

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

Epiphany Two (January 18, 2009)

1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51

- 1) Pr. Joel Neubauer, Christ Lutheran Church, Middletown, Conn.
- 2) Pr. Paul D. Sinnott, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Torrington, Conn.
- 3) Pr. Susan P. Thomas, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Hanover, N.H.

1) **Pr. Joel Neubauer, Christ Lutheran Church, Middletown, Conn.**

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Everything. Everything changes. The very essence of daily life – the air we breathe, the food we taste, the water that cools our skin as we wash our faces; the steps we take, the words we speak, the news we hear – every sense we have ever known of living is changing. Everything will be different. All that is old, all that has been, every trace of our former weariness, will pass away. We will give new meaning to the wisdom our grandmothers have spoken: “Be patient; they’re going through the change of life.” We will be the people whose hope is made certain, who cling to the hope that shouts out: “See! Everything has been made new!”

We have survived. We have endured the old regime. We have persevered through the attacks and the wars, through the onslaughts of a flailing economy and through storms. We have prayed for a change and waited for a leader – and now is the sentinel of a new day standing up and cheering us on because the nascent dawn of the new sun is at long last illuminating the line of a new horizon. And everything is about to change. For the children who have known no different, life is about to be painted with a new color. From black to white and rich to poor; from girl to boy and mansion to street; from loser to winner and Democrat to Republican; from sick to healthy and old to young; from gay to straight and slow to smart; from legally aborted to illegally immigrated; from lonely to loved and admired to hated; from slave to master and strong to weak; from dreams to reality and believers to agnostics: this is a new life for each one of us and everything – everything – changes, from old to new, from death to life.

And the change has a face. And the change has a direction. And the change has a purpose. And the change has a name.

And this – what we are experiencing in these earliest moments of the new day, as the light just begins to shine again as it did on that first morning of Eden, setting us on the cusp of time in that blessed space between the place where the grayscale monochrome of the night breaks into the daylight’s first distinguishable colors – this is what the prophets have longed to witness. We will be remembered as a blessed generation, blessed that our lives were counted among those who were first embraced by the long-hoped-for change.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lived and labored and lost his life in service to the change. He marched in the front of pack – his face was consecrated as the face of the coming change,

like John the Baptist in his camels' skins; and the Rev. King's voice spoke out for the change like the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord! Level the pathways!" Found in prison, the Reverend King took up the ministry of Saint Paul – writing epistles to encourage his sisters and brothers who were being persecuted for righteousness' sake on behalf of the change. Found on the hallowed steps of memorials of power, the Reverend King took up the ministry of Saint Peter – proclaiming to all who would listen the reality of the change that pours out the Holy Spirit on the visions of the young and on old men in their dreams. Found on the mountaintop, the Rev. King took up the ministry of the Prophet Moses – gazing upon the promised land that would be the home of a changed freedom for the women and men whom he led from the captivity of death by the command of the One who says "I am who I am." And the Rev. King was great in his ministry, but the heights of these moments were not the greatest in his life.

Mr. Barack Hussein Obama, former senator and future president, is a product of – and a promise of – the change. In the Rev. King's most intimate dreams, perhaps there was a face like the countenance we have met in Mister Obama. As a community leader and legislator, as a man who has lived in the liminal space between antiquated ideas of race, as a connected citizen of the world and a dedicated citizen of his homeland: Mr. Obama has begun his own changed living – and soon he will take on the highest office of his government. Soon he will hopefully live up to his promise to walk with us in the change.

There is a particular celebration of Mr. Obama, the first man of color to assume the American presidency, on the day following our national remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr. There is an excitement that seems to build on his youth and enthusiasm. There is a wave of political fervor that is rising like a tsunami – powerful and proud – as Mr. Obama offers the possibilities of different directions than those we have recently known. There is a humility and a spirit of family as we welcome a new First Lady, who speaks of her desire to be a fit mother for two young daughters, and a President who laughs with his live-in mother-in-law.

Mr. Obama is entering into a ministry that mirrors Deborah's – a minority voice charged with speaking for more than a simple majority of those in his care, a powerful figure whose power must be shared among all those who rightfully lead the people. And Mr. Obama is stepping into a ministry that mirrors King David's – a leader charged with uniting a nation that is split in many ways, a commander charged with directing a military that is split between several enemies. And Mr. Obama is walking into a ministry that mirrors King Solomon's – a judge charged with the task of establishing justice, a young man charged with a task that requires wisdom and prudence. And we hope and we pray Mr. Obama will be great in his ministry, but the heights of his moments to come will not be the greatest in his life.

Just as the presidency has not been the greatest endeavor of George W. Bush, neither will it be – *neither* could it be – the greatest endeavor for Barack Obama because the office of the president of United States is an American achievement and these men are not first and foremost, or at the end of the day, mere American citizens.

It is not the presidency that defines these men in their public service, but their commitment to the change, to the change who has a face, to the change who has a name: Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ.

If we were a people of the paparazzi or a community of tabloid reporters, we would relish in the gory dogfight of comparison between our leaders. We would find it easy to reduce the Reverend King's struggle for freedom and equality into a mere forty-year-old prophecy of a biracial Hawaiian-turned-Washingtonian ruler. We would find it easy to isolate the weakest moments of President Bush's past eight years and pit them against the most eloquent of Senator Obama's speeches. We would find it easy to make our elections an example of racial politics or to join with conspiracy theorists that continually cast Mr. Obama as a terrorist in disguise.

But we are not that paltry, petty people. We are the people of the change. We are the body of Christ. And in this holy body, we know about the change. We know the life that comes after death, the resurrection by God that outweighs the violence of the terror and murder of the cross. We know the love that is so strong it lays down its life for its friends. We know the self-sacrifice so great as to lead a man to give his flesh and blood for the world. We know the true desire of God for genuine universal health care – that love which cares for the health of the world so deeply it would look on us with pity and heal us through God's faithfulness. We know the greatest moment in life has nothing to do with our best attempts at community organization or public leadership, but rather has everything to do with the moment when Jesus comes to us, finds us, bids us to follow him, bids us to carry his cross for the sake of the change that he brings in the name of the Sovereign of the Universe.

We are the people of the true change, the people who have been graced with every good gift from God our Guide and our Guardian. We are the people who know that the Rev. King did not live and die and dream for sake of a segment of the world's population, but for the sake of Jesus, who had asked him "Follow me." We are the people who know that the coming transfer in American executive power from George W. Bush to Barack H. Obama is not The Change (capital T and capital C) we have hoped for or The Change we can believe in; but we are the people who – through the baptism into Christ Jesus we share equally with Bush and Obama (and with our brother Martin for that matter) – we are the people who are committed to supporting these men as followers to the best of their abilities of the same One who promises to change the reality of all people. And we can say this all with confidence because we are not primarily followers of a president, but followers of the same Messiah they follow. And we are not primarily the subjects of a president, but we are primarily the sisters and brothers of those who serve as presidents, all of us being subject to the same call of discipleship.

And this is the great gift of participation in the change: it is not a partisan choice between which human side we will claim in some public forum or debate. The change we meet in Christ – for which the Rev. King was martyred, by which President Bush has sought to govern, in which Mr. Obama, we pray, will walk – comes to us. The change seeks us out. The change sees us sleeping under the fig-tree-corners of our lives and summons us to wake up and follow. The change rises up from the towns of the least expectation and locates its incarnation in body that claims Christ Jesus as its head. The change looks us dead-to-alive in the eye of our

bewilderment and promises we will see even greater things: we will see the heavens opened and all God's angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Jesus' call is the hope we need; Jesus is the change we can believe in, the change who strengthens the prophets of progress and justice, the change who meets the flaws of presidents with grace and who fills the dreams of leaders with holy direction.

"Follow me," says the Author of Unchanging Love who is willing to change all else for the life of God's people. Everything will be different. Only the faithful love of the One who changes will remain.

May we pray for the grace to stand with our brothers, to stand with our sisters, to change, to go and follow. Amen.

2) Pr. Paul D. Sinnott, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Torrington, Conn. (sermon excerpt)

Epiphany Two (01/18/09)

1 Samuel 3:1-20, John 1:43-51

Dear Mom and Dad:

Please accept my apologies for not writing to you more often. Things in the temple are always busy. Thanks for making sure that I have presentable clothing to wear as I serve here. Most of the time, my duties are mundane and even boring. But from time to time, something exciting happens, especially during festivals and celebrations.

One day not long ago, I went to bed after a particularly tiring day. As you know, my cot is near the room of Eli, the most senior Levite here in the temple, the one to whom Mom had pledged my service during her pregnancy with me. During the night, I was awakened by a voice. It had the same kind of authority as Eli's but it was a little different than his. I can't really describe it. This voice called me by name, so I assumed it was Eli. But when I went into Eli's room to ask how I might be of service to him, he told me he had not called to me. Later on, when the same voice called, I thought again that it was Eli. This time however, Eli explained that the voice could very well be God's voice, and that I should listen to God's instructions.

Listening to God's instructions is not easy. God gives enough detail to be scary, but not so much that everything is clear. God told me that I had been chosen, "called" was the term that comes to mind, to be a leader in God's house. Furthermore, the voice explained, when I was asked, I was to inform Eli that his own sons had done sinful things in God's house, and that Eli had not exactly been a model parent. Thus, his time as leader of the nation was limited. I knew that this news was not going to be well received by Eli or especially by his sons. And one thing I have learned so far is that *unsolicited advice is never welcome*. So I was reluctant to share what I had heard with Eli.

Nevertheless, Eli pretty much forced it out of me. And so I told him what God had told me. He was not pleased, but being a loyal follower, and a man of wisdom, he accepted my news with

both grace and sadness, mainly I think, because he knew God had judged him correctly as a poor parent and role model to his sons. I write this to you so that if you hear anything bad about me from Eli's sons, you will know that they have become angry because of God's judgment of them, and not my own. I only ask that you keep me close in your prayers just as God has chosen me to be the bearer of tidings and the vessel of hope for all of God's people. Your loving son, Samuel.

Dear Dad:

It has been a long time since I have written to you. Things are busy at church. Much has happened since we last talked. Our country is engaged in a war on two battlefields. The world economy is faltering, and our leaders don't seem to be capable of providing the kind of leadership that would snap us out of it. It may even appear that we are headed toward the kind of an economic crisis that you always told us about in your childhood as we would roll our eyes and zone out. The church you had so long loved is in the midst of a continental shift and we can't be sure of the outcome. But please know that you have capable children and now many grandchildren of whom you would be proud.

Not long ago, something happened that will change things in our country for ever. In a record turnout, the American people chose an African American to be their next president, and he will be inaugurated, God willing, this week. I know that you would not have voted for him, because you never, ever would vote for a Democrat. But you would be proud of our country I think, not because of his ideology, but because the color of his skin did not stand in the way of his leadership. You would be proud I think, because for all of those years when your children marched in the streets and took the risk of association, we only now live in a society where the choices we can make are not determined solely by what we have done in the past or what we are afraid will happen, or as Dr King said, by the color of our skin. I think you would be proud that we have chosen to look more often about where God is calling us tomorrow than where God chose to call us in remembrance.

I write this to you at a turning point in our history, and because I remember you often in my thoughts and prayers. It has been more than twelve years since God has called you to your latest endeavor. And I am reminded of a family teaching that has never left my consciousness: *God always calls us "to" something. Thus God doesn't need to call us "from" something.* I think you would be proud of where and how God is working "in, with and under" the "accident" of our being. You would be proud of our country, your family, your church. Rest easy, Dad. Your loving son, Paul

These letters and our lessons remind us once again that all of us have a calling in God's world. The youngest, the oldest, and even those whom God has called into the communion of saints. The calling of Nathaniel toys with us; it centers on the improbability of origin, place or tribe in God's plan. It affirms that where we come from is far less important than where we're called, and that even less important than *by whom* we are called. Our call as God's people comes from God through Jesus Christ, by means of our baptism. The invitation stands. The door is open. Jesus continues to beckon, to call, "Come and see." Amen.

3) Pr. Susan P. Thomas, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Hanover, N.H.

We are well and truly known by our Savior. Jesus knew Nathanael before he was called to come and meet Jesus. And, like Nathanael, we are given a promise right from the start.

Jesus connects Nathanael immediately to Jacob – his crafty ancestor in the faith. Jacob who was renamed "Israel", and who dreamed of a ladder to heaven. Nathanael, Jesus says, is one who is true Israel, one who doesn't spin things to his own advantage but is without guile. Nathanael will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending not upon a ladder, as Jacob did, but upon the Son of Man.

Nathanael is without guile. In other words, he's truthful, saying what he thinks. And he thinks things don't look very promising. When Philip comes with his hopeful announcement that they have found the one, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth, who had been promised in the law and the prophets, the first words we hear from Nathanael are certainly skeptical. He asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Hearing this, the last words he says to Jesus in this encounter are stunning -- we hear Nathanael say to Jesus, "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Quite a turnabout!

This is a divine encounter of seeing and being seen, of knowing and being known.

In our first lesson from 1 Samuel, there is also very good reason to be skeptical of anything good coming out of Shiloh. Eli the priest has allowed, or at least watched, the spiritual life and understanding of the people he was to shepherd fall into ruin. His vision is clouded and his understanding is limited. Things have come to a terrible pass under his watch. It's been so long since he's heard the voice of the Lord that he's almost forgotten what the proper response to it is – "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Eli himself surely hasn't been listening carefully or regularly for some time. Back when Hannah came to this holy place to pray for a child in her barrenness, Eli had mistaken her fervent prayers for drunkenness. Nonetheless, when God answered her prayer with the child Samuel, she "lent him to the Lord" after he was weaned, bringing him to serve God under the tutelage of Eli. So this is the scene – a young child, Samuel, whose eyes and ears are open, being tutored by a spiritually blind and deaf mentor who gave up long ago. Eli expects nothing from God anymore.

He's way beyond skepticism; he doesn't care any longer. Because of this, he is surely complicit in the ruin around him. The priests he's had charge of have used their spiritual authority for personal gain and pleasure, betraying God's trust. They have contributed to the ruin rather than calling themselves and their people to account for their actions before God.

We hear both Nathanael and Samuel saying clearly, "This is what I see. This is what I hear. This is what I think." Neither skepticism nor inexperience are an issue for God. God still calls them into service, and the truthfulness, the "guilelessness", the transparency that accompanies these inexperienced and skeptical disciples is a virtue that will assist them to be prophets of integrity.

And here's another wonderful thing: God even uses this old ineffective priest Eli to teach what was necessary to young Samuel, who would succeed him and who carried a message from God that meant destruction to Eli and his house. And Eli, once he understood the reality of the situation, saw the justice in it. Upon hearing the terrible prophecy of doom upon him, Eli responds, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him." There is a sense of relief in these words, at least as I hear them. Relief that the Lord again is present and moving in the land; that the Lord will make good out of this mess, even though it means his own devastation. In fact, I don't believe Eli was devastated by the message Samuel received from the Lord. I believe he was grateful once again to be able to trust that God was acting for good. That he therefore died with his faith restored.

In these remarkable days as a nation, traveling on that train from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., with the first African American to be inaugurated as President of the United States, a day that came sooner than almost anyone envisioned was possible, people who gave up hope have had their faith restored. Their faith in this nation and their faith in a God active for justice. The graciousness in defeat of the contenders for the Presidency, the graciousness of our current President in welcoming and recognizing the historic significance of this shift in power, the fact that this nation as a whole wants our new president to succeed in the midst of what looks ruinous around him, and the gratitude we feel for the gift of renewed hope in ourselves and our nation all combine to make this a moment of tremendous significance. Not just nationally or globally, but also individually and spiritually for us gathered here today.

This is a moment to hear our calling by God renewed. And to respond, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." Yes, we can, with God's help, begin to repair this world. Yes, we can, with God's help, give legs to the dream of racial equality. Yes, we can, with God's help, exchange greed for the common good. Yes, we can, with God's help, be faithful and hopeful, just and loving, clear-eyed and compassionate. This is not just about an historic new American Presidency, as remarkable as that is. This is about us and our calling to be people of God.

Amen. With God's help, may it be so for us.