

Forty-six years ago, just forty-six years, the blink of an eye ago, a twenty-seven year old Harvard graduate student named Bob Moses traveled to McComb county Mississippi. Moses was inspired by Martin Luther King Junior and other civil rights leaders. And he wanted to help other African Americans register to vote. McComb was home to more than 8,000 voting age blacks, yet fewer than 100 of these women and men could vote. During his first three weeks in the county all Moses did was try to escort would-be voters to register. For this he was arrested twice, beaten by a court-house mob and beaten bloody in broad daylight in a town square by the county sheriff's cousin. When he walked to the courthouse, dripping blood in order to press charges the police told him to leave McComb by sunset or he'd be killed.

He left and wasn't killed. So this story, one of many just like it, fell into the cracks of civil rights history. Unremarkable at the time, hard to believe today.

For today, just forty-six years later, our country has *elected* an African-American president. The growth that this represents, the healing that it is, is difficult to overestimate. If Tuesday January 20th is not a redemptive moment for our nation, I don't know what is.

But what does it mean for the *church*? How does a transition in the oval office affect our life together, our purpose, our call? At the risk of disappointing both those who voted for Tuesday's outcome and those who cast a ballot in the other direction, let me say that I don't think a change in who holds the most powerful office in the world affects us, the church, much one way or the other.

During Christ's lifetime Rome ruled the globe. The Emperor Augustus came to power about fifty years before the birth of Jesus. He was a shrewd and ruthless politician. After seizing the throne he slaughtered thousands of his political enemies. But Augustus was not all violence. He maintained an honest government and a sound currency system; extended the highway system; fostered free trade among the provinces; and built many bridges and aqueducts. He died in the year 14 and his unloved and long-neglected step-son Tiberius inherited the throne. Jesus had nothing to say about the transition. He was busy, about his Father's business.

Hard and secretive by nature and embittered by the neglect with which his step- father allowed him to be treated, Tiberius was described by some of his subjects as a bloody tyrant. However, others called him the most distinguished of all Roman emperors, a ruler faithful to his duties, just, wise, and self-contained. Jesus voiced no opinion on the Emperor's character. He was busy feeding the hungry.

During the second half of his reign Tiberius began executing potential rivals, minor royalty and many of his relatives. The gloom which pervaded Rome as a result of these killings induced the Emperor to leave the capital in the year 26 for the Island of Capri. Jesus made no comment about this departure. He was busy healing the sick.

In the Emperor's absence Rome was ruled by his son Drusus. Much political scheming then took place and Drusus was poisoned by his wife Livilla and her lover, his trusted second-in-command Sejanus. When Sejanus then conspired to secure the throne for himself, Tiberius came storming back and had the usurper executed. The Empire was abuzz with gossip. Jesus ignored it, choosing instead to listen to

the hopes and worries of tax collectors and prostituted women.

Tiberius spent his last years in constantly increasing seclusion and debauchery on the Island of Capri. He was on this island when Jesus was killed. Rising from the empty tomb Jesus had nothing to say about the Emperor. He was busy, reconciling creation to its Creator. Two years later Tiberius died. The early church had no comment on his death. They were too overjoyed to talk about anything but Easter.

The Emperor's nephew Caligula then took the reigns of power. Caligula's first acts were generous in spirit; he recalled political exiles and reimbursed those wronged by the imperial tax system. His popularity was immense. But, insanity soon caused him to lose control of both his own appetites and the empire. Four years after assuming the throne there was payback and he lay in a bloody heap in a palace corridor, murdered by officers of the very guard entrusted to protect him. Neither Peter, Paul, Prisca nor any other early Christian leader voiced an opinion about the coup. They were busy, healing the sick and embracing the wounded, giving their money away, shaping a people of welcome and praise, becoming the church.

A far flung imperial relative named Claudius then took control. He was considered a rather unlikely man to become Emperor. He walked with a heavy limp and spoke with a stammer. His infirmity may have saved him from the fate of many other Roman nobles no one bothered to have him executed because he didn't pose a threat. Claudius wrote extensively, and proved an able administrator. In 47, his armies finally subdued Britannia, bringing the rebellious province into the Empire for the next 350 years. The early church failed to celebrate this victory. They were busy, learning how to turn the other cheek.

What did Jesus do when the Empire of his day changed rulers? Well, odd as it sounds the answer, as we've seen, is nothing. He didn't do a thing. Or, more properly, he didn't change at all. Jesus did not share our contemporary cable-television fueled preoccupation with those who rule the world. Not just because he was penniless and powerless, but because he was living in another realm, about his father's business.

Christ's true home was not Rome. He lived in the empire, but he lay his head in a kingdom where strength is not based on might. A kingdom where wealth is not based on riches. A kingdom where peace is more powerful than violence. This was the reign he inaugurated, the reign he invited his followers to live within.

And so the early church made little distinction between Caligula's insanity and Claudius's skill at building viaducts. Republican, Democrat, hedonist, technocrat, the first Christians didn't see such distinctions. Their eyes were watching God.

I don't mean to downplay the significance of what will take place on Tuesday. Earlier this week I read an interview with Ta Nehesi Coates, a writer whose work I love. Coates was raised in Baltimore at the height of the crack cocaine epidemic. His father was a Black Panther who raised his children to be deeply suspicious of white people. Commenting on President Obama's election Coates said, "I had

never in my life considered the *humanity* of white people from Iowa. And now I am.” This is what I mean by Tuesday as a redemptive moment. In a very real way some of the sins of our past are being healed.

But not all of them. No political change, no matter how significant, will ever replace or eclipse the work of the church.

Rather than either wringing our hands or jumping for joy every time our Empire changes leaders we are called to love each other, to feed the hungry, to sing God's praises. Rather than pinning all of our hopes on whoever assumes the throne, you and I are called to be about our Father's business.

And so, if you are a Republican don't despair because a Democrat just took the White House. You have a claim on your identity far more grand than any political party can ever hope to give you. You are a Christian. And if your loyalties lie on the other side of the aisle, don't celebrate too much because the Democrats are back. You have a claim on your identity far more powerful than any partisan ideology. You are a Christian.

Seventy-four years ago Germany was rocked by the sort of political upheaval that makes you realize each and every one of our recent Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates would have been a decent option. As Hitler took the reins of his nation a group of concerned pastors called on the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth.

“What should we do?” They asked. “How should we respond? How should we change? And Barth said, in essence, “Don't do anything. Don't change. Continue to be the church and you will be more than enough.”

He wasn't advocating political quietism. Indeed, like Peter and Paul before them, many of the ministers he spoke to that day wound up imprisoned as enemies of the state. Not because they followed a politician, but because they followed Jesus. As Jurgen Moltmann writes, “the acknowledgment of the sole lordship of Christ will always plunge the church into political conflict.”

I would suggest that over the next four years, over the next forty years, over the next four hundred years, the church should be the church, letting the ensuing politics fall where they may.

Rather than conflating God and Empire when we like the President, or complaining when the Emperor's politics don't correspond to ours, we could learn from history and remember that neither Augustus, Tiberius, Drusus, Sejanus, Caligula nor Claudius recognized the presence of God in humble peasant Jesus.

And then we will do the humble work of Jesus. We will sing hymns loudly. We will worship with emotion and intensity. We will preach the good news of resurrection with words when necessary. We will run to one another when illness strikes. We will try to learn to turn the other cheek. We will feed the hungry and house the homeless. We will look to each other's interests before our own. We will be about our Father's business.

And so, rather than gaining vain and fleeting illumination from the weak flame of our own political opinions, we will be like the moon, which has no light of its own, but instead reflects a greater, far more beautiful source. We will be the Church and the light on our face will be the reflected light of Christ, a light that will shine and shine and shine on those who have been in these pews for years, and those who are hesitantly visiting, on questioners and believers, Republicans and Democrats, on all who are seeking God's eternal brilliance in the darkness of our own Empire's present passing joy and present passing struggles. Thank God! Amen.