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B Epiphany 03

A New President, An Old Destiny

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan – to do which may achieve and cherish, a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations. Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of the United States, Hero of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama.

We have a new president and a new government. Let's think theologically about these facts for a bit. All of life has theological implications, that is, everything is a part of the way we think about God and our relationship to God. We Americans treasure our tradition of separation of church and state, but that important guarantee of religious freedom ought not blind us to the fact that our national life, including politics, is included in the judgment of God on human life. So, although the church and its ministers need to stay outside of *partisan* politics, the church has every right to comment upon the theological, ethical, and moral dimensions of our national and community life, that is, politics in its widest sense. We do not have the right to force others to observe our religious values, but we have a right to place those values into our public discourse. We have but to remember the silence of the German churches in the face of Nazi horrors to know what moral cowardice is. We have but to remember the Roman government's summary execution of a defenseless, innocent Man to know what other horror is.

But today is not a day for negativism or horrors. It is a day to celebrate part of the new creation that God is bringing about in Jesus Christ. Every moment of the universe's life is part of that re-creation; every particle from the smallest nanobit to the hugest galaxy is part of that re-creation. Every human being – and, I hope, every dog, cat, rose, aardvark, and whatever – is part of that re-creation.

Christians are fundamentally optimists. We have to be. We know that the worst that sin and ignorance and malice can do has already lost the contest. Good conquers evil, love conquers indifference, God transfigures the wicked, life conquers death, resurrection has the last word. Better, perhaps, to say that love has the last word, for love includes resurrection but is so much more. And maybe when we write and speak that word "love," we ought to capitalize it, Love, for God is love (1 John 4.8, 16). The resurrection of Jesus confronts the ultimate defeat that every human being must endure and nullifies it. The resurrection of every human being is included in the resurrection of Jesus. Your destiny and mine and everyone's was radically altered when God transformed the corpse of Jesus into new life. The Galilean carpenter and teacher became the Lord of the universe, the

Pantocrator in Christian thought and art. God's intent for the welfare of his beloved in one stroke transcended the decay and entropy natural to the universe. God spoke, as He once did to the nothingness before creation, God spoke to the natural running-down of the universe in the resurrection of Jesus and said, "Thus far shall you come and no farther. The future, time itself, and eternity belong to Me. I have re-made the fate of the world into something incredibly beyond what it could ever be by itself. That is what my good will (grace) is all about."

Well, let us return to this particular moment of grace in our national life and in our individual lives, for, of course, they are intertwined. How ought we to live? Our people's traditions and scriptures give us guidance.

In the interest of time and space, I will pass over the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, except to note that in Israel's ideal, nothing in life was begun or executed except under the guidance and judgment of God. Israel forgot that to her peril.

In the New Testament we find that Christians have two approaches to government. One is anger at the persecution Christians suffered because they would not worship Caesar, the civil religion of their day. Christians were seen as disloyal atheists who were persecuted to give up their error-ridden ways. So we see in some passages an anger at government that calls down God's judgment (see *The Revelation to John*). On the other hand, Christians saw government, even bad government, as part of how God brings order into the world. Therefore, government is worthy of honor, loyalty, and prayer. (Romans 13.7; 1 Peter 2.13, 17) Jesus Himself teaches us that government has certain rights and responsibilities: "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Luke 20.25; Matthew 22.21; Mark 12.17) What can we take for ourselves from this? I think we are counseled to be wary of government and to call it to task for its mistakes. At the same time, we are to honor and pray for government as part of God's way with the world. The devil, of course, is in the details: how are we to distinguish the difference? That is an on-going process of balance and proportion, what Episcopalians are particularly good at. We have work to do.

In the midst of life's uncertainties, we have so much to celebrate today. Our nation has elected its first African-American president, perhaps the last chapter in the Civil War, and a giant step toward eliminating racism from our experience; maybe that is a foretaste and forecast of eliminating other -isms from our lives. We have a president of intelligence and new vision who will bring solutions to the seemingly intractable problems that have stymied us for so many years. We have a president of great inclusiveness, demonstrated by many of the events we have witnessed in the past inaugural week. We have a president who has started acting decisively to meet the economic and political threats to our welfare. We have a president whose values we can all embrace – devotion to God, family life and love, breadth of vision, pride in our American heritage, a realistic grasp of

the challenges facing us. We have a president who is optimistic. We have a president who has claimed as his role model the greatest president of our past, Abraham Lincoln.

Let us be wary of civil religion, of worshipping our country instead of our God. But, oh, let us rejoice and be glad today, for our country and for ourselves. For God has acted today, as She has in all the days that have gone before, and as He will act in all the days ahead. No matter how we try to exclude God's radical call to holiness and love from our individual lives and from our communities' lives (what we call sin), God will have none of it. That is why we Christians are so optimistic. That is why we join Judaism and Islam and Wicca and other religions, in today's jubilation, for they have similar visions, though for different reasons. But we have so much in common, so much to share with one another. Let us Christians be glad of who we are and Whom we follow and Whom we adore, and let us lay that treasure before the world that they may share in it, and we in them. Let us place those Christian values into our public discourse, local, national, and international.

Let us have malice toward none. Let us have charity and love for all. Let us be firm in the right as God has given us commandment: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7.12; Luke 6.31; Talmud, shabbat, 31a). We have work to do, wounds to bind up, warriors and their families who claim our care, we have peace to make and to cherish. God calls us to this work. Abraham Lincoln echoed that call, as does President Obama. Let us begin.

Now let us pray, from the Book of Common Prayer: O Lord our Governor, whose glory is in all the world: We commend this nation to your merciful care, that, being guided by your Providence, we may dwell secure in your peace. Grant to the President of the United States, the Governor of this State, and to all in authority, wisdom and strength to know and to do your will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in your respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, page 820)