

## Election Sermon

October 26, 2008

Forrest Church

[One of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, the Church of the Larger Fellowship, asked for my permission earlier this month to reprint an excerpt from my election day sermon from 1992, proposing that the issues I had raised then equally suited the context surrounding the 2008 presidential election. Flattered by the request, I granted it immediately and then taped the excerpt for their accompanying Blog. Afterwards, I began to test the premise more closely. The sermon did, in general, express my feelings today, but I found it lacking in several respects. Part of what seemed missing stems from the change in times. Far more is at stake today than it was when Bill Clinton challenged President George H. W. Bush in his race for reelection. As important to me, however, was my religious charge to the nation and congregation. While directionally correct, it lacked a certain clarity and theological specificity that has developed in my own thought over the intervening years. As a personal experiment, I decided to reprise my 1992 sermon, casting it in new form. The resulting reframing of that, to me, long forgotten sermon, represents my final thoughts on the fundamental relationship between religion and the body politic.]

There's a noble tradition in the ministry, going back to the 17th Century.

One or two Sundays before an election, almost every preacher in the land devoted his sermon to the body politic.

It's a great literary genre. Often, the brimstone was so hot that an Election Day sermon was the one sermon a minister might be remembered by.

There was a reason for that. No words were minced.

He entered the pulpit and for the next two hours—count your blessings,

folks—proclaimed a jeremiad. As in Jeremiah, the great Hebrew prophet.

Here's how it went. *The world has gone, or is about to go to Hell.*

*The reason is simple. God is punishing you for your sins.*

*Whatever is wrong in this world is wrong because you are wrong-headed,*

*wrong-hearted, inattentive to God's commandments,*

*and God is watching and God is angry,*

*and if you keep on messing up you will burn forever.*

At least they burned for two long hours. Nonetheless, by the end of the pastor's jeremiad, almost everyone who listened did in fact feel at least partially responsible for everything that was going wrong in the world. No more "throw the bums out"; the bums were us.

In passing judgment, the early Puritan preachers, in their demands for moral perfection, too often forgot the importance of forgiveness: of loving-kindness; of self-acceptance; of honest doubts.

But they did remind us that, despite our failings, we are accountable.

They didn't let us pass the buck while complaining that somebody else was diminishing its value.

I won't give you two hours worth of sermon,

and I'm not going to tell you who to vote for.

I'm not even going to tell you that everything wrong

with this country is your fault and the result of God's responsive wrath.

I will say, with the nation mired in two seemingly endless wars

and the economy in meltdown, that this is the most important

presidential election since 1932.

Add the almost unimaginable, world-inspiring presence

of an African-American on the verge of being elected

president of the United States, and the election takes on a historic quality

unparalleled in modern memory.

With the world on a precipice and our economy in ruins,

we will be casting the most critical vote of our lifetimes.

In casting this vote, one question should rest foremost in our minds.

Which of the two candidates is most likely

to spend his first 100 days imitating Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

I am partisan in this race. I favor one candidate above the other for a host of reasons. But I remain unsure, once the dirt is swept from the campaign floor and half the wistful promises are being forgotten, which of these two candidates is temperamentally more suited to move from the nasty business of being elected president to fulfill the solemn oath he will take to serve all the American people at our great hour of need.

There wasn't a hint of FDR's first 100 days in his generic, quite negative campaign for president, during which he stressed the importance of balancing the federal budget.

But then, almost overnight, with the prompt action of a willing congress, he corrected the nation's course and charted a new future for America.

Only George Washington and Abraham Lincoln faced as great a challenge.

The former met it by making the founders' dreams come true, the later, over four long years, by ending slavery.

Our next president will face a challenge less great perhaps than these,  
but greater than any we have faced in recent decades.

He must rise to the occasion and we must rise with him.

If he fails to rise, it is our responsibility to present  
not a partisan but a patriotic demand that he and the congress  
put aside their base-pleasing talking points and act  
on behalf of all the American people,  
first, by making the hard decisions that will right our economy.  
and second, by conducting our foreign policy  
in a way that will make our nation and our allies  
once again proud of America at its best.

That said, in the spirit, if not the letter, of our Puritan forebears  
let me expand my compass to include a religious charge.

Both the candidates for office are flawed men. I accept that.

I want a flawed person in the White House,  
but one who knows that he or she is flawed.

The reason is simple. The president will be less dangerous.

Certitude, moral and otherwise, is blind. For eight, long years  
we have witnessed the ravages of moral certitude

and blind, inflexible leadership.

We can't afford, and the world can't afford, more of the same.

Though FDR, with the advice of a wide range of brilliant counselors, came close, the president of the United States alone is not going to save us. The president can help and inspire us, can work with and for us. He may even, like FDR, rise to the occasion, act with purpose, achieve near consensus, and pull the nation back from the brink of catastrophe.

But, in the largest sense of the word, neither John McCain nor Barack Obama is going to save us.

Here the old Puritan preachers were right.

The votes we cast for president are much less important than the votes we cast with and in our lives. Then God, greater than all and yet present in each, will save us.

God will save us by looking through our eyes, and touching our hearts, and applying our hands to the saving work of neighborly love.

Conversely, wherever you see neighborly hate, God is absent.

God's love unites us, it doesn't divide us,

either within or among ourselves.

If the United States of America is about anything  
it is about unity amidst diversity. E pluribus unum.

Not one for many, but out of many, one.

It is far less important that the trains run on time,  
even that all the passengers have a government-stamped ticket,  
than that the passengers are willing to take responsibility  
for one another's welfare.

On this historic election eve, the choice we must make,  
not just with our vote, but with our lives,  
is a choice between hope and fear.

Hate is not love's opposite, fear is. When we are frightened  
—by others, by life itself—we cannot love.

We can hide. We can fight. But we cannot love.

Conversely, love casts out fear.

We are good at fear. That's why politicians play on our fears.

Fear gives power to others, and inspires us

to try to take power away from them.

Fear divides, weakens and then conquers us.

It feeds on our weakness and envy and jealousy.

It leads us to follow those who tell us we are victims.

It closes hearts and poisons minds.

One of the ways fear drives the world today may, on its face,  
seem positive. Fear loves order and hates disorder.

Fear will sacrifice equity and freedom for order in a minute.

I'm not suggesting that disorder is good and order bad.

Both are neutral in value. All depends on the ingredients that create them.

But, in the spirit of the founders, controlled disorder  
is far more American than imposed order.

Imposed order almost always rises phoenix-like  
from the ashes of scapegoats.

Jews, gays, feminists, Blacks, immigrants: take your pick.

Let me close this brief and gentle jeremiad

by recalling the basic ingredients of the religious life.

St. Paul named the three great virtues: faith, hope, and love.

If fear is love's opposite, the opposite of faith is belief,  
and the opposite of hope is certitude.

Faith is confidence, a basic trust in being.

Belief is a set of propositions that true-believers claim  
make it possible for us to possess faith.

In fact, belief diminishes faith's compass. It may even kill faith.

We believe something, or in someone, and it disappoints us  
or they disappoint us and we lose our faith.

Belief has a second shadow side. How easily it becomes demonic,  
or even silly. Take the pastor who said that,  
since Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims around the world  
were praying for an Obama victory, if McCain didn't win,  
our God would look smaller than theirs.

Belief casts a political shadow as well.

Surely each of us has believed at some point in someone,  
but then times changed or we changed.

Camelot came and went and we lost our faith.

We became cynical. Or we lurched from one belief system to another.

Think of how many ex-communists joined the Catholic Church.

The God who failed, fails again and again and again.

Faith, which says yes to mystery, wonder, possibility, and change  
should never be sacrificed to belief.

Let me put it this way. I have faith in myself,

but I certainly don't believe in myself.

You see the difference. Only faith gets us through a dark night of the soul.

It's the difference between a view and a fortress,

the difference between horizons and walls.

As for hope, the opposite of hope is certitude.

Hope says things, perhaps, can be different, be better,

the world and ourselves redeemed,

if only we will align ourselves with life by doing what we can

and being who we yet might be.

Hopelessness is one form of certitude.

Assurance is another. Both squeeze out the gentle ambiguities of hope.

I don't want my president to ask me to believe in him.

I simply won't. I will ask him to earn my faith.

And I don't want him to play on my fears of others.

Believe me, I have such fears, I surely do.

And I don't want him to crush my hope by setting up an impossible dream,  
any more than I want to succumb to the cynics  
who have lost their ability to dream.

Instead I want my president to inspire hope, just as FDR did.

I want him to give me faith.

And I certainly want him to encourage me to open my heart to love.

Mine is a religious request. I know that.

But, after all, this is a religious nation, an experiment in religious freedom,  
founded in the spirit, not the letter of the scriptures.

As we near Election Day, I am no more ashamed  
of making a religious request than my forebears were  
when they fulminated for hours, expressing as sincere a desire

that everything, somehow, might turn out right.

I ask a lot, because our founders and early leaders asked no less of us.

Abraham Lincoln, who recalled us to “the better angels of our nature”

put it this way: “The question is not whether God is on our side,

but whether we are on the side of God.”

The United States of America is the most daring experiment

in democratic governance that has ever been fashioned.

Our responsibilities are equal to its promise.

I have great faith in our system of government.

I love this country and its people.

I hope that our future will fulfill the founders’ dreams.

Yes, I have my doubts. And I have my fears.

All of us do. Yet my faith and hope are strong.

We who already have so much will somehow muster the capacity

to rise to historic occasions such as this one.

If we and our leaders can somehow rise beyond politics as usual

to meet this momentous challenge,

November fourth will mark not the end of this election.

It will mark its beginning. And the world will change.

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.