

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany • February 1, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Mark 1:21-28

“Hope”

Here in Alexandria, we had the equivalent of a front-row seat to the presidential inauguration just about two weeks ago. The better part of two million people came to town in tour buses, planes, trains, and automobiles to be a part of an historic occasion. For at least a few days, the D.C.-area took center stage in the national attention – not because of a scandal, for once – but in anticipation of something new, something momentous. I understand that some members of our own congregation made the trek down to the National Mall to see the inauguration firsthand or, at least, on a colossal video display. But if you didn't brave the Metro or bike or hop a cab downtown, I'm guessing you saw the images of the inauguration on television or in the newspaper. Crowds and crowds of people, chilled by the freezing temperature but cheered by a shared sense of hope and joy. For some of the attendees, this inauguration was the fulfillment of a lifetime's expectation. When asked by a reporter if she minded the cold weather, one woman waiting for the day's events replied, “History will keep me warm!” (Personally, I'd like history, a fleece blanket, and a cup of hot cocoa.) This brief statement, though, points to the general feeling of those who gathered and watched as our country inaugurated our forty-fourth president. I heard the tenor of hope in the media coverage; saw it on the faces of the people who came together on this chilly January day. People on the Mall, people around the nation – even people all around the world – have looked forward to our new president exercising the authority of his office in such a way that times ahead can be better than times past.

Throughout his campaign, the president spoke of change, things being different than they were or are. Hope for change, hope for the possibilities of the future, brought millions of people here to witness the presidential inauguration. It wasn't just hope that caused this to happen, at least not “hope” in the sense of a general sentiment, but hope that is backed by the knowledge that the president can *do* things. The Office of the President of the United States is one of the most powerful in the entire world. Our nation has entrusted our new president with a great deal of authority. He, in turn, has pledged to use this authority to effect change in the way that the government operates, to “clean house,” to sweep out the ineffective, the wasteful, and the corrupt, and to address our nation's relationships with our global neighbors. Such reform, cleaning house on a grand scale, might not be easy or speedy; however, **people have based their hope in the knowledge that it is possible.**

Now, almost two weeks after the inauguration, the president, along with the rest of the country, is at work. The work of change, of cleaning house in our government, is under way. But such work won't be easy, for the government is resistant to change. There's been a certain way of getting things done in Washington, which, I think, is called “politics.” My family has lived in Illinois for many years, so we've seen how some people suppose politics should work. It is my hope that the president, our elected leaders, and the rest of the government can dispense with the negative forms of politics to work together for the benefit of the nation they have sworn to serve – indeed, that is my prayer! But it's easy to see that the president's authority is limited. On his own, he cannot change government, because he cannot cause people to change. We will still probably see instances of corruption, greed, and self-interest among officials. Our nation faces economic hardship at home and warfare abroad. Despite the authority given to the president, poverty and homelessness and violence will not likely be gone in four, eight, or even sixteen years. Governments and nations are made up of people, and *people* are resistant to change. Some refuse to acknowledge the problems that exist or, if they do, seem unable or unwilling to learn and work in a different way.

We'd like to change. Really, we would. Well, kind of. We'd like to see *good* change in the government, in the world at large, or even in our friends and families. And we know that we need personal change, too – especially when we think about where we stand before the Lord. Each of us could probably name *at least* one thing that we need to change in how we live our lives, something that we

consistently end up putting ahead of our relationship with God, the things that damage and dirty our hearts and minds, leaving them **unclean**. What are the unclean things in your life? Where do you struggle, knowing that you need change, even if you're not sure how change would be possible? Or how often has change begun when you start to feel the unclean things calling you back, calling you to resist change? Scripture calls these unclean things "sin." It doesn't matter who you are or what office you hold, president or congressional page: we are all tempted by sin day in and day out. Some temptations might seem new, others, decades old. When you think about how these leave us tainted, contaminated, and just plain filthy before God, when you consider how resistant to change we seem to be, you might wonder if there's really any hope, any *real* hope, to be found. How can we be rid of the unclean if our very minds and hearts are unclean?

In today's Gospel text, at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus is at work to call out the unclean and restore right a relationship with God. We see Jesus "cleaning house." And let me be clear here: I'm not primarily talking about the miraculous healing of the man with the unclean spirit, which Mark so vividly records. The most astonishing occurrence in our text is Jesus' teaching! Jesus has come onto the scene, correcting the people's understanding of what it means to have a right relationship with God, proclaiming the gospel of God's grace. The authority of Jesus' teaching, already evident in what he has spoken to the people at the synagogue, is demonstrated again as he frees a man from the dominion of an unclean spirit. Jesus doesn't kick the spirit out: he tells it to leave the man, and it cannot help but obey his command, because he has authority over it. He can bring change into lives *because he is God*. And because he is God, he can forgive our sin and wipe out our unclean-ness.

Hope, for the Christian, comes from the confidence that God has forgiven us out of his grace. One of our current midweek adult classes is exploring the distinction between **justification** and **sanctification**, two theological concepts that we can always seek to communicate more clearly. Jesus bought our *justification*, our being made right before God, with his blood on the cross. We are saved by God's grace in Jesus and changed into God's people. Our *sanctification*, then, is living out the reality of that change that God has worked in us through His Son. Christians are called to change. As a people he has made his own, **Jesus calls us to clean house in our lives**. The lives that we live in Christ are to be changed lives, lives lived apart from the sin that would leave us unclean in body, mind, or soul. But all Christians still struggle with sin: we're like headstrong politicians who don't want to embrace reform, hoping that things can just go back to doing business as usual. God calls us to change, but how can we, especially when we resist change? **Jesus, who proclaimed the gospel with authority and called out unclean spirits, makes real change possible.** He gives us his Word in the Bible, Word which comes into our lives and evokes change. Holy Scripture is God's gift to us: it is living and active, for through it the Holy Spirit confronts us and works to sanctify us, moving us from being unclean to being holy. If you admit that you need to follow Jesus' call to clean house, the do not neglect the reading, studying, and meditation on his Word in these sixty-six books called the Bible. Through it, God will change and sanctify you, building your relationship with Him. And through you, God will change the world around you. Our hope for change isn't based in ourselves or even in a president. Our hope is based in God Himself.

Jesus didn't come to Capitol Hill, but to the hill of Calvary. The good news that he taught is our message and our new reality as people in whom God cleans house; for **Jesus does bring change – change in which we can believe.**

Amen.