

From the Community Pulpit

January 18, 2009

An Open Letter to President-Elect Obama

Texts: Micah 6:8, Psalm 146:-4, and I Timothy 2:1-4

Sunday Morning – 8:30 am & 10:30 am

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill, Senior Pastor

◆ Community Christian Church ◆ 4601 Main Street ◆ Kansas City ◆ Missouri ◆ 64112 ◆ 816.561.6531 ◆

www.community-christian.org

To The Honorable Barack H. Obama:

Greetings and abundant blessings upon you as you approach the great day of January 20, 2009. While we recognize the legal and sacred obligations to abide by the guiding principle of the separation of church and state, we know, too, that neither religious institutions nor political ruling bodies in the United States have ever mandated a divisive choice between either church *or* state. Thus, we believe, it is appropriate and all together right to send you our greetings and prayers and thereby convey our hopes, dreams, and affirmations for you and your new administration.

In the span of 48 hours, your inauguration as the 44th President of the United States of America will be happily and joyfully accomplished. The long-awaited fulfillment of a million dreams over the past 233 years of our nation's blemished and yet beautifully blessed experiment with democracy will have arrived. The hopes of so many – those who voted for you along with all those who have yearned for America's promise to be realized more completely – are now on the threshold of attainment.

That the people of the United States have waited so long for January 20, 2009, to arrive is a sad fact. And yet, we are jubilant. For there have been countless testimonies from so many who never believed they would ever see, within the span of their lifetimes, your inauguration or that of any other person of color.

When you are sworn in with your hand on the same Bible upon which Abraham Lincoln placed his hand when he was sworn in as the 16th President of the United States, several historic moments will be fulfilled.

- *The scourge of racism in America will have been dealt another significant blow.* Of course, it will not be a death blow, for racism's ferocious capture of too many hearts and minds, even if a minute minority, remains. And yet, for the vast majority of our nation's citizens, your election signals a new day in America. Beyond the challenges of the economy, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, health care and so many other pressing issues, an opportune moment has arrived for the creation of new models for conversations about race

and race relations. If you will allow us to, the great people of greater Kansas City (joining with representatives from the 4th, 5th, and 6th congressional districts in Missouri and the 3rd congressional district in Kansas) can be wonderful partners in fashioning such conversations. We have the imagination and the will to do this necessary healing work. We would cherish the imprimatur of a Presidential endorsement .

- *The dreams of so many who have died will be satisfied.* These are the dreams of those “*who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life*” and fell on fields of battle in defense of our nation and those who never tasted freedom’s full savor and fell to their death by exhaustion or an assassin’s bullet along the highways and byways toward freedom.
- *It will be a moment of clarified pride in our nation when we can and will say, “It is true, truly true! Any American citizen can do what circumstance and innate gifts and tenacity and native grit and mother wit affords them the opportunity to do.”* And when the day comes when a woman is also sworn in as President, we will then be able to look all of our children in the face and say to any and *all* of them, without equivocation or qualification, “**Yes, you all can grow up to be President of our country.**”
- *This is a moment in which the dreams of all common Americans – particularly those born without privilege or position, those launched on their paths without monetary advantage, those without famous family names or the highest political pedigree – are being rekindled.* The entire presidential election, and especially your campaign, enthused a record number of new voters, most of them young and freshly engaged in the political process. May this newfound energy and freshly discovered passion for electoral politics be a harbinger of a new wave of involvement in civic affairs and public service.

A CALL TO HUMILITY

Within the pages of our shared sacred text, The Bible, there is a passage of scripture we hold dear, and, we are sure, you hold dear, as well. (This passage would make for an excellent devotional moment, whether on the day of the Inauguration or at the National Prayer Breakfast the following day.) There seems to be no better passage than Micah 6:8 as a summation of the high standards which faithful people, and especially their elected

leaders, are called to enact: "... to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Thy God."

May your efforts to do justice echo the principle that Plato described: "What is honored in a country is cultivated there."

We hope, too, that you will harness your immense capacities for the loving of mercy, steadfast loving-kindness. Too frequently cold and too often harsh, our world desperately needs a warm, kind, healing, loving touch. Touch the United States, touch the world, touch one and all, with as much merciful tenderness as you can muster.

We would further hope that a blanket of humility could be wrapped around you as you walk in faith to do your duty as President. We beseech you, Mr. Obama, to remember that there has never been a leader of any nation or any empire, anywhere or at any time, who could long prevail or even endure in an attitude of arrogance.

OUR CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES

Our current circumstances— a radically fluctuating economy, the roller-coaster otherwise known as the stock market, the disrupting experience of job layoffs (and the threatening specter of more), the uncertainty connected with the world financial markets, the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the unknown effects which all of these events will have on us all, including the family of faith at Community Christian Church – all these require:

- (1) calm, intelligent consideration,
- (2) steady resolve,
- (3) faithful prayers,
- (4) and renewed imagination.

We have sensed the stress and strain of our current circumstances in the faces of those who are telling their stories of concerns about their futures. Still, your election has provided for so very many a hopefulness (and a sense of relief) that change will be coming to the nation and to our nation's regard among the world's community of nations. How and in what manner that change will be brought about still causes folks to lose sleep. We are reassured by your recognition that the change that is coming is no small thing, and this moment is no small historical occasion. We are convinced that our faith, buttressed as we are by the stalwart witness of steadfast souls who have gone before us (enduring equally hard times in times past with grace and success) will see us through, not only to endure but to prevail. Our tasks as people of faith are plain:

- to work hard and to pray harder;
- to trust in Our Creator who has always provided what is needed and more than enough of what is wanted;

- to be an oasis of hope when others despair;
- to reaffirm joy and goodness as the preferred way of life;
- to apply our considerable gifts for the welfare of others under duress;
- to remember always to encourage one another and all those with whom we share this planet;
- to think and play and organize and serve and abide with one another, always with a sense of celebration, anticipation, and gratitude.

To paraphrase Phillips Brooks inspiring challenge: *“Let us not pray for easy lives, but rather to be stronger people. Let us not pray for tasks equal to our powers, but rather for powers equal to our tasks. Then the doing of our work shall be no miracle, but our collective efforts shall be the miracle.”*

REMEMBERING DR. KING

It is noteworthy that you will assume the duties of your office on the day after our nation honors the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Robbie Putney, all 4'2" of him, helped us celebrate Dr. King's memory in a special way this morning here at Community by reciting a portion of Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech. More notable than Robbie's presence and poise is his passionate belief in the words he was reciting. He would surely have made Dr. King and you very proud. Almost as proud as we are.

Sadly, our times now are not unlike Dr. King's times in the past.

Instead of growing toward a *“beloved community”*, too many have become fearful isolates.

Instead of building what Dr. King called the *“new world house,”* too many have allowed themselves to be satisfied with dilapidated dwellings of petty prejudice.

Instead of abiding in *the strength to love* which is given by God, we have become addicted to the love of strength which is given by the world.

Instead of joining in the grand parade championed by the esteemed *drum major for justice*, who had a wonderful *dream*, some have decided that since the drum major died, so had his dream, and the parade had apparently been called off.

We welcome your parading arrival at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., as a sacred stride toward the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream. And we challenge your administration with the task of picking up the drum major baton for the sake of justice and mercy among us all.

THE AUDACITY OF HOOPS & HOPE

Mr. Obama, we have been impressed by your on-going, improving game on the basketball court. We see in your activities on the court not only the tradition – might we say the superstition? – of playing pick-up games before each election day but also *“the audacity of hoops,”* as Alexander Wolff puts it in *Sports Illustrated*. We say, “Keep on working on

your three-point jumper!" By doing so we, as a country, may be inaugurating more than a president but also a renewed awareness of the need for exercise, health, physical activity for one and all.

In your candidacy we have beheld the triumph of *The Audacity of Hope* over *The Audacity of Hype*. Of course, we hope and trust that you will continue with your proclamation of that audacity, and the boldness, and the courage that hope can bring to strengthen our nation, especially in uncertain times.

NEW BIRTH OF HOPE

Just as President Lincoln enshrined the shining ideal of "a new birth of freedom" at Gettysburg and brought it about in his Presidency, so we yearn for a new birth of hope.

A new birth of hope is needed in the education systems all across the country and right here in the greater Kansas City metropolis. Public education requires radical reform more than ever before. Not to provide the best possible education for all students is a reckless gamble. In fact, it is a dangerous dereliction of duty, one which may cast current and future generations of Americans far behind their peers in the world.

Two of my young friends here at Community – Jacquelyn Berry and Ian McDonald – offer me, nearly every Sunday, their artistry from the back of their attendance cards. I appreciate these so much since many of their efforts are quite flattering portraits of me, granting my head far more hair than I deserve or have ever had. I appreciate them most of all for the sense of hopefulness and joy and glee and vision and sheer fun and the genius possibilities they express. When I see Jacquelyn and Ian and, indeed, all of Community's children, I know we can and must do better for them in their educational journeys.

A new birth of hope is needed as well in relation to our nation's dependency on oil as basis for our energy needs. Domestic and foreign oil fields are finite and cannot be exploited forever. Despite the current pleasingly low cost of gas, please know that you will have strong support from the American people for directing the U.S. toward a different and saner energy policy than those that have persisted for more than 50 years.

None of us would rebuff a new birth of hope in the U.S. political process itself. Teilhard de Chardin once said that "*The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope.*" You have promised to model for the rest of the nation the practice of giving back to our communities through days of service. And this surely inspires high hopes, particularly as we follow your and Michelle's example and do likewise. But we also have a deep understanding that there is a need to bring hope to those who long to be of service to their country as publicly elected officials, and thus become

themselves standard-bearers of hope. Help us rekindle a high regard for public service by elected officials.

COMMUNITY

Mr. Obama, never doubt that we will do our part. And more! In fact, in true American fashion, we shall also pledge this day:

- to remind you of your promises;
- to be loyal when loyalty is needed;
- to offer critique and holy agitation when critique and holy agitation are appropriate and required;
- to offer ourselves as faithful, agitating “grains of sand” within our nation in order to help promote “the pearls” of a greater liberty, a fuller freedom, and a broader prosperity for all people.

Put Not Your Trust in Princes

The Psalmist was more than merely comforting when he reminded the Israelites of their duty, as the loyal/royal opposition, to place their ultimate trust in God, the Lord who has no Lord, the One who is over everyone and subject to no one. As a Christian, you share with us this fidelity to the Highest Power known in the human experience. We shall give you our most enthusiastic welcome, we shall offer you our best hospitality, we shall hold fast to your guidance of us and your influence on the rest of the world through that leadership. But our fidelity to our country is not our highest allegiance. “*Put not your trust in princes,*” says Psalm 146, the first of the final five psalms that shout “Hallelujah!” at each of their closings. We will give you our hurrays. And we shall rejoice to the hilt at the moment of your inauguration. But we will continue to proffer our loud “Hallelujahs,” along with our highest praise and our deepest devotion, to God.

We Will Be Praying for You

While there are historically proven reasons and theologically sound justifications for people of faith to maintain a humble distance from their elected officials, no one can keep us from praying for you. And pray for you we will. After the manner that Paul instructed Timothy about appropriately praying in public for rulers of any and all kinds – “*I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions....*” – we will pray for you and those whom you have gathered around you as your team.

CONCLUDING SALUTATIONS & BENEDICTIONS

Of course, we want to express and extend our warmest personal regards and fondest graces:

- to Michelle, Sasha and Malia, as you make a new home together and keep a safe distance from the glare of the public eye;
- to Joe and Jill Biden and their family, as well, as they offer supportive partnership in a time of uncertainty and great anticipation;
- to your entire Washington entourage.

In fact, we want all of you to know you'll always be welcome here at Community Christian Church. We encourage you to come for a visit at any time – at your convenience, of course!

We shall be thankful to God and to those who have led us to the historical occasion that is upon us! Your inauguration is a moment in which we can enthusiastically celebrate the deep experience of passionate citizenship, the electric excitement of democracy, and the sheer, dazzling beauty of believing in leaders who inspire hope and determination, pride and gladness. And we will continue to pray that God will keep all of us ever faithful to *“the better angels of our nature.”*

Gwendolyn Brooks perhaps put it best: *“We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.”* To such a harvest, to such business, to such a magnitude and bond, you have pledged your best efforts. We can do no less than offer ours in return.

May God bless you. May God bless us all. And may God bless our nation and a world transformed and come of age in peace.

Sincerely yours,

Robert Lee Hill, Senior Pastor

Community Christian Church

4601 Main St.

Kansas City, Missouri 64112

816-561-6531

revhill@community-christian.org

www.community-christian.org

cc: U.S. Representative Emanuel Cleaver
 U.S. Representative Ike Skelton
 U.S. Representative Sam Graves
 U.S. Representative Dennis Moore
 Governor Jay Nixon
 Governor Kathleen Sebelius
 Senator Christopher Bond
 Senator Claire McCaskill
 Senator Pat Roberts
 Senator Sam Brownback
 Vice-President Elect Joseph Biden
 Mike Kruglik, Gamaliel Foundation
Bill Moyer's Journal
The Kansas City Star