

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

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The thought came naturally in the days after Senator Barack Obama was elected to become the next president of the United States: This will be a moment of American history worthy of witness. I felt comfortable with the governmental rhythm of former inaugural parades I had attended with my family (my parents served as pastors in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Synod for most of my rearing). An invitation was extended to the dozen-or-so high school students of our congregation:

“We are privileged to live in a nation that has enjoyed a tradition of peaceful change in government. The writers of the New Testament epistles repeatedly admonish the Church to live as respectable citizens of their secular nations, trusting that good government – while always human and imperfect – is a godly blessing. As is written in Titus: “Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone.”

“From January 19-21, we will be able to attend the festivities surrounding the presidential inauguration of Barack Obama. We will not be attending on partisan grounds, but as citizen participants in this historic moment in our nation’s life – especially historic as the United States of America openly transfers leadership to an individual whose color of skin would have made his presidency unthinkable even in recent decades.

“We will be attending as representatives of our congregation; our behavior and maturity will be expected to reflect the good name of Christ Lutheran Church. This is an opportunity for us to witness to our fellow members, to our local community and to the nation and world as a whole that we, as people of faith, are respectfully engaged in the public life we are permitted to enjoy.”

The plan was simple – we would rent a van and “camp out” on the floor at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Vienna, Va., where my mother serves as pastor. Being only a short walk to the Metro, we would easily slip into the city and enjoy the day. But this wasn’t simply vacation; it was to be a specifically Christian witness to the public life we share as American citizens. The invitation concluded: “I truly hope the day will come when you might tell your grandchildren and great-grandchildren the story of how you were present for the beginning of a new chapter in our national life – and that you were there in witness to the holy faith and civic commitment of your family at Christ Lutheran Church.”

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The winter between Election Day 2008 and Inauguration Day 2009 had not lacked for snow. The original excitement of many high school students to join the inaugural crowds in DC was deeply affected by changing school schedules. Students who went to Washington would have to miss two days of classes – days that would have led into midterm examinations. Making up for time lost to snow, midterms were moved up and dwindled our number of who would go for the inauguration. In the days leading up to January 20, our trip was trimmed to two high school seniors and four adults – I wasn’t sure folks would still want to venture out, but students and adults were unanimous in their enthusiasm. The van was cancelled and at noon on Martin Luther King Day, a caravan of cars set out from Middletown.

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There were no traffic backups between Middletown and Washington, even though there were signs along I-95 from Baltimore south reading: “01/20: Expect Major Delays/Lane Closures Expected.” We made the trip in good time. A college friend and member of Christ The King Lutheran Church in Richmond, Va., (who was backup to help chaperone our “large group”) met us at the church with pizzas for dinner. With our sleeping bags strewn across the floors of the church building, we ate our pizza and relaxed with a movie before heading off to bed. It wasn’t an early night’s sleep, but it would be an early morning; we turned off the lights at 11:00pm with plans to be up by five o’clock in the morning.

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The morning was early – we were still tired enough that we ran the coffee maker twice through, till our pot runnethed over. We ate a little oatmeal or maybe a bagel – but we didn’t drink much due to the rumors of a very low port-o-john to visitor ratio. We stumbled through our layers of clothing: double layers of socks; fleece pants inside our jeans; t-shirts under thermal shirts under overshirts under wool sweaters under sweatshirts under coats. We charged our camera batteries and loaded our pockets with granola bars. Our necks were wrapped in scarves. Our heads here swaddled under caps. We held handwarmers and wore gloves. Inside the heated church building, we were sweating till we were as wet as the days we were baptized – but we were excited and there wasn’t a word of complaint.

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Before we left our campground at the church building, we gathered in a chapel and shared in the order for Responsive Prayer from the ELW. We took turns reading the verses of Psalm 72; we took the moment to contemplate the leadership of God and the leadership of those who guide us in public service.

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The walk from the church building to the Vienna Station of the Metro’s Orange Line wasn’t far. Along the way, a man from Indianapolis crossed the street and began following us. Someone in our group asked if he was going into the city. The man said he was. He had decided to come to Washington at the last minute and had spent the night trying to get a ticket for the reserved viewing areas, but he wasn’t successful. He asked if he could follow us to the Metro Station.

I admit that I was nervous. It was just after six o’clock in the morning and it was still dim outside. Though the man seemed genuine, I was suspicious of his friendliness – after all, we were headed into the crowds of the city and I felt a modicum of vigilance was appropriate against pickpockets and con artists. Yet as the man continued to chat with us, I began to realize he had no hidden agenda. He was simply excited to be where he was. He asked who we were – and when he heard we were from Christ Lutheran Church, he lit up: “I’m a Lutheran, too!” The man’s background was from the Missouri Synod and he was evidently very active with his congregation.

We split ways at the Metro Station. It was the only time I’d felt suspicious the entire day – and I had to ask forgiveness even for that.

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The line at the Metro Station stretched from the station gates around the bus drop-offs, then around the parking lot until it finally ended inside a parking garage. Throughout the day we learned the police were keeping the lines outside the stations and only allowing access for as many people as could board the incoming trains. Once we made it inside the station – after reading some inauguration-

themed pamphlets given to us by folks from Jews for Jesus – we easily made it onto a train. Most of us stood for the long ride into the city. Because so many people were flooding the Metro system, the normally half-hour trip started-and-stopped itself at least twice (if not three times) as long.

On the train, we met a woman from Boston who raved on and on about the politeness of everyone she had met. We met a small group from Wyoming, who joked that there are less than 550,000 citizens in their entire state –and, since 500,000 of them are die-hard Republicans, it wasn't too tough to get a ticket to watch a Democrat's inauguration up close. Somewhere in the crowded corners of the train, there was a group who sang "The Star Spangled Banner" and "God Bless America," whenever we were stopped to let the stations ahead of us empty their crowds.

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We got off the train at L'Enfant Plaza around the intersection of Maryland Avenue and 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Our goal was to get to the Mall to be there for the inauguration itself – but all we saw was people. We slowly shuffled out of the packed station while folks laughed and zipped up their coats. One girl urged us to "Lift Every Voice and Sing" with her.

We didn't ask directions – we only followed. The tidal wave of humanity was awesome. Older folks were dressed in their best clothing and young families held their children's hands. There were wheelchairs and strollers and crutches, sneakers and stilettos and work boots. Brown. Black. White. Every shade of humanity was walking in one direction without pushing or shoving.

One of our members tripped a little – and countless arms reached out to catch her (unfortunately, they were a moment too late...but her spirit wasn't bruised and she never stopped walking).

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At one point we passed a woman covered in ribbons and buttons and red, white and blue. She said she had arrived in the early morning hours. She'd needed to use the bathroom and it took her 90 minutes to work against the flow of traffic on the Mall. Now the security checkpoint she had originally used was closed, and she couldn't rejoin her group. But she didn't whine. She wished us well and told us to hike as far back to the Lincoln Memorial as possible as quickly as possible, if we wanted to get in.

At the 14<sup>th</sup> Street security checkpoint, we were turned away. There was no room for anyone to step onto the Mall.

We continued walking.

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A little ways down from 14<sup>th</sup> Street, we noticed people climbing over the barricades. The police weren't anywhere in sight. In one of those split second decisions, we had a plan: one of the adults would go over first, and then the students, followed by the rest of us. We got over with enough time to gather in a circle, asking Jesus to be merciful as we jumped our way into the crowd – and thanking God for bodies spry enough to do so.

An older African-American woman was trying to climb over the barricade at the same point. Her face was determined. After asking if we could help her out, we grabbed her feet and thighs and caught her as she was hoisted over. She thanked us as she hurried off into the crowd, almost leaving her purse behind with an adult from our group.

A minute or so later we saw that the barricade had been pushed open just feet from where we had climbed over. People were walking in with ease, but their stories wouldn't be as exciting.

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Like ducklings following their mama, we wedged ourselves as deep in the crowd as we could safely manage. We were on the edge of the Mall, in front and to the right of the Washington Monument. The White House sat austere across from us in a secure and conspicuous absence of people. The prelude music was playing and we could hear everything with perfect clarity. If we looked through the bare tree branches to our left, we could watch the ceremonies on a Jumbotron in between the heads and hats of taller onlookers.

Maurice and Silvia were standing by us with their teenage son. We were quickly all friends. Cameras were passed between strangers with the hopes that a neighbor might have a better shot of the action. Every square inch of our bodies was in contact with other bodies, but no one was rude. No one was less than friendly. Everyone laughed. Maurice and Silvia helped keep an eye on our group.

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The one ugly moment of the crowd occurred when President Bush was seen on the Jumbotron. Some of the people booed, others sang "Na na na na, na na na na, hey hey hey, good-bye". To our left was a family of women of several generations who had come up together.

When one of them booed, another said, "Stop that. That's got no place here. He served us as our president as best as he could." "I know it ain't professional," the first woman responded, "but it is what it is. It's the feeling of the people. It is what it is." To that, the oldest member of the group looked at her family and said, "Jesus, have mercy on 'em. Have mercy on 'em, Lord."

Throughout the crowd, it wasn't police who stopped the booing, but people in the crowd itself who asked their neighbors to be more supportive citizens.

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At one point, an African-American woman was visible on the Jumbotron. It was hard for folks to decipher who was coming into the Capitol. Someone yelled out, "Who is it?" The answer came: "Well, it's either Michelle Obama ... or Condoleeza Rice." People laughed. We were having a good time.

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A voice over the loudspeaker said we could be seated; we laughed accordingly.

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As a taste of home, I regularly read *The Washington Post* online. For weeks I'd been reading various opinions on Mr. Obama's choice of Pastor Rick Warren to open the inaugural ceremonies with prayer. So as Pastor Warren was introduced to pray, I pricked my ears to listen to the words he would offer his God (and mine) on behalf of these United States.

Pastor Warren prayed eloquently – and I recall that his prayer was based on sincere, if predictable, hopes for our nation and our government: courage and wisdom, strength and compassion, diligence

and discernment. Pastor Warren clearly seemed to be attempting a balance between offering a prayer on behalf of a pluralistic gathering, but also offering a prayer that was genuine to his faith and his relationship with the God he knows through Jesus Christ – whom the ancient Jewish world knew as Yeshua, whom the Muslim world knows as Isa, whom large portions of the Americas know as Jesús (HEH-soos). (In fact, one of the most repeated queries in the “On Faith” discussions of *The Washington Post* was whether or not the Rev. Warren would offer his prayer “in Jesus’ name.” Some opinions were that to do so would alienate large segments of the American populace and would muddy the waters between church and state; others felt that any authentic prayer would have to ring true to the faith of the person praying.)

I am not a sociologist or a constitutional lawyer. I do not know the rippling effects of Pastor Warren’s prayer on my neighbors, but as I listened to the earnestness of his personal prayer, I was able to join with numerous others in the crowd who share in their knowledge of the One solely through Jesus. Afterwards I picked up my considerations of what is appropriate religious expression in a public forum, but for the duration of the prayer I simply let the words rise to heaven – and when Pastor Warren began to pray with the words our Savior taught us, I was honored to join in the prayer along with those Christians who had gathered...and I was humbled by the quiet respect my non-Christian neighbors (of whatever opinion) gave me to pray.

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At some point, Joe Biden took his oath and became vice president. We knew it was happening and perhaps some of the mob was paying attention. In all honesty, the voices around me were whispering with more excitement that this was a portent of Obama’s coming oath than they were with excitement for Joe Biden. I remember hearing the words, but my attention was already fastening on things to come. When I clapped for Biden, I would like to believe it was with an unconscious thanksgiving for the roles of all those who lack the luster of the spotlight...but my conscious thinking was otherwise preoccupied.

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I was ready to listen to Mr. Obama take the oath of Mr. President. We were all asking each other to shift a little this way or that way so we could see the Jumbotron. Some folks asked the people around them to take their hats off during the oath—and no one who was asked seem to refuse. The family of women standing by us was laughing and cheering, one of them chanting: “Let the tall ones squat! Let the small ones see!” (The chant didn’t work.)

The students with us had made their way farther into the crowd; I and the other adults with our group were straining to keep an eye on them. Maurice had also made his way deeper into the crowd than Silvia – and every now and then he’d turn to us and say, “The girl with the white hat and the girl with the blue hood, they’re yours, right? They’re fine; I got my eye on ’em.”

When Barack Obama finally began reciting the oath, however, my eyes had wandered off the Jumbotron. I was listening to the sounds, but I wasn’t hearing them clearly. My head turned a little more to the left and I saw the White House – I wasn’t thinking of anything in particular, but about what life must have been for President Bush and about what life was about to become for President Obama.

Then – suddenly – I was snapped back into attention: the record had skipped. My eyes strained after the Jumbotron again and I saw Mr. Obama looking confused, grinning a little. Justice Roberts seemed to repeat a bit of the oath and Mr. Obama began to recite again; the crowd laughed

approvingly as Mr. Obama proved his human limitations. And then there was the applause that recognized the success of a peaceful transition of power in our midst.

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While President Obama spoke, the crowd was still. The women to our left were shedding silent tears in tandem. All across the Mall, people were holding their cell phones in the air, recording the President's words with an oddly anachronistic Roman salute. There was a man pressed against the right side of my body, holding his son up to see the jumbo image of the new executive; the little boy, who had slept through most of the preceding pageantry, had his blue eyes fixed on the screen while he mumbled "o-BA-ma, o-BA-ma" over and over again. I didn't take time to think and process the president's address; I only listened.

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Neither clapping nor applause suffice for the eruption that followed with laughter and whistles and crying and wide-eyed shouts of excitement. I had taken off my gloves to clap appropriately, but I never heard the sound my hands made. And scattered throughout the mass were the occasional forms of people who stood motionless and silent, for whom I can only assume the next appropriate step was unknown; while the day transcended the shade of a person's skin tone, it was impossible to overlook the somber faces of color that broadcasted a simple "I never thought I'd live to see the day...".

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Immediately after President Obama's address, the human tide began to ebb back out of the Mall and streams of people poured downhill into the Metro stations. While the Inauguration Day poem was read (I later read the poem and liked it, but at the time the words were lost in the afterglow of the day's events), our little gang regrouped.

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We had been proud of ourselves for making onto the Mall – and there was a certain elation we had assumed from standing on "green grass" after the weeks of snow we'd enjoyed in Connecticut. While the crowds thinned out, however, we realized for the first time that we had been standing ironically on the cement sidewalk all morning. There was no soft soil beneath our feet – and the pain in our heels began to make much more sense.

The ground was littered. Odd gloves that had been lost throughout the day were scattered everywhere. There were scarves and blankets and jackets and belts. There were random shoes dotting piles of candy wrappers and empty juice boxes. The trashed Mall lay in odd juxtaposition to the high-spirited day.

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People were walking in every direction and we tried to join them. Soldiers were directing the flow of traffic down Independence Avenue, trying to explain to those who were eager to watch the parade that there was no way to get from the Mall to Pennsylvania Avenue.

We decided to walk down by some of the open-air monuments in order to let the crowds thin out. We went down to the Tidal Basin across from the Jefferson Memorial and stopped by some out-of-the-

way (and relatively clean) port-o-johns on our way to the memorials for Abraham Lincoln and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

We eventually found some street vendors and bought pins and snacks and a baseball cap. There weren't as many vendors as we expected; we assumed maybe they were more concentrated along the parade route.

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We made our way up 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, through the campus of GWU (George Washington University), to the last Metro Station on the Orange Line before crossing the Potomac River back into Virginia. It was around three o'clock in the afternoon when we joined the horde trying to get into the Metro Station. A Metro official stood at the top of the stairway leading down into the station underneath the George Washington University Hospital. While the hospital staff stared at us from the warmth inside their windows, the Metro official repeated continuously into his bullhorn: "People, please, the station is full. We have to empty the station before we can let you back in." We all laughed because we wished we had had the chance to have been inside at some point in order for our friendly official to let us back in.

A police officer stood at the top of the escalator to which we were headed. He kept reminding people not to push – but in all truthfulness, no one had been pushy all day. Families and groups were trying to stick together as they carried flags and souvenirs down onto the escalator. "You can meet back up with your loved ones at the bottom of the stairs!" shouted the police officer. One of the women in our group looked at the police officer and joked, "Or your not-so-loved ones." The police officer got a kick out of that. It was after 5 p.m. before we made it home.

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After the train ride back to Vienna, Va. – and the walk back to Emmanuel Lutheran Church – we were exhausted...and probably a little dehydrated. We drank water and orange juice before loading up our gear into the cars. My mother had invited us to her apartment for dinner and warm showers – and we elected to camp there for the night, making use of the television to watch on the news all the up-close images we hadn't been able to see during the day.

Ready to make the drive back to Connecticut the next day (which would take us through Gettysburg, Penn., and an opportunity to take part in the midweek Eucharist at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg), we quietly made our way to sleep off the history of the day. We slept well.

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