

What Are We Waiting For?

What incredible days! Truly “earth-shaking” events have transpired since we last gathered for worship – *just one week ago*. Perhaps even better stated, what “*earth-shaping*” events have taken place since our last meeting for worship! I’m asking this morning for a special measure of grace as I share this message. I request your very careful listening skills and, as always, the benefit of your doubt!

As this sermon was taking shape, I simply could not step away from the week’s political events. I’ve been drawn by these events - not into the posturing and promises of individual politicians and parties – rather, I’ve been captivated by the swelling voice of this country’s people and the people of the world. This week’s election, without a doubt, is *historical* – Barack Obama, the first black man elected president of the United States. Yet, at the very same time, this week’s election amplifies what we have so often heard *repeated throughout history*– the ancient, ardent cry of hearts yearning after and longing for a place and purpose worthy of the spending of their lives. This week’s election has provided platform for a plea – what have we heard? What have we seen? What are we waiting for?

We’ve heard singular voices calling out for opportunity and purpose. We’ve heard (and seen!) collective voices – of ever more staggering numbers – united in a call for an end to militaristic maneuvering, calling for renewal of respect for international neighborhoods and for the care of our shared home – planet Earth.

The election of the past Tuesday **is not** the focus of this morning’s message. Yet the campaign process gives *venue* for the call and cry of a great number of Americans and world citizens alike. From folks of all colors, cultures and creeds, we hear a call and cry for peace- in the tangible redirection of military investment; for hope – in economic policies which will allow the middle class to be where most are able to live; for healing – through sustainable distribution of health care....Beyond these tangible pleas, I hear a weariness with fear; I sense a hunger for community. I note a longing for ways to contribute to that which has meaning today, and to that which has enduring value for the future. The alluring certainty of what seemed like unstoppable housing and stock market growth is shipwrecked. The false promise of satisfaction in owning material goods has been found wanting. (How many things really do survive beyond their stay in the storage unit?) Instead, I hear a yearning for promise and certainty beyond economic and exploitative “security.” **Simply stated, I hear – interwoven between the words – a longing for life found in the way of Jesus – a terrain and a path which we – persons gathered this morning - experience as the kingdom of God.**

I offer these wonderments for us as the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship as we find ourselves at this time and place in history.

What does it mean when hundreds of thousands of people are drawn together to public gatherings to share in a pivotal point in human history? What does it mean when millions of people from across the globe gather around television sets and computer screens sensing that a seismic shift is on the horizon? What does it mean for us as citizens of this particular country when the worlds' people gather with profound vested interest – not simple curiosity - to see what's next? I speak to us as sojourners on the Emmaus Road... also a gathered people, also a people strangely drawn together. We, too, are a people seeking a yet fuller glimpse of the kingdom of God.

As we consider the week just past...

1) Were not our hearts burning within us as we saw the television images capturing the streaming lines of people walking toward Grant Park in Chicago? Crowds swelled in Times Square and in countless other places where people were gathering to share the night – together. At one point, news anchor Diane Sawyer invited the cameras to simply pan the crowds of people. She said something like this, “Let’s scan the crowd to see this beautiful sea of diversity, this great melting pot of humanity.” Even usually wordy commentators fell silent as the pictures spoke more than their words were able. It was breathtaking to see the scope of the crowds – crowds made up of real life people – black, white, Asian, aged, women, Hispanic, men, infants and children – people with lots of hair, people with little hair – folks dressed brightly, folks dressed drably - standing side by side – touching each other, hugging one another - peacefully, expectantly, somehow reverently, yet with rejoicing. The crowds most likely wouldn’t have described it this way...but from my vantage point, I saw the kingdom of heaven, this fabulous array of human cultures and communities... “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9 and 14:6)

2) Were not our hearts burning within us as we heard words like these from Congressman John Lewis from Georgia. He offered –again- this profound witness as he watched saying, “we are experiencing a non-violent revolution.” This man who had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. on Bloody Sunday from Selma to Montgomery in protest of voting prohibitions for blacks was witnessing the election of a black man to the presidency without riots, without tear gas, without the blow of a skull crushing baton... I don’t know whether John Lewis would describe it in this way or not, but in my mind, I heard the words, ‘the kingdom of heaven will be like this...’

Matthew 25 begins with these very words, “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...” Yes, here is another parable about the kingdom of God of which Matthew has many. But it’s because not one of these parables – alone or all together- can capture

completely the essence of the fullness and beauty of the kingdom of God that Matthew offers us so many...The kingdom of God is like:

- “someone who sowed good seed in his field,”
- “yeast that a woman mixed in with three measures of flour”
- “a treasure hidden in a field”
- “a merchant in search of fine pearls...”

Now, Emmaus Road travelers, ready yourselves for another glimpse...of the kingdom...

“The kingdom of heaven will be like this; ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five were foolish and five were wise.” The foolish were those who took lamps but no oil. In contrast, the other five bridesmaids took not only their lamps, but *flasks* of oil! God’s kingdom – already among us, but not yet complete - is a patient place –a very small yet spacious place. It allows for us to make our choices. We can bring what we want. We can come with commitment and great intention or we can just drop by.

The kingdom is like this...a way filled with invitation and possibility, yet no demands. As was the experience of the ten bridesmaids, there is no question that we, too, are invited to the wedding; that we are welcome in the kingdom. We belong there! (...and there’s room for everyone else, as well!) In the kingdom, there are no demands just basic choices - we have our lamps to tend – and we can tend to them as we choose. We can choose to simply go through the motions of carrying light – allowing cynicism and guardedness to overshadow us. Or, we can actively participate by trimming our lanterns and refilling oil – as many times as needed. We can stand at the door with anticipation aglow, bursting with expectation. Without oil, the lamps remain dark–the kingdom only a glimmer. When the wicks are trimmed and the lamps filled – light shines boldly – illuminating a expansive kingdom which trembles with “unyielding hope.”¹

Megan McKenna writes, “The kingdom is relational, binding beyond ancestry and family, binding in obedience and response... Intimacy in the kingdom of God comes from hearing and obeying...and making it come true, incarnating it in history now.”² The kingdom of heaven...a part of history...now and always... already and not yet... knits us together...here in this place today and beyond.

May we answer the call to celebrate and to care for this kingdom. For us on the Emmaus Road, the call may look something like this... In the Spirit of Jesus may we

- welcome one another to discover and express our true selves

¹ Barack Obama, Acceptance Speech as president –elect. November 4, 2008

² Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p.64.

- for those of us with long standing acquaintance, may we engage in the challenge of coming to know each other again for the first time!
- for those new to our fellowship – may this place be a safe harbor for building new life-giving relationships.
- invite one another to open ourselves to new possibilities and unlikely call upon our lives
- risk letting go of old labels and categories; believing that God really does make all things new!

Regardless of our personal choice, our country has decided on a new president. In this selection, I sense that our country's electorate is embracing a really new sense of possibility. Yes, Barack Obama was elected president, but Barack Obama was elected president of the United States because of the committed work of tens of thousands of ordinary people. These were determined people; folks inspired by a vision for a better future. These were communities of people believing in impossibility. This was a nation of people enlivened by hope...and as a result, that which only 40 years ago would have been simply absurd to even consider came to pass. An African-American man was elected to the presidency of the United States. "The kingdom of God is a very human, physical tangible thing that can be identified --- it is not a spiritual idea that we interpret or apply ---(but as followers of Jesus we know it when we see it), we rejoice in its presence and we join in to do all that we can to help it along"³

Once upon a time there was a blacksmith who worked hard at his trade. The day came for him to die. The angel was sent to him, and much to the angel's surprise he refused to go. He pleaded with the angel to make his case before God, that he was the only blacksmith in the area and it was time for all his neighbors to begin their planting and sowing. He was needed. So the angel pleaded his case before God. He said that the man didn't want to appear ungrateful, and that he was glad to have a place in the kingdom, but could he put off going for a while? And he was left.

About a year or two later the angel came back again with the same message: the Lord was ready to share the fullness of the kingdom with him. Again the man had reservations and said: 'A neighbor of mine is seriously ill, and it's time for the harvest. A number of us are trying to save his crops so that his family won't become destitute. Please come back later.' And off the angel went again to talk with God.

Well, it got to be a pattern. Every time the angel came, the blacksmith had one excuse or another. The blacksmith would just shake his head and tell the angel where he was needed and decline. Finally, the blacksmith grew very old, weary and tired.

³ Donald Blosser, e-mail correspondence, November 6, 2008.

He decided that it was time to go, and so he prayed: 'God, if you'd like to send your angel again, I'd be glad to come home now.'

Immediately the angel appeared, as if from around the corner of the bed. The blacksmith said: 'If you still want to take me home, I'm ready to live forever in the kingdom of heaven.' The angel laughed and looked at the blacksmith in delight and surprise and said: 'Where do you think you've been all these years?'"⁴

This morning, our hearts burn within us because we sense that Jesus is with us on the road, the road given to **us** – our own place in the kingdom! May we go out from here filled with passion for the work of the kingdom. – to offer good news to the poor, sight for the blind, freedom from tyranny...hope for those in pain.

As our sister in the faith, St. Teresa of Avila, realized centuries ago, “Christ has no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours with which he can do his work, no feet but ours with which to go about the world, no eyes but ours through which his compassion can shine forth on a troubled world.”

Emmaus Road Fellowship...What are we waiting for!!

⁴ Megan McKenna, *Parables: The Arrows of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p.96.