

From the Community Pulpit

“An Open Letter to the Candidates”

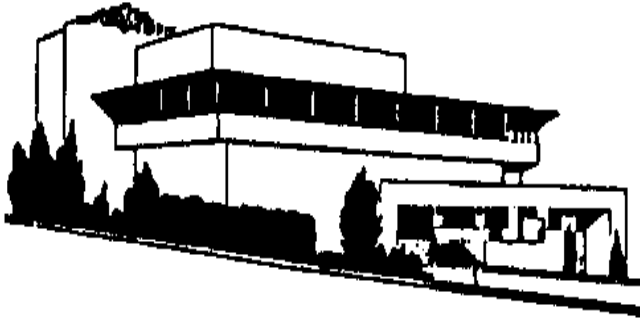
by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

October 26, 2008

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Text : Isaiah 58:6-12

6 Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

9 Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

11 The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Dear Senators:

Eight days from now, beginning on a Monday morning and continuing through Tuesday evening, at Community Christian Church, at 4601 Main Main Street in the heart of Kansas City, Missouri, and in the heart of the heart of he country, our marquee will broadcast a simple statement: **“VOTE! VOTE! VOTE!”** On election Day, November 4th Americans will once again exercise the most toned musculature of any democratic republic in world history. Not that we all exercise at the same pace or with the same intensity. And not that some folks still refuse to exercise at all. E.B. White, wry-witted *New Yorker* writer and beloved author of *Charlotte's Web*, was partially on target when he said, *“Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time.”*

H.L. Mencken, as he was consistently wont to do, once offered a more cutting, cynical assessment of our political process: *“Democracy is only a dream: it should be put in the same category as Arcadia, Santa Claus, and Heaven.”* I would quickly point out that that's a comment that's wrong on so many counts! And yet, Mencken was 100% half-right about democracy being a dream.

Before democracy is enacted and embodied in the shared congress and common commerce of a human community, it is indeed a dream.

Democracy is the dream of citizens ever striving to be more and more of what we say we are.

It is the dream of immigrants who have heard from afar about democracy's promise, have worked for it to become real in their lives, and have then tasted its full flavor when they actually have become citizens.

It is the dream of school children, as they learn of the sorely blemished but still blessed trajectory of the U.S. experiment with freedom over the past 232 years.

It is the dream of citizen groups, as their members organize and gather their collective will to press their cherished concerns.

It is the dream of all who want to live out the virtue of fairness.

Democracy is the dream of all who have been shackled – politically, culturally, and physically – by death-dealing totalitarian systems and deadly dictatorships.

It is the dream of everyone who reads the Declaration of Independence with deep discernment.

It is the dream of us all when we take seriously the gifts of diversity and the challenges of living in a pluralistic world.

It is the dream of each one who carefully interacts with the advance of new technologies and their impact on the global village.

It is the dream of every person who enters a voting booth mindful that theirs is not the final say but part of the main in our nation's grand laboratory of liberty.

When we go to the polls on November 4th, we will pool our opinions and dreams, and thereafter we will deal with what our democracy – flawed and beautiful and ever-improving as it is – will deliver. What has been true in past elections will once again be true in this one. In a time of tension, in the apparent muck and the seeming mire of the world's embroiled situations, in a season when conflicts are heightened about possible solutions to social and political problems, we Americans will give our best efforts to living out our best ideals. President John Kennedy put it best when he said, *“We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant*

facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation that is afraid of its people." I'm glad we live in a nation which is not afraid of its people.

Because we are dreamers, we continue to believe in voting and in what voting can mean for our neighborhoods, our cities, our states, and our nation. So do a record number of new voters, most of them young and freshly engaged in the political process. There is much riding on this election, and we all are hopeful in our waiting to see if the newfound energy and freshly discovered passion for electoral politics will be the harbinger of a new wave of involvement in civic affairs and public service.

As we approach our quadrennial rendezvous with the ballots that will tally the nation's choice for President, there are a myriad number of hopes and yearnings among us. Not only here in the heartland but cast across the broad span of America's horizon, from the New York high lands to the red wood forests.

Beyond and beneath the fundamental need for a sense of security and safety, we yearn for the reassurance about our democracy. We need to hear as an echo of our confidence in our nation the sound of our nation's confidence in us. The American people are a brilliant people and can take the stuff of hard news and tough times. But we despise the malevolent taint of misrepresentation and prevarication and the demonic tone of fear-mongering and intentional misleading.

When we receive clear information and strong counsel from our leaders, we will respond with duty and care. When we don't know what we are up against and, instead, are kept in the darkness of deception and partial truths, we are less empowered to do our part.

Also, we need not so much reassurance about our financial future, but rather the assurance that we can live useful, purposeful lives. For we know that when we are engaged in purposeful pursuits, when we can be of use to our families, others in the community and the world, fiduciary surety can ensue. To be sure, for some – a rather paltry few, sometimes a powerful few – the main challenge of their lives has always been about money and the unending material stuff money can make happen. But in the main, the collective will of the American people has always been about simpler quests. We want to be as Marge Piercy describes in her poem "To Be of Use":

*I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.*

*I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

*... the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

The American people, indeed the members of the whole human family, cry out for work that is real.

Now, most importantly, we are ready for sacrifice, if sacrifice is needed, for the betterment of our country and especially our children's future and the world.

On the west door of the Staunton Harold church in Leicestershire, England, are carved words which applaud a group of people in the midst of the 17th century who are like the people here when we are at our best:

*"When all things sacred
were throughout [the] nation
Either demolisht or profaned
Sir Robert Shirley, Barronet,
Founded this church;
Whose singular praise it is,
to haue done the best things
in [the] worst time,
and
hoped them in the most calamitous."*

We, too, have done and can do again the best things in the worst times, and hope them in the most calamitous. Our capacity for sacrifice has not been exhausted, since we know, especially as people of faith, the sacred character of sacrifice and the holy gift it can be to others.

Now, among our many requests surely the following are worthy of highlighting for both of you. Of the many things that will reign as important for the next President of the United States of America, these three should be toward the top of your lists:

(1) *The restoration of the United States to a position of respect among the world's gathering of nations.*

We are weary and embarrassed that the United States is among those countries decried and derided as despicable and degenerate by other nation-states.

And we are ready for a President who will eschew arrogance and presumption and assume a posture of openness and dialogue with the world's community of countries. Each of you has this capacity.

Instead of diffidence in the face of opposition, we would extol diplomacy in the face of opportunity.

Instead of insolence we are ready for inspiration.

Six centuries before Christ's birth, the prophet Isaiah witnessed to the southern kingdom of Judah about its responsibilities and duties if it truly wanted "favored nation" status. Granting that the United States is unlike the kingdom of Judah at the time of the time of the great prophecy in Isaiah 58:6-12 - we are not a religious monarchy, after all, and there is a sacred assumption about the separation between religion and the state in the United States - there still are lessons to be learned for our time as citizens and in the role one of you will play as President of the United States of America.

- We know as American citizens that "rugged individualism" too frequently disintegrates into "ragged individualism" and such is not the only way and cannot be made to be successful as the sole mode of citizenship. America is a "we" proposition. Or as Isaiah puts it, we are to share our bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless into our homes, and shelters and sanctuaries if need be, and provide clothing to those who are naked and vulnerable to the elements. Such charitable work has always been and shall remain the work of religious communities of faith. But such duties are not ours alone. As a country we have a duty to provide collectively for the increase of health and wholeness for those in need. And when we do so we should know that the light of our fame as a nation will break forth like the dawn and an inner healing for our country will have sprung up in us.
- We also know that there are distinct national challenges that need head-on attention beginning on January 20, 2009. Isaiah put it eloquently: "If you will remove the yoke [- the yoke of enmity -] from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.... and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in." What an awesome goal and what an audacious dream for a President to lead us to fulfill! Can we dare to dream what it would be like for the American people to be called "*the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in*"?

- (2) *We desire a new form of politics and a new way of talking about issues of substance and importance that matter to each of us.*
- A. In the closing days of your campaigns, we implore each of you to *abide in a spirit of civility*. We will defend both of you against demonizing charges against your characters. But each of you can do light-year's worth of good and can have, we believe, the utmost impact on your campaigns if you will ignore the advice of your handlers and shun all instructions to "go negative." For once, it appears that such a dispiriting strategy is backfiring for all campaigns.
- B. We also beseech each of you to do all in your power to *expand the possibilities for the fullest expression of everyone's citizenship*. It may be that this electoral season will experience a record number of legal challenges. The scurrilous charges from all sides - declarations about of "senility," "anti-Americanism," "antiquated-ness," and "communism" - should stop. All of these epithets do no one any final good. And, sadly, they seem to impede the fullest expression of the precious right of voting.
- C. After the election, one of you in the White House and the other in the United States Senate can take up a much needed task: *the call to have a national discussion about race and relations among ethnic groups*. The dynamics of this Presidential election season, more than any other before, behoove us all to create a model for conversations about race and relations among ethnic groups. You each have said how important such a discussion could be. By the way, Kansas City volunteers for this role. Allow the great people of greater Kansas City to create "*A Caring Conversation About Race*," as we gather representatives from the 4th, 5th, and 6th congressional districts in Missouri and the 3rd congressional district in Kansas. For a nine-month period of time, these folks could come together monthly to discuss various aspects of race relations, doing so in "fish bowl" arrangements, with the general public invited to witness these conversations. We have the imagination and the will to do this necessary work. All we need is the imprimatur of a Presidential endorsement.
- D. *We seek and desperately need a transformation of the financing for political ads*. If there is anything either of you could give the citizenry as a "Presidential" inauguration gift it would be to take up a suggestion from Priscilla Reckling: If constitutionally permitted, could we not allow contributors to political campaigns to direct their donations only for positive ads? By the way, Priscilla

is my wife, and she shares a trait possessed by each of your wives: she's a smart cookie! Please know that I've borrowed this suggestion from her, but I know she won't mind. I also know she and I and the rest of us would appreciate the implementation of this suggestion at your earliest convenience!

(3) *We Ask that Each of You Serve as Standard-Bearers of Hope for our Country.*

On November 5th, the day after Election Day one of you will be the President-elect and thus celebrating and preparing a transition team for officially occupying the White House. And one of you will be returning to your role as a member of the U.S. Senate, no doubt with sadness in the wake of defeat, but also, we hope, with gladness that you had the privilege of meeting a nation of people who are eager for a new moment of transformation in the body politic of the United States. Because each of you has committed to such a transformation, each of you can do much to promote....

- ***Public Service As a Virtuous Path for Life***

Teilhard de Chardin once said that "The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope." We need to bring hope to those who long to be of service to their country. Help us rekindle a high regard for public service by elected officials.

- ***Feeding the Hungry***

Food pantries all around the metro here and throughout the nation are burgeoning with new, fresh faces seeking help and hope. Let us all do our part to "decriminalize" poverty and "de-stigmatize" homelessness. Isaiah's words challenge us again, "If you will feed the hungry....!" And with the ever-increasing fallout from the current financial crises - domestically and globally - it behooves us to be sensitive to those needing the simple provision of food.

- ***An Expeditious Conclusion of U.S. Participation in the War in Iraq***

Among the situations that have caused the greatest worries and deepest fears for Americans over the past four years, surely the war in Iraq has been the most pressing. Mothers and fathers from every state hold their breath in anxious waiting. While proudly supporting the troops with public smiles and patriotic fervor, they also harbor interior prayers for the safe return of their beloveds. Your timetables for concluding the war differ, we know. Yet, at this late date - after so much blood has been shed, after so much has been proven about the disconnect between Iraq and the terrorists' attacks of 9/11 eight years ago, a disconnect described by both of you at one point or another along

your campaign trail - surely we can with hope resolve to end the depth of America's participation in the war in Iraq and bring our troops home as expeditiously as possible. In this regard we are reminded of the wisdom of Vaclav Havel who said "Hope... is not the same as Joy that things are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good"

Concluding Salutations and Prayerful Benedictions -

We are thankful to God and to our forbears for this singular occasion in which we know the deep experience of passionate citizenship and the electric excitement of democracy and the sheer beauty of believing in candidates who inspire hope and determination, pride and gladness, especially in a time of trouble.

We are equally thankful for the process in which we are now engaged, a process for determining the next President of the United States of America. And we pray that in the days ahead we will express the best of our citizenship and vote in record numbers! We pray, as well, that we will express the best of our religions, in a manner suggested by a favorite son of Illinois, not by seeking after whether God is on our side, but rather whether we are on God's side.

We are praying for each of you, that you both will be kept safe, and, indeed, that all candidates everywhere will be kept safe, throughout the waning days of this political season. And we pray that God will keep all of us ever faithful to the "the better angels of our nature."

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

Sincerely yours,
just as surely as each of you
and all of us are sincerely God's -

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- This sermon was preached during the morning worship services at 8:30 a.m. and 10:30 on Sunday morning, October 26, 2008, at Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri.
- It was transmitted to Presidential Candidates Senator Barack Obama and Senator John McCain on Monday, October 27, 2008.