

Even as a kid, I was never a big fan of comic books. Perhaps that is because I was not exposed to them very much. There was no high brow reason for this. I did not think it was beneath me to read them or anything like that. In fact, the issue was the opposite. I never had enough money to buy one. But there was one comic I read religiously (no pun intended) as a youngster. It was called Treasure Chest. Any fans of Treasure Chest here? I didn't think so. Treasure Chest magazine was a publication of the Roman Catholic church when I was, as my mom used to say, knee high to a grasshopper. Since I went to a parochial grade school, this meant that I had an opportunity to read it without buying it. After all, what else are you going to do on a winter's day in Baltimore during recess when it is 10 degrees outside?

I thought I was the only person in America who remembered Treasure Chest, but years ago I heard the late George Carlin do a whole hysterical schtick on his experiences with it. The main characters in the comic strip were two guys, Dusty and Buddy. That part didn't seem to bother Carlin, but it frosted me immediately. How come, I wanted to know, were there no female leads in this comic? Even at the tender age of seven, your Rector was a feminist. The reason of course, is that there were no female leads in the Catholic church, still aren't.

The part that got Carlin though, was the fact that, "Dusty was a Catholic and Buddy.....was not." With that gentle reminder from Carlin, I then remembered how miffed I was that Dusty was always doing the right things, and Buddy.....was not. Looking back on it, I now see that Treasure Chest was propaganda of the highest order,

initiating children into the idea that Catholics were right and held the keys to the kingdom, while everyone else was wrong, and was condemned to everlasting damnation. Treasure Chest contributed to the schism Catholic hierarchy have created between themselves and the rest of the world's denominations.

Despite all this, I also need to confess to you this morning that there was one series of comics in Treasure Chest that touched me deeply. I have to tell you, I don't remember a heck of a lot about my life when I was seven. But this serial comic made such an impression on me that I still recall it today. It was a story about the future. The futuristic time setting was 1976 and Dusty and Buddy, who were my age, were now adults. The story was about the Presidential election that year. You see, 1976 was to be the first presidential election that people my age would have had the opportunity to vote. As it turned out, Vietnam changed all that. It was pretty difficult to argue with the logic that if you were old enough to die for your country, then perhaps maybe you were old enough to vote. That's when the voting age was changed to 18. Treasure Chest got that part wrong. The first election in which their intended audience actually had an opportunity to vote was 1972, the McGovern/Nixon election.

The Presidential race that Treasure Chest invented was an ethical battle between two good and moral candidates. But the editors made sure that all of us would choose the same candidate as we read along. One stood head and shoulders above the other in the eyes of me, Dusty and even Buddy the loser, the non-Catholic. The weird thing was, you never saw the face of the candidate that Dusty and Buddy and presumably, you the reader, were backing. Finally, with the suspense at a fever pitch, the final issue of Treasure Chest arrived at school. Yes, Dusty and Buddy's candidate was elected

President and I cheered. Then, in the next frame, we finally got to see the new President elect's face for the first time. He was a black man.

That was a very bold statement to be making in the years before the Civil Rights movement. It was an even more incredible statement for a conservative church publication to make. Maybe that is why I still remember it to this day. Yes, it was just a comic, but it helped my little idealistic mind begin to believe that maybe, someday, it could really happen.

Regardless of how you wanted the election to go on Tuesday, there is no question that you and I have been part of a gigantic landmark moment in American and world history. Tuesday, the wild notion in a comic book 47 years ago came true. Scholars have already noted that this is the first time in history that a white majority has elected a non-white head of state. I believe that this event will change who we are as a nation and as a people. I believe it is a major step in living into the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. But the enormity of this change to the very fabric of the patchwork quilt we call America did not fully hit me until those two little girls, Sasha and Malia, walked across that stage in Chicago Tuesday night. The vision and hope of an egalitarian world as Jesus envisioned, as Gandhi worked for, and as Dr. King preached about, symbolically appeared in front of our eyes. When after President elect Obama spoke to the nation and those two culturally diverse families then mixed together on that stage, I am not afraid to admit that your Rector started crying. When I finally gathered myself enough to talk, I said to Jean, "It is here. The kingdom of God is in our midst."

It is an image I had dreamed about, but began to think would never happen in my lifetime. This event goes so far beyond politics. Even if you were supporting the other

honorable candidate, John McCain, all of us need to celebrate this moment together. All of us need to celebrate what it means that America has moved so far beyond its racist past. I think Charles Evers, the brother of slain Civil Rights hero Medgar Evers, put this in historical context best. "45 years ago," he said, "we couldn't even vote in Mississippi and now we have a black president." Indeed. That we could elect a man with a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas to the highest office in the land says so much about us as a country. It truly is the kingdom of God forming in our midst.

But as we all know, the kingdom of God here on earth is always a fleeting thing. We see it for a second, but then it is gone again. Our first reading reminds us of that. As lectionary luck would have it, that lesson is also about a transition of political power, in this case from Moses to Joshua. Like my reaction to the election, most Hebrews believed that they too were on the cusp of becoming a great nation, now that Moses had led them out of bondage in Egypt. But great is in the eyes of the beholder. O, they became a *powerful* nation all right. But they did so not by flipping states from red to blue, but flipping themselves. For years, they had been an oppressed people. But now, under Joshua, they became the oppressor. They ripped their way through their new land, taking part in what we now call ethnic cleansing. That campaign left no survivors. "He totally destroyed", we read in Joshua 10, "all who breathed." Cities were torched, kings were hanged and people were enslaved.

The cry in today's reading is for the nation to come back to their senses, to turn away from their selfish ways and return to God, to serve The Lord once again. But it didn't happen. The next transition of power was even worse. This is the period of the Judges. Within one generation of Joshua's death, total anarchy reigned in Israel for 400 years. As

we hear in the last sentence of Judges, “every person did what was right in his own eyes.”

If I was to characterize the last 25 years in America, I would be hard pressed to find a better description of us than that last sentence of Judges. We too have become a nation where every person does what is right in their own eyes. My great hope as we look ahead into the age of Obama, is that we make a better transition than the Hebrews, that we can stay laser focused on creating the major shift in this country President elect Obama has spoken so eloquently about. If we are going to avoid the fate of other empires, we must stop trying to solve just our own problems and begin to serve God and one another. We must do this not just as a church, as St. David's has attempted to do, but also as a nation. Whether it is military service or the peace corps or operating a food pantry, we need to focus our attention on the other. Our biblical history shows us the fallacy of an individual approach to life and we now have a great opportunity to avoid it.

I have been waiting for a transformative moment in history of this magnitude for my entire life. But if we believe that we have reached some sort of climax and that now the kingdom of God has been captured, we also need to hear the cautionary tale in today's Gospel.

It's a weird story, isn't it? Bridesmaids waiting for a groom with lamps, some of which run out of oil. It is also a troubling story, because it seems to contradict much of the rest of the Gospel of Matthew. Isn't this, after all, the same Gospel where Jesus tells us not to worry about our lives, about what we will eat or drink or about what we will wear? Isn't Jesus now saying the exact opposite, that all of us need to prepare for the future? And what about avoiding this individualistic approach to life that we just talked about and Jesus speaks of so often during his ministry? Isn't he now saying to be selfish and keep

your own oil and let the other person suffer?

The trick in understanding what is going on here is the realization that today's Gospel is an allegory. This story is not really about an actual wedding or actual oil in some bridesmaids lamps. The wedding, for Matthew, is a symbol of the kingdom of heaven, the great messianic banquet. The bridesmaids are you and me, the people of the church, the people who have been invited to the banquet. The lamps that they carry are the light of the world, the light we are not to hide under a bushel basket. If we run out of fuel, how then are we to be lights to the world? Today's Gospel is not a contradiction of the Sermon on the Mount or last week's Beatitudes. It is the same thing. It is about being prepared, not prepared for what might happen to us, but prepared so that we may always be a light to the world. The oil we need for our lamps is the strength and fortitude we will need to live the Beatitudes. The point here is that being members of the wedding, that is being members of the church, is not a free ticket to the kingdom of heaven. After all, half of these bridesmaids already had their invitation to the wedding, but they never make it. The message is clear. We may get some of our oil by going to church, but church itself is not the light. It is only fuel to keep the light burning.

The same is true of this transformative moment in our history. We may all be energized by the symbol before us of an egalitarian world. But we must remember that it is just a symbol and not the thing itself. We may get some oil from this event, but it is not the light itself.

If we are unprepared to live into the vision, if we do not keep our lamps burning for all, we are no closer than we were before to experiencing the kingdom of God. Half of the bridesmaids believe that since they have already been invited to the wedding banquet,

since they are already members of the church, they are free and clear. But being a member and going to church does not make us members of God's kingdom anymore than being in a garage makes us a car. The church is a symbol of the kingdom, not the kingdom itself.

In a similar way, the election of Barack Obama just may be a symbol of a new era, but it too is only a symbol. Each of us, like the five bridesmaids who are prepared, need to keep our lamps trimmed and burning to make this vision a reality.

But what, exactly, does that mean? Matthew makes it very clear that keeping our lamps burning has little to do with what you say or what you believe. It is in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who DOES THE WILL of my Father in heaven."

For Matthew, being prepared is all about creating the kingdom of God now, living the life set before us in the Beatitudes that we heard last week.

The trick in today's lesson is making sure you are prepared for this long journey. Many of us can feed the hungry, bring release to the captives, and be peacemakers for short bursts of time. But as our Gospel suggests, the journey to the kingdom of God is a long one. It is a marathon. It is one thing to be a peacemaker for an event or two. But continually working for peace can wear out the most dedicated of all of us. That's when most of us get into trouble, when the kingdom is delayed. I think that's why so many Christians love to play the "crack the alleged code of Revelation game." Everyone wants to know when the end is coming so they know if they will have enough fuel. So one after one, various denominations and individuals tell us they have broken the code and they know when the end is coming.

Not only is that hogwash, it is also contrary to what Jesus told us, “that of that time, no one knows the day or the hour.” What Jesus tells us today is that we need to stop wasting our time looking for loopholes and instead prepare ourselves for the marathon.

So let us keep our lamps full by celebrating the election of a man who symbolizes the egalitarian hope of our future together. Let us celebrate the distance our country has come, moving from the statement in our first Constitution that stated that blacks were 3/5 of a person, to this shining moment. Let us also fill our lamps by worshiping together and feeding each other for our journey. But let us also remember that elections and worship, are not enough. We are called to leave this worship space, to move beyond the glow of an historical election and continue to work for the dream, to continue to create the dream, the dream of the prophet Amos, the dream of the prophet Martin Luther King, Jr. and the dream of you, the prophets of St. David's. Let us continue to work together and lift up our lamps together to create that world where justice always rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Amen.