

**“COME AND GO WITH ME TO THAT LAND”**  
**MARTIN LUTHER KING JUNIOR SUNDAY AND THE INAUGURATION**  
**January 18, 2009: The Reverend Maddie Sifantus**

**MEDITATION:**

Please join me in the spirit of prayer. We are gathered here this snowy morning, we brave souls. We have come out of the cold into this place where we can find warmth with each other. We are thankful for that warmth and commit ourselves to stoking the fires here that will allow the warmth to continue.

We come here also in thanks—for the miracle of an airplane that could land safely on the Hudson River this week, with a cargo of 155 precious souls who were not lost to their family and friends.

We come here today in concern—for those in our families or our community who may be dealing with economic problems seemingly spiraling beyond control or health issues or any of the human problems that we can experience.

We come here also in sadness—aware of the continuing hostilities in many places around our world, most especially this week in Gaza and the continuing conflict in Israel and Palestine, as well as that in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our prayer, as always, is for peace, however impossible that might seem.

And this week we come here in hope and joy—as we prepare with our country and the world for an extraordinary change in leadership. Our thoughts and minds come together to pray for this new administration, for Barack Obama and Joe Biden, their families, the new Cabinet and for all of us as we go forward into this moment with the audacity to hope. And may we all work together to bring the hoped for new day, with justice for all, as we deal with the many problems and challenges we have ahead of us.

And our prayer continues with the gospel hymn that was sung at Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral.

**MUSIC:** *Precious Lord, Take My Hand* Solo, Kelli Parece

**SERMON: Reflections on Martin Luther King Jr. and the Inauguration**

What a day. What a precious time. What a weekend as we approach the Inauguration on Tuesday. What a time we have come to in our country. How very far we have come since Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership was cut off so tragically. I am wondering how you are feeling about it all, as I am just getting to know you. I am wondering what your experience has been, your memories, and your stories. After all, the history of a community, a church or a nation is told through stories. Through all our stories, we can see the picture of where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. What stories could you tell me of experiencing racism in your lifetime? Of the power of hearing Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech or of coming to understand what racism is and how it affects all of us.

As this Sunday approached, which has been for many years now been celebrated as

Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday, we have all been aware of how special this particular Sunday, January 18, 2009 would be, juxtaposed as it is two days before the Inauguration of the first African American President of our country. Just even saying that amazes me. I have found myself thinking about how far we have come, even as we know we have a long way to go.

One of my colleagues, James Kubal-Komoto of the Saltwater Unitarian Universalist Church in Des Moines, Washington state reflected on just that earlier this week. He said:

“On August 28, 1963, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed his dream for the United States of America, and on January 20, 2009, in front of the U.S. Capitol, Barack Hussein Obama will take the oath of office to become the President of the United States of America.” Kubal-Komoto continues to reflect: “From the Lincoln Memorial across the National Mall to the steps of the U.S. Capitol, is a distance of 1.9 miles. It will have taken 45 years, four months, and 23 days for us as a nation to make the journey from one historic spot to the other. If you're curious, that's a speed of (about) 7 inches per day, a seemingly glacially slow speed, but because of the hope, courage, perseverance, and patience of so many, and their willingness to continue to put one foot in front of the other, it has been a journey that has been possible within some people's lifetimes.”<sup>1</sup>

What a journey. Many of us remember the struggles and the heartache along the path to this week. Some of us may have worked on voter registration or supported those who did. Many of us remember 1963 and the story and images of the Birmingham of the Story for All Ages we heard earlier. I have a colleague, David Johnson, who is currently interim minister at our church in Plymouth, home of our Pilgrim fathers and mothers. He and I are advisors to the UU students at Andover Newton Theological School. He has been doing that work long enough that he was my advisor when I was a student there. I remember David doing a sermon for the student fellowship some years back, telling of his participation in the march in Birmingham. Recently I asked him how he felt after Obama was elected in November, and he said that he cried. He cried. He cried that all the work that had been done, all the sacrifice and blood had brought our country to this time of hope and promise, even in the midst of new challenges.

UUA President Bill Sinkford says in an Open Letter to Obama this month that he heard of Obama's election as the forty-fourth President of the United States while on an airplane to

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<sup>1</sup> UUMA list serve, January 2009.

Africa. He says that many on board that airplane wept with joy.<sup>2</sup> They wept. Emotions are running high. There will be new leadership for our nation. And what a challenge that new leadership will have in the days, weeks, months and, yes, years ahead. “Yes, we can” was the chant. Now the time is coming where the “we” of that chant will be tested. How can the “we” of “yes, we can” be realized? How can we use the high emotions which seem to make us feel that the sky is the limit, that every problem can be solved and that we can come and go with each other to that land where peace can be found and justice can roll down like waters? And how can so much hope and trust be placed in one man and one administration to solve everything that is on the path ahead of us? How dangerous is it to be a leader for change?

We are aware how dangerous it was for many of the change agents in history, from the prophets of old to our modern day prophet, Martin Luther King Jr. He paid the ultimate price for the change he believed in and fought for. There is much that could be said about Dr. King but, for me, one of the most important things we must remember about King is that he was first and foremost a man of faith, a minister and a pastor. All that he did came out of that place. MLK was a man who brought hope and healing to America. We commemorate as well the timeless values he taught through his example—the values of truth, justice, compassion, dignity, humility and service. If we could claim him as a Unitarian Universalist, we would. On his holiday, we do lift up the universal, unconditional love, forgiveness and nonviolence that empowered his revolutionary spirit. He certainly didn’t let nobody turn him around.

And it is my belief that Martin Luther King’s ministry expanded the vision of what the church can be in the modern world. That those of us who work from the place of our faith can make an impact and that we are all going to be needed to form the vision for the future that we will all be building together under the new administration. A leader can not do it all on his or her own, whether it be the minister or the president of the congregation leading here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield or whether it be Barack Obama leading a nation.

Taking on the path leadership in our world is more complicated all the time. Our world has expanded to a point where we are all beginning to realize how interconnected we really are—our economies, our ecology, the interaction of cultures including religions, and the quick access to information that the Internet brings. It’s been going this way for a while, but now we are distinctively aware of it. Barack Obama and his supporters were singularly successful at

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<sup>2</sup> UUA website. Letter to Obama for Tikkun magazine, January 2009.

using the Internet to reach voters of all ages, especially the youth and twenty-somethings who are most conversant with this world. You can watch Obama's speeches on You-Tube and track his support on Facebook. You can send text messages and "tweets" on Twitter. A new world and mystifying to many of us, including your minister.

Obama has looked at leadership and has figured out to reach out broadly through all the means available. He is assembling a team of Cabinet appointees and advisors who can help navigate him through the pitfalls and, he hopes, "tell it like it is" rather than tell him what they think he wants to hear. But will all of that planning, leadership is still dangerous; it is inherent with the territory. Especially when his whole campaign was built on change.

I recently read a book by Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky of the JFK School of Government: "Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading".<sup>3</sup> In this book, the authors make the distinction between what they call technical change and adaptive change. Technical problems are those for which there are already answers that can be called upon, procedures and the necessary how-to in place. So, in the case of the airplane accident several days ago, there are procedures in place for analyzing what happened, whether it was caused by a bird strike, as has been reported, what happened when the engines failed, looking at how the leadership team—the pilot and cockpit crew—and how they operated in an emergency. Changes in procedures for operation in the future can be made based on technical analysis.

Adaptive challenges are far more complicated and involve folks adjusting to tough realities, which could involve loss. New experiments are called for, new ways of communicating, and many adjustments may need to be made. It is time for new ideas, new values, and new ways of working. According to Heifetz and Linsky, "the single most common source of leadership failure...is that people treat adaptive challenges as technical problems."<sup>4</sup> This holds true in a faith community such as ours and in our nation with Barack Obama poised to take the reins on Tuesday.

In order for Obama to fulfill the promises he has made and truly lead our nation, he is going to need all of us to do our part in moving things forward. The leader can not do it all on his or her own. There will be the promise of new approaches, new agendas, and hope for breakthroughs on many fronts, from the economy to relations with Cuba to peace in the Middle East to an end

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<sup>3</sup> Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14.

to war. One man can not do it all. One man can not orchestrate all that change without all of us on board.

And this hope of change can come down to a very personal level as it did in an article I read in the Boston Globe this week in which a young man from Boston was quoted as saying: “Now, I hope we can make a better light of things. I hope I can get a better job. I hope I can have a better career. I just need better. We all do.”<sup>5</sup> This young man has new hope for the future, and we can pray that his hopes are realized. But also know that if we all don’t come together, bringing our special light and gifts to our world, even with new leadership that we are excited about having, the forces that try to keep things the same will come into play.

This is why some are asking what it is we can do. One choice: There is a workshop being held this coming Saturday at the First Church of Newton named “Obama's Elected: What do we do now?” This social action conference will have information about current issues including immigration and homelessness and a roundtable discussion about next steps. The roundtable will consider – “How do we connect the 20,000 UUs in Massachusetts to make a difference, in our churches, in our communities and in the state? What strategies work? How do we work as a united front against injustices?” I ask, can UUs present a united front on anything? That is what is needed, if we are going to make the difference that the audacity of hope calls for. It calls for working together on the adaptive challenges, not expecting the leadership to solve these problems on their own. The hope of new leadership is in their ability to give us difficult news, to ask the tough questions, building a fire under us to take up the banner and work with them rather than blaming the messenger for the problems.

But for these few days, we want to celebrate. What are you going to be doing to recognize this historic occasion? I know I am having several friends over to watch the events of the inauguration together, in my circle of friends. You might like to attend a multi-faith worship service, intercultural dialogue and luncheon which is being held at the First Parish in Malden tomorrow. Nekita Lamour, the event organizer, says “Let’s tell the Obama-Biden administration our dreams and hopes. Let’s open our homes, our churches, our community centers, business offices, university campuses, or any feasible doors, to plan, assess, and contribute to the change that is being made in the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Boston Globe, 1-12-09, B2.

<sup>6</sup> Contact Ms. Lamour at 781-321-1003 or nplamour@aol.com to participate. Or contact the First Parish in Malden at 781-322-0474 or MaldenUU@verizon.net. Monday, Jan. 19, from 10:30

Or perhaps you want to attend the events here in Wakefield later today from 3:00 to 5:00 PM down the road at the Americal Civic Center. See Janet Schucter if you want more information. I will be going; I will hope to see you there.

So there is new light coming, new leadership. We began here two weeks ago with my ministry with you and the whole country begins on Tuesday with a new administration. We rejoice. We hope and pray for a smooth new road and clear shining of the light. The light of our leaders, and our lights, yours and mine.

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a.m. 12:30 p.m.