

The question keeps getting asked...

Reflections from an Inauguration junkie...

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Did you ever think you would see the Inauguration of an African American in your lifetime?

This question, which acknowledges the deepest wounds and shortcomings of American history and culture, has been asked over and over again in recent days...

Pinch me – but yes I have! A long with a million or two on the National Mall. It was a marvelous weekend of celebrations. I was delighted to be one of those specks on the Mall that you see in the satellite image of the January 20th. Look closely, I am close to the Jumbotron near the Third Street crossing.



Photo from GeoEye-1, a commercial imaging satellite orbiting 423 miles above the Earth's surface.

My Inauguration weekend began on Saturday, January 17th at the Halethorpe Maryland Commuter Railroad station not far from our offices. There the sidewalks were lined with shivering...they came in fancy cars and not-so-fancy cars...young and old...prepared for the cold and not prepared... Helicopters fluttered about overhead...some so close you could almost reach up and touch them.

Then in an instant it was over as the President-elect's special train raced through the station on its way to Washington, DC.

On Sunday evening, January 18th, Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, staged a combination Inauguration celebration, prayer service, mission fair, praise service and Martin Luther King, Jr. remembrance. I hugged friends, ate, clapped and sang for nearly two and half hours and the program still had much more to go...panelists from labor, community organizations, voter rights groups and historic civil rights organizations described how we got to this day...and the many shoulders we were standing upon.

You could begin to feel the electric energy in the air...

Monday morning's drive into the Congregational Black Caucus Foundation's Prayer Service at Metropolitan AME went surprisingly fast. The streets in DC's downtown were vacant except for clusters of National Guard troops clustered at each corner. The coffee shop next to the church became a gathering place for program participants.



The church quickly filled with members of Congress, religious leaders, mayors from around the country and others awaiting inspiration from Archbishop Desmond Tutu's address. He did not disappoint. Someone noted that too often we had gathered to recite the unfulfilled dream or memorialize the life of a pioneer – but now we were living witnesses to a new hope-filled chapter in history.

I was honored to represent the United Church of Christ as one of three scripture readers—Jewish, Muslim and Christian. I chose to read the first half of Luke...the temptation of Jesus by the devil and Jesus' reading from Isaiah in the synagogue. I dedicated the reading to long-time Black Caucus member, and California Congressman Augustus Hawkins who'd give me a boost-up early in my ministry.

Desmond Tutu was worth the wait. He entertained. He laughed at his own jokes before he told them. Occasionally you had to lean over to hear the Archbishop's quiet words...*"You Americans look what you've done...a black man....a black man with a nice family...is living in the White House...and he's a Kenyan!"* Barely visible behind the high pulpit the Archbishop did a little jig as he said: *Kenyan*. And the audience roared its approval.

In his prayer the Archbishop reminded us that the "world is waiting for an America..."

- Where there is no Guantanamo...
- Which does not torture
- Which disavows racism, materialism and militarism

- Which recognizes the rule of law and joins the International Criminal Court
- Which protects human rights in Zimbabwe, Burma, Tibet, the Sudan...
- Which views the world as a compassionate place and makes war no more
- Which spends its money on children
- Where poverty is history
- Which cares for the earth
- Which affirms that all are created in the image of God!

Carolyn and I dashed from the Prayer Service to Christ Congregational United Church of Christ in Silver Spring where United Church of Christ members and friends had gathered for reflections, prayer and song. I shared Tutu's prayer at the end of my reflections. Toward the end of the service we held hands around the perimeter of the sanctuary and sang *We Shall Overcome* as if we really believed in the words for the first time in decades.

And then someone offered tickets to the Inauguration!

Our son Aaron, his special friend Kate and I had planned to leave home around 4 AM to get one of those choice spots along the curb for the Inaugural Parade. Now with real tickets we could take the special MARC commuter train from Frederick all the way to Capital Hill and avoid the crush of traffic. In anticipation I had purchased the special train tickets when they first became available.

We stuffed our pockets with snacks and drinks and headed off. Every seat on the train was full as we left Frederick in the early morning darkness. We made only a couple of stops on our way to Union Station.

No problem finding a bathroom here, dozens of Porta-potties lined the exit from the station. I felt like the tin man in the Wizard of Oz trying to walk with my layers of clothes guarding against the winter cold.

I had studied and restudied the map to plot our route to the "security entrance" for our coveted tickets. We walked up E Street from the station to the Third Street tunnel. It was strange to walk under the Mall on the tunnel's pavement where cars normally zipped along. Emerging on the south side we found the banner for the Silver Gate only to be directed to "the line." The line snaked around corners for at least a dozen blocks. Eventually we ended up in the middle of the street in front of the Air and Space Museum. Once the line started to move we went around and around the same blocks...all very orderly and "controlled."

Then our section of the line went straight ahead - at someone's direction - while the rest of the line headed off around yet another block. By going straight we went directly to the security screening area and after pushing through the crowd blocking the entrance (they did not have tickets but were "getting close" and blocking those who had tickets)...we were suddenly in front of a dozen or more screening points where TSA screeners gave us a cursory once-over.

There we were actually on the Mall just a few yards west of Third Street and close to a Jumbotron TV...the picture was partially obscured by the leafless branches of a tree...



The crowd stood shoulder to shoulder...occasionally an older man standing near us would give us a report on the Obamas progress as he listened to his radio through ear phones... He'd speak, too loudly, they just left the White House...they're running late...

Cheers went up as the Jumbotron showed pictures of the motorcade moving from the White House toward Capital Hill.

The good-natured crowd expressed their affirmation or disapproval as dignitaries were seated on the podium. Kennedy, Clinton, Carter drew affectionate cheers...when the President-elect appeared there was a roar and you forgot that your feet were frozen and numb from standing on the frozen tundra. Occasionally the crowd would begin to chant: O-ba-ma, O-ba-ma, O-ba-ma... The chant would echo up and down the Mall.

On the Jumbotron, Senator Feinstein came to the podium and the event was underway. The man with the earphones expressed his aggravation..."they are running late, he needs to be sworn in by noon..." We groaned at his insistence.

The Vice President was sworn in first and then the President.

Yes, this is for real! Barack Obama is the President! My picture of the Jumbotron has branches across his face.

The crowd listened attentively to the Inauguration address with its fresh approach to domestic and global realities then almost immediately began to disburse as the new President completed his speech. The new President was forthright in his desire to take the country in a different direction. Rev. Lowrey's closing prayer was drowned out by the shuffling of feet on the frozen soil littered with newspapers and tons of junk.

We tried to make our way to the parade route but the way was blocked by temporary fences like those you'd find at a construction site. The only way out was the narrow route we had used to come in. The crowd was stuck...no place to go, .so someone took matters into their own hands and moved the fences. Community organizing 101 on the Mall!

Outside the Native American Museum we decided to head for Independence Avenue's eateries. Warmly inside "Hawks and Doves" (yes that is the name of the eatery) in a back room we spent the afternoon eating, drinking, warming up and watching the parade on TV.

Around 6 we headed out and wandered on Capitol Hill...the crowds were gone, the security fences were still in place without the guards and we were free to roam. We had the place almost to ourselves. In the distance we could hear the drums of the bands in the much - delayed parade and the echoes of the parade announcer.

Back at Union Station, Frederick passengers were herded over to a remote corner where an AMTRAK employee from Rhode Island patiently tried to explain we'd be free to get on the train once it got into the station. For the most part the crowd followed instructions but every once in a while someone would sit on the floor or complain that there were no chairs and it was cold.

The grumbling ceased as we boarded the train and headed off to share our pictures, stories and adventures with loved ones we'd left at home.

It still seems unreal to hear "President Obama" on radio or TV reports. Who could have imagined just two years ago that a person with deep roots in the United Church of Christ – schooled in an academy established by our missionary forebearers in Hawaii and a long-time member of our largest church, Chicago's Trinity – who could have imagined this new chapter in the dream's fulfillment?

Pinch me...this is for real!

