved each other's seats while we waited in line for port-a-potties or hot dogs. Most people had already walked for miles to reach this point and few were dressed warmly enough. Many were elderly and children not at all used to these significant physical challenges. But again, few complained and most seemed thankful to be there. It was a friendly, family atmosphere usually only experienced in smaller groups of people that know each other well. Most people carried small flags on long sticks, but not much else.

As I looked around at the crowd during the speeches, only visible to us on the jumbo-trons, I imagined a very similar crowd that must have been present in this same spot for Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. It certainly fit with the historic crowd photos that I have seen. But even that image did not adequately describe the power of this special moment in history. Reflecting a bit more on this in the past few days since returning to Boston, it felt more like what I imagine the Kingdom of God will be like. It was a beautiful, joyful and peaceful expression of unity and love on a vast and unprecedented scale. At the same time, it was a little scary for most of us as we looked around at crowds as far as we could see in all directions. But for those few hours, it felt like we were truly free and surprisingly connected with one another.

I truly believe we were surrounded by the Holy Spirit on this remarkable day, and it extended to those connected by television viewing it from around the world. Thanks be to God!

6) Pr. Joel Neubauer, Christ Lutheran Church, Middletown, Conn. (see separate reflection)

7) Ruth Nunnally, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, Dorchester, Mass.

As a Woman of Color, Ruth Nunnally feels that Obama's election asks Men of Color to view their wives as a gift from God. "Publicly expressing your love for your wife makes her more secure and more of a help-meet. By showing love for her, your children see a role model to follow when they are adults." The election also means there are no limits on dreams of and for children of People of Color, and that it is "cool" to be well-spoken and educated. "Let us rejoice when we see more African American and Latino children rise out of poverty, graduate from high school and college, and create the America that is the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

8) Janna Vrlik, St. Paul, Arlington, Mass.

Teacher sums up inauguration experience: 'Euphoric'

Editor's Note: Janna Vrlik teaches first grade in Boston. She writes: "My students were so excited when I returned to school. They all insisted that they saw me on TV while they were watching the inauguration! I told them that I remember being in first grade and watching Jimmy Carter's inauguration and that they would remember Obama's inauguration for the rest of their lives. They might not understand, at the moment, the magnitude of what they witnessed Jan. 20, but I hope they remember they were in first grade when it happened!"

I feel very blessed to have been a part of this historical event. Since my return last week, I've been trying to think of a word to describe the energy of Washington, D.C., on Jan. 20 and the days that led up to the inauguration. The best I have come up with is "euphoric."

Despite the freezing temperatures, the enormous crowds, and the long waits in restaurants, stores, and the Metro, I never witnessed one single person lose their patience or show so much as a sign of frustration. Everybody was just so happy to be there!

When I think of the words "God Bless America," I can honestly say that this country was blessed that weekend. I saw God's blessings all over Washington, D.C. I saw Him in the eagerness of strangers to introduce themselves and share from where they came. I saw Him in the multitude of smiles that spread across the city like some kind of epidemic. And I heard him in the Metro as people waited nearly 10 minutes to exit the station and the masses started to sing Amazing Grace.

People that were in Washington, D.C., for Barack Obama's inauguration will never be the same. We were all moved by the spirit that lifted and held the city for days. It was a feeling I've never felt before. I wish that all Americans could've experienced it and pray that I feel it again someday.



Janna Vrlik (far right) with Daniela Anello (left) and Connie Jacquays stop for souvenirs in Washington, D.C.

February 2009, *The Lutheran Link*, Worcester, Mass