

11-13-16 “Voices From a Long Night” a Post-Election Reflection by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

Well, what a difference a week makes. A week ago I began “How about those Cubs?” This morning’s rhetorical hook therefore naturally follows “How about that Donald Trump?” As an aside, the President Elect and I once stood shoulder to shoulder. Which BTW is not something I take any pride in sharing, but just thought I’d share anyway.

One thing that our soon to be new President has ushered in, among many things he’s ushered in, is a resounding refutation of all things “politically correct”. Yes, there was once a time, not really all that long ago, when people actually were sufficiently respectful of others so as to intentionally guard their word choices in a way that would come off as unoffensive, nondiscriminatory, unbiased, neutral and nonpartisan. That day is clearly now behind us. Recognizing this fact, and taking my lead from the groundswell movement that Mr. Trump has given birth to, I feel liberated this morning in new ways. Things that I once, not really all that long ago, would never have brought into the pulpit, I now recognize a new license to do so. Mind you, I have no desire to be offensive to anyone, although I may indeed be so in the manner of our President Elect’s precedent. But I proceed anyway because I am sensitive to the long standing necessity of us preacher types to keep up with the times, to frame our humble reflections in a way that includes contemporary cultural trends. It seems we’re more relevant when we do this, or so we’re told. In the same way non PC language has come at us of late without apology, I offer no apology either. Such parochial concerns are but a product of a bygone era.

As you’ve received a hint at already, there is nothing normal about my following message. Indeed it is abnormal. Abnormal in the same way that this election cycle has been abnormal; in the same way the events of this past week have been abnormal; in the same way such abnormality will clearly be with us for many years, generations even. Now some might proclaim joy over these abnormal occurrences. I am not one of them.

And I realize my lack of joy flies in the face of God’s word from the prophet Isaiah to us this morning. To which I respond “it is what it is.” As each of you no doubt have experienced for yourself, sometimes God’s word resounds deeply and sometimes it rubs us against the grain. Our Word from God to us this morning is very simply, an invitation to people of faith to trust in the goodness of God’s providence; or as we’d be more inclined to say, “let go and let God”. As you know the people of God spent some seventy years of exile in Babylon. They returned to a devastated land and a devastated holy city.

Our lesson today comes some two generations after the fact. Present realities didn’t meet expectations. The rebuilding of the Temple and the City hadn’t gone well. Daily life didn’t measure up to the glory of the good O days. Added to that people continued to suffer the effects of economic injustice, corruption, greed and political turmoil. People were hungering for much better. Yes, they were desperate to make Jerusalem great again. And the Word of God offered an alternative, a hope-filled alternative where all things would be made right, where even “natural” predators—ravenous wolves and ferocious lions—would live gently, peacefully, side-by-side with gentle lambs and presumably with people too. This has always been God’s dream; or at least always God’s work project, as people of faith are yet waiting. And where even the best people of good faith wait for the most noble dreams and projects, even those ordained by God, such things can easily become corrupted by human beings promising to circumvent God’s timetable with a quick, dramatic fix.

Like half the world I was up all night Tuesday night, well into Wednesday morning. History was making itself; or perhaps unmaking itself with the dashing of expectations and the surprise rise of brand new precedents. Over the many hours of waiting, attempting sleep, failing, moving from an early evening into the early hours I transitioned back and forth from television—which tended to stall out about 12 or 1—to bed to smart phone, to bed to smart phone. Of course the hours were filled with many voices, unvarnished voices, voices questioning, pondering, inquiring, voices incredulous, voices reflecting initial reactions—which from my self-avowed progressive perch— included un-muffled shock, raw grief, horror and predictions of imminent doom. I can tell you, such things do not make for a sound night's sleep. Fortunately I didn't need to be at my desk in the morning. What follows are excerpts from some of those voice, captured by my phone, in roughly chronological order, voices from a decisive time in history, voices from Americans...voices of people with hearts, and minds, and dreams and projects and elderly parents, and small kids, and teenagers and bills to pay. Voices from a long night. And I caution you, they are partisan and very much in the manner of the new order, not PC.

A voice from 10:58 PM. “We still don't know who will win the electoral college, although as I write this it looks — incredibly, horribly — as if the odds now favor Donald J. Trump. What we do know is that people like me, and probably like most readers of The New York Times, truly didn't understand the country we live in. We thought that our fellow citizens would not, in the end, vote for a candidate so manifestly unqualified for high office, so temperamentally unsound, so scary yet ludicrous. We thought that the nation, while far from having transcended racial prejudice and misogyny, had become vastly more open and tolerant over time. We thought that the great majority of Americans valued democratic norms and the rule of law.

It turns out that we were wrong. There turn out to be a huge number of people — white people, living mainly in rural areas — who don't share at all our idea of what America is about. For them, it is about blood and soil, about traditional patriarchy and racial hierarchy. And there were many other people who might not share those anti-democratic values, but who nonetheless were willing to vote for anyone bearing the Republican label.

I don't know how we go forward from here. Is America a failed state and society? It looks truly possible. I guess we have to pick ourselves up and try to find a way forward, but this has been a night of terrible revelations, and I don't think it's self-indulgent to feel quite a lot of despair.”

A voice from 12:21 AM. “The trouble is that this new, American version of the disinherited has squandered their voice on a dyspeptic scream, a retro turn to racism and sexism, without anything resembling a plan, or a new vision for America....Far from condescending to anyone, everyone I knew was mostly hoping desperately that Mr. Trump's voters could not possibly hate the rest of us so completely that they would vote in droves for the most irresponsible and openly bigoted candidate ever to gain a major-party nomination.

A friend called to say that this is what it felt like in Britain, as Brexit was going down. We are in uncharted territory now, a place where there are no directions or guidelines. A president who has close and perhaps undisclosed ties to a powerful foreign dictator and American enemy? A president with absolutely no public-sector experience? A cabinet to be filled with an array of characters more bizarre than your average Batman villains? A far-right Supreme Court for the next generation?”

A voice from 2:39 AM. “So here he is, soon to be the most powerful man on the face of the earth, with no popular mandate but a Republican majority nonetheless awaiting his direction, a court of hacks and flatterers around him, a bureaucracy and deep state unsure how to respond to him, an unstable world regarding his ascent with apprehension (or, in Moscow and Beijing, satisfaction), and none of the preparation that even the most inexperienced of modern American presidents have brought to their lofty office.

What happens next promises (and threatens) to make history as nothing has in America...I fear the risks of a Trump presidency as I have feared nothing in our politics before. But he will be the president, thanks to a crude genius that identified all the weak spots in our parties and our political system and that spoke to a host of voters for whom that system promised at best a sustainable stagnation under the tutelage of a distant and self-satisfied elite. So we must hope that he has the wit to be more than a wrecker, more than a demagogue, and that his crude genius can actually be turned, somehow, to the common good.”

A voice from 3:07 AM. “On Saturdays in synagogues across the United States, Jews recite a prayer for our country. In my synagogue, the custom is that the congregation stands, and says the prayer in unison.

Our God and God of our ancestors: We ask Your blessings for our country — for its government, for its leaders and advisers, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority. Teach them insights from Your Torah that they may administer all affairs of state fairly, that peace and security, happiness and prosperity, justice and freedom may forever abide in our midst.

Until Donald Trump’s run for the presidency, this moment in the liturgy felt like boilerplate. It was a nice expression of patriotism...Until Trump, and Trump’s divisive rhetoric, upended the assumption that politicians of both parties share an essential platform of agreement on matters of basic decency, of respect for those of other religions and backgrounds.”

A voice from a time not noted. “I began election night writing a column that started with words from an immigrant, my friend Lesley Goldwasser, who came to America from Zimbabwe in the 1980s. Surveying our political scene a few years ago, Lesley remarked to me: 'You Americans kick around your country like it’s a football. But it’s not a football. It’s a Fabergé egg. You can break it.'”

Friends of the United Church of Christ receive daily email devotionals from our National Office in Cleveland which are sent out about 4AM each morning. It arrived as expected. The day's reflection was based on Lamentations 3:22-23, *"God's steadfast love never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning: great is your faithfulness."* “We get our devotional assignments long before publication, so I'm writing this three weeks before the election. The day it's published we'll know who won, but now, as I mess with syntax and synonyms, I'm clueless.

I don't know if it was a squeaker, a landslide, or something in between. I don't know if the pollsters were dead on or if Nate Silver is driving a cab today, scratching his head. I don't know if the loser conceded gracefully or threw a tantrum, nor if the winner delivered an inspiring speech or a cringe-worthy crow. I don't know if you stayed up late watching the returns or turned in early with a stiff drink and a trashy book. I don't know if you're planning a happy bash for tonight or packing your trunk for Canada or Fiji or wherever you swore you'd go if the worst occurred.

I don't know how happily, sadly, or indifferently this day has dawned for you or me or our country. But I do know this: In ways that really count, this post-election day, momentous as it is, is no different from any other. Like every day, it's a gift from God, a new and pregnant mercy. Like every day, it's a precious clearing in which to meet again the Steadiness that undergirds each change and chance, and in that meeting to believe again that no matter what befalls us or our fragile democracy, God will not fail to hold us night and morning. God will not fail to will and work the good of all creation. God will not fail to be God. God will not fail."

Friends, I want to believe that. I want to believe that even when the rug is pulled out from underfoot, even when whatever unimaginable occurs; that throughout the longest, darkest of nights or days, God will not fail and will work for the good of all creation. I want to believe that God will not fail. I do, even when it seems ludicrous to do so. I want to believe the prophecy of the ancient prophet who shares a time to be anticipated when God's creation is at last fully created for goodness sake; *"when no more the sound of weeping shall be heard...or the cry of distress...no more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days...no more shall we labor in vain, or bear children for calamity"*

Friends I have spent my entire life choosing to believe that, to believe in God's good and loving providence for all of us. It is why I have been found at worship most every Sunday morning of my life; it is why I stand before you this very moment. I want to believe so I have chosen to believe and in choosing to believe I am a different from the person I otherwise would have been. I like to think a better person.

And just as everyone from President Obama to the author of Lamination had promised, the sun did rise Wednesday morning. But for me, and I suspect for millions of others, it greeted me with an abrupt stillness that resembled that moment that immediately follows a sonic boom...a moment that invites the world to regain its footing and to recover its bearings; indeed, its heart, mind and soul.

May God's mercies never come to an end! Amen.