

**Harmonies of Liberty**  
**Isaiah 58:6-12, Mt 22:6-40**  
**Rev. Dr. Sharon E. Watkins**  
**National Prayer Service; January 21, 2009**

Mr. President and Mrs. Obama, Mr. Vice President and Dr. Biden, and your families, what an inaugural celebration you have hosted! Train ride, opening concert, service to neighbor, dancing till dawn . . .

And yesterday . . . With your inauguration, Mr. President, the flame of America's promise burns just a little brighter for every child of this land!

There is still a lot of work to do, and today the nation turns its full attention to that work. As we do, it is good that we pause to take a deep spiritual breath. It is good that we center for a moment.

What you are entering now, Mr. President and Mr. Vice President, will tend to draw you away from your ethical center. But we, the nation that you serve, need you to hold the ground of your deepest values, of our deepest values.

Beyond this moment of high hopes, we need you to stay focused on our shared hopes, so that we can continue to hope, too.

We will follow your lead.

There is a story attributed to Cherokee wisdom:

One evening a grandfather was teaching his young grandson about the internal battle that each person faces.

"There are two wolves struggling inside each of us," the old man said.

"One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self-pity, fear . . .

"The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth, love . . ."

The grandson sat, thinking, then asked: "Which wolf wins, Grandfather?"

His grandfather replied, "The one you feed."

There are crises banging on the door right now, pawing at us, trying to draw us off our ethical center – crises that tempt us to feed the wolf of vengefulness and fear.

We need you, Mr. President, to hold your ground. We need you, leaders of this nation, to stay centered on the values that have guided us in the past; values that empowered to move us through the perils of earlier times and can guide us now into a future of renewed promise.

We need you to feed the good wolf within you, to listen to the better angels of your nature, and by your example encourage us to do the same.

This is not a new word for a pastor to bring at such a moment. In the later chapters of Isaiah, in the 500's BCE, the prophet speaks to the people. Back in the capital city after long years of exile, their joy should be great, but things aren't working out just right. Their homecoming is more complicated than expected. Not everyone is watching their parade or dancing all night at their arrival.

They turn to God, "What's going on here? We pray and we fast, but you do not bless us. We're confused."

Through the prophet, God answers, what fast? You fast only to quarrel and fight and strike with the fist. . .

Is not **this** the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house . . .? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly . . .

At our time of new beginning, focused on renewing America's promise –yet at a time of great crisis – which fast do we choose? Which "wolf" do we feed? What of America's promise do we honor?

Recently Muslim scholars from around the world released a document, known as "A Common Word Between Us." It proposes a common basis for building a world at peace. That common basis? Love of God and love of neighbor! What we just read in the Gospel of Matthew!

So how do we go about loving God? Well, according to Isaiah, summed up by Jesus, affirmed by a worldwide community of Muslim scholars and many others, it is by facing hard times with a generous spirit: by reaching out toward each other rather than turning our backs on each other. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "people can be so poor that the only way they see God is in a piece of bread."

In the days immediately before us, there will be much to draw us away from the grand work of loving God and the hard work of loving neighbor. In crisis times, a basic instinct seeks to take us over – a fight/flight instinct that leans us toward the fearful wolf, orients us toward the self-interested fast . . .

In international hard times, our instinct is to fight – to pick up the sword, to seek out enemies, to build walls against the other – and why not? They just might be out to get us. We've got plenty of evidence to that effect. Someone has to keep watch and be ready to defend, and Mr. President – Tag! You're it!

But on the way to those tough decisions, which American promises will frame those decisions? Will you continue to reason from your ethical center, from the bedrock values of our best shared hopes? Which wolf will you feed?

In financial hard times, our instinct is flight – to hunker down, to turn inward, to hoard what little we can get our hands on, to be fearful of others who may take the resources we need. In hard financial times, which fast do we choose? The fast that placates our hunkered-down soul – or the fast that reaches out to our sister and our brother?

In times, such as these, we the people need you, the leaders of this nation, to be guided by the counsel that Isaiah gave so long ago, to work for the common good, for the public happiness, the well-being of the nation and the world, knowing that our individual wellbeing depends upon a world in which liberty and justice prevail.

This is the biblical way. It is also the American way – to believe in something bigger than ourselves, to reach out to neighbor to build communities of possibility, of liberty and justice for all. This is the center we can find again whenever we are pulled at and pawed at by the vengeful wolf, when we are tempted by the self-interested fast.

America's true character, the source of our national wisdom and strength, is rooted in a generous and hopeful spirit.

*"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, . . .  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,<sup>1</sup>*

Emma Lazarus' poetry is spelled out further by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy . . . I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made."<sup>2</sup>

You yourself, Mr. President, have already added to this call, "If there's a child on the south side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. . . . It's that fundamental belief — I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper — that makes this country work."

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Lazarus

<sup>2</sup> *The Words of MLK, Jr.*, selected by Coretta Scott King, 21

It is right that college classes on political oratory already study your words . You, as our president, will set the tone for us. You will help us as a nation choose again and again which wolf to feed, which fast to choose, to love God by loving our neighbor.

We will follow your lead – and we will walk with you. And sometimes we will swirl in front of you, pulling you along.

At times like these – hard times –we find out what we’re made of. Is that blazing torch of liberty just for me? Or do we seek the "harmonies of liberty", many voices joined together, many hands offering to care for neighbors far and near?

Though tempted to withdraw the offer, surely Lady Liberty can still raise that golden torch of generosity to the world. Even in these financial hard times, these times of international challenge, the words of Katherine Lee Bates describe a nation with more than enough to share: "Oh, beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain . . ."

A land of abundance guided by a God of abundance, generosity, and hope – This is our heritage. This is America’s promise which we fulfill when we reach out to each other.

Even in these hard times, rich or poor, we can reach out to our neighbor, including our global neighbor, in generous hospitality, building together communities of possibility and of hope. Even in these tough times, we can feed the good wolf, listen to the better angels of our nature. We can choose the fast of God’s desiring.

Even now in these hard times let us

*Lift every voice and sing Till earth and heaven ring,  
 . . . with the harmonies of Liberty;*

Even now let us *Sing a song full of hope. . .*

Especially now, from the center of our deepest shared values, let us pray, still in the words of James Weldon Johnson:

*Thou who has by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us . . . in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand.  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> James Weldon Johnson