

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

As I sat and watched the election returns come in on this past Tuesday evening, I could not help but reflect on how the world has changed during my lifetime. I don't consider myself to be all that old, except when my grandchildren think that I was on Noah's ark, but I have this sense that the world is a very different place from when I was young. As an amateur historian, I have been trying to make sense of all that has happened during this election year.

I grew up primarily in the 1950's. My memories of the 1940's are sporadic and unformed. What I remember about the fifties was that it was a wonderful time to grow up as a white kid in Minnesota. In many ways we embodied that rather stereotypical "Leave It To Beaver," "Father Knows Best" and "Ozzie and Harriet" community.

Almost all of the people who lived around us and with whom I went to school were Scandinavian and German. I had never met a black person, knew almost nothing about what was happening in the deep south between blacks and whites and was blissfully ignorant about such things as racism, apartheid, and segregation. The first time I even became aware that there was a problem was when Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play major league baseball, but I couldn't quite figure out the significance of all this.

As I have been writing a book for the past several years entitled "Changing of the Beat, 1955-1959," I have become much more poignantly aware of how devastating it was to grow up black in America. While I was experiencing a free and empowering existence, many children of color were suffering under horrific conditions.

The 1950's became the decade when the revolution against such oppression truly went public, although there had been stirrings much earlier. The Supreme Court in 1954 ruled that segregated schools were against the law. Rosa Parks a year later refused to move to back of the bus, and Martin Luther King Jr. was chosen to lead the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama.

Emmett Till, a fourteen year old boy from Chicago, was visiting relatives in Mississippi when he allegedly whistled at a white woman and was summarily abducted, beaten and killed. For almost the first time, the northern press

finally began to pay attention to the violent social climate that existed for African Americans. Chuck Berry, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Little Richard, Clyde McPhatter, Fats Domino and others began to shake up the status quo by their revolutionary music.

The Little Rock Nine gained notoriety as they attempted to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Eisenhower had to send in federal troops to protect the students from the raging white mobs. Racist governors such as George Wallace and Orval Faubus stoked anger and violence against protesting blacks and whites. In the south, most blacks were prevented from voting by poll taxes, registration obstacles and downright physical intimidation.

When my wife Jackie and I spent a winter doing ministry in southern Florida in 1964, the racial tension was so thick you could have cut it with a knife. "Whites only" signs were still present, as well as "Colored only," hanging on rest rooms, drinking fountains, doctor's waiting rooms.

Martin Luther King had just inspired a nation with his powerful dream in the march on Washington in 1963. "I have a dream that all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics would be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last.'" But only a few months later, President Kennedy was assassinated, and the dream seemed to be only fantasy.

We prayed and hoped it would get better, but it only got worse. As I remember back, 1968 was the bottom. I doubt that there has even been a more devastating year in American life, at least since the Civil War. The whole world seemed to be crumbling around us. I was the rookie pastor of a church in north Minneapolis, located just a few blocks from neighborhoods that were literally burning. The war in Vietnam was escalating, some 44,000 young men had just been called up, some of them from my congregation.

1968 arrived. During January, February and March, the infamous Tet offensive happened in Vietnam where 300,000 enemy troops pushed south and created chaos,

causing 600,000 refugees. The casualties on both sides were horrendous. The overall effect was that public opinion turned against the war; protests accelerated and rage was contagious. President Lyndon Johnson was forced to drop out of the race for re-election.

In April of '68, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, and America was pitched into devastating darkness. I was trying to preach sermons of hope and meaning in the midst of chaos, but my words seemed hollow. When I attended a committee meeting the same night that King was killed, one of our faithful saints seemed to sum up the feelings of many in the church when she said, "Maybe it is just as well. He was such a troublemaker." I was speechless.

Two months later in June I was up late one night rocking our eighteen month old daughter to sleep and watching the returns from the California primary when all of sudden the world exploded again. Senator Robert Kennedy had been shot. We soon learned that we had another enemy beside the Soviet Union. The assassin was a Palestinian immigrant, and he did this evil act on the one year anniversary of the Six Day War as a protest to the Israeli victory.

In August, while two Minnesotans, Eugene McCarthy and Hubert Humphrey, fought for the Democratic nomination, Chicago, the site of the convention, became a battleground. In beautiful Grant Park thousands of demonstrators were charged by the police, and a riot ensued. On the convention floor one speaker after another castigated the legendary Mayor Richard Daley for the actions of the police as he hurled insults back at them from the floor.

America was split into many different factions: black and white, pro-war and anti-war, those under the age of thirty and those who were older. As a pastor I was trying to hold my congregation together, trying to perform the role of a peacemaker, a non-anxious presence, an interpreter, and not meeting with a whole lot of success. The social order seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

Now forty years later this November, there seems to be an enormous juxtaposition. For those who are younger, the change may not be as noticeable, but for those of us who lived through 1968, the change is revolutionary. Of course the fact that the celebration of the election took part in Grant Park in Chicago was certainly serendipitous.

This time there were no riot police, no tear gas, no national guard standing by, no rage rising from the

streets of Chicago. Instead there were hundreds of thousands of people standing together as black and white, Latino and Asian, young and old, rich and poor, famous and anonymous, celebrating the election of an African-American of all things. I could hardly believe that in just forty years such a changing portrait could be presented.

Of course, we are nowhere near to completion in terms of race relations in America. Obama may turn out to be less than what people hope, and the issue of race may again fracture our country. The challenges that the new president faces are staggering. Yet America has proven to be a resilient nation and has overcome far worse in our history.

So we pray for our new president, that he might lead us toward peace, justice, love and hope. I hope that 1968 has gone away forever, never to return.