

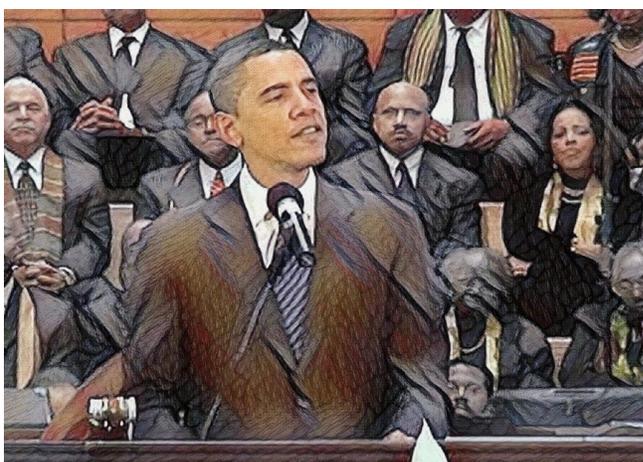


AmericanRhetoric.com

Barack Obama

Ebenezer Baptist Church Address

delivered 20 January 2008, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

[Introductory remarks]

Scripture tells us that when Joshua and the Israelites arrived at the gates of Jericho, they could not enter. The walls of the city were too steep for any one person to climb. They were too strong to be taken down by brute force. And so, the people sat for days, unable to pass on through; but God had a plan for His People. He told them to stand together and march together around the city, and on the seventh day he told them that when they heard the sound of the ram's horn, they should speak with one voice. And, at the chosen hour when the horn sounded and a chorus of voices cried out together, the mighty walls of Jericho came tumbling down. That's what scripture tells us.

And there are many lessons to take from this passage, just as there are many lessons to take from this day, just as there are many memories that fill the space of this church. As I was thinking about which ones we needed to remember at this hour, my mind went back to the very beginning of the modern Civil Rights era.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Because before Memphis and the mountaintop, before the bridge in Selma and the march on Washington, before Birmingham and the beatings, the fire hoses, and the loss of those four little girls, before there was King the icon and his magnificent dream, there was King the young preacher and a people who found themselves suffering under the yolk of oppression.

And on the eve of the bus boycotts in Montgomery, at a time when many were still doubtful about the possibilities of change, a time when there were those in the black community who not only mistrusted each other, but mistrusted themselves -- King inspired with words not of anger, but of an urgency, a fierce urgency that still speaks to us today. "Unity," he said, "is the great need of the hour." "Unity is the great need of the hour." Unity is how we shall overcome.

What Dr. King understood is that if just one person chose to walk instead of ri[de] the bus, those walls of oppression would not be moved. But maybe if a few more decided to walk, those foundations might start to shake. If just a few women were willing to do what Rosa Parks had been willing to do, maybe the cracks in those walls would start to show. If teenagers took rides from North to South, maybe a few bricks would come loose. Maybe if white folks marched because they'd come to understand that their freedom was wrapped up in the freedom of others, that they too had a stake in the impending battle, the walls would begin to sway, and if enough Americans were awakened to injustice, if they joined together North and South, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, then perhaps that wall would come tumbling down, and justice would flow like waters of righteousness, like a mighty stream. "Unity is the great need of the hour." That's what Dr. King said. It is the great need of this hour as well, not because it sounds pleasant, not because it makes us feel good, but because it's the only way we can overcome the essential deficit that exists in this country.

I'm not talking about the budget deficit. I'm not talking about the trade deficit. Talking about the moral deficit in this country. I'm talking about an empathy deficit, the inability to recognize ourselves in one another, to understand that we are our brother's keeper and our sister's keeper, that in the words of Dr. King, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny." We have an empathy deficit when we're still sending our children down corridors of shame, schools in the forgotten corners of America where the color of your skin still affects the content of your education.

We have a deficit when CEOs are making more in ten minutes than ordinary workers are making in an entire year, when families lose their homes so unscrupulous lenders can make a profit, when mothers can't afford a doctor when their children are stricken with illness.



AmericanRhetoric.com

We have a deficit in this country when we have Scooter Libby justice for some and Jena justice for others, when our children see hanging nooses from a school yard tree today, in the present, in the 21st century.

We have a deficit when homeless veterans sleep on the streets of our cities, when innocents are slaughtered in the deserts of Darfur, when young Americans serve tour after tour after tour after tour of duty in a war that should have never been authorized and should have never been waged.

We have an empathy deficit in this country that has to be closed. We have a deficit when it takes a breach in the levees to reveal the breach in our compassion, when it takes a terrible storm to reveal the hungry that God calls on us to feed, the sick that He calls on us to care for, the least of these that He commands that we treat as our own. So, we have a deficit to close. We have walls, barriers to justice and equality that must come down, and to do this, we know that "unity is the great need of the hour."

However, all too often, when we talk about unity in this country, we've come to believe that it can be purchased on the cheap. We've come to believe that racial reconciliation can come easily; that it's just a matter of a few ignorant people trapped in the prejudices of the past, and that if the demagogues and those who would exploit our racial divisions will simply go away then all our problems will be solved. All too often, we seek to ignore the profound structural and institutional barriers that stand in the way of insuring opportunity for all of our children, or decent jobs for all of our people, or health care for those who are sick. We offer unity, but we are not willing to pay the price that's required

Of course, true unity cannot be so easily purchased. It starts with a change in attitudes. It starts with changing our hearts, and changing our minds, broadening our spirit. It's not easy to stand in somebody else's shoes. It's not easy to see past our own differences. We've all encountered this in our own lives. What makes it even more difficult is that we have a politics in this country that seeks to drive us apart, that puts up walls between us. We are told that those who differ from us on a few things, differ from us on all things, that our problems are the fault of those who don't think like us or look like us or come from where we do. The Welfare Queen, she's taking our money. The Immigrant, he's taking our jobs. The believer condemns the nonbeliever as immoral, and the nonbeliever chides the believer for being intolerant.



AmericanRhetoric.com

And for most of this country's history, we in the African-American community have been at the receiving end of man's inhumanity to man. And all of us understand insidious -- All of us understand intimately the insidious role that race still sometimes plays on the job and in the schools, in our health care system, and in our criminal justice system.

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that none of our hands are entirely clean. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll acknowledge that our own community has not always been true to King's vision of a beloved community. If we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there have been times when we've scorned our gay brothers and sisters instead of embracing them. The scourge of anti-Semitism has at times revealed itself in our community. For too long, some of us have seen immigrants only as competitors for jobs instead of companions in the fight for opportunity. Everyday our politics fuels and exploits this kind of division across all races and regions, across gender and party. It is played out on television; it is sensationalized by the media. Last week, it crept into the campaign for President with charges and countercharges that serve to obscure the issues instead of illuminating the critical choices we face as a nation. None of our hands are clean.

So let us say that on this day of all days, each of us carries with us the task of changing our hearts and minds. The divisions, the stereotypes, the scapegoating, the ease with which we blame the plight of ourselves on others -- all of that distracts us from the common challenges that we face, war and poverty, inequality and injustice. We can no longer afford to build ourselves up by tearing each other down. We can no longer afford to traffic in lies or fear or hate. It's the poison that we must purge from our politics, the wall that we must tear down before the hour grows too late. Because if Dr. King could love his jailer, if he could call on the faithful, who once sat where you do, to forgive those who had set dogs and fire hoses upon them, then surely we can look past what divides us in our time and bind up our wounds and erase the sympathy deficit that exists in our hearts.

But if changing our hearts and our minds is the first critical step, we cannot stop there. It's not enough to bemoan the plight of the poor in this country and remain unwilling to push our elected officials to provide the resources to fix our schools. It's not enough to decry the disparities of health care and yet allow the insurance companies and the drug companies to block real reform in our health care system. It's not enough -- It's not enough for us to abhor the costs of a misguided war, and yet we continue to allow ourselves to be driven by a politics of fear that sees the threat of an attack as a way to scare up votes instead of a call to come together in a common effort.



AmericanRhetoric.com

Scripture tells us that we are judged not just by word but by deed. And if we are truly to bring about the unity that is needed, that is so crucial in this time, we have to find it within ourselves to act on what we know, to understand that living up to this country's ideals and its possibilities is going to require great effort and great resources, sacrifice and stamina. We can't pass a law called No Child Left Behind and then leave the money behind. That is not a serious effort in bringing about the unity that is needed. We can't celebrate Dr. King's dream, and yet still have insufficient funds to cash that promissory note that was promised at the beginning of this nation.

That is what is at stake in this great debate we are having today. Changes that are needed are not just a matter of tinkering around the edges. They will not come if politicians simply tell us what we want to hear. All of us will be called upon to make some sacrifice. None of us will be exempt from responsibility. We've had to fight to fix our schools, but we also have to challenge ourselves to be better parents, and turn off the television set, and put away the video game, and our men have to be home with our children. That, too, is part of the challenge that we must make.

We will have to confront the biases in our criminal justice system, but we also have to acknowledge the deep-seeded violence that still resides in our own communities, in too many of the hearts of our young people, and we have to break the grip of that violence wherever we see it. That's how we're going to bring about the change that we seek. That's how Dr. King led this country through the wilderness.

He did it with words, words that he spoke not just to the children of slaves but the children of slave owners, words that inspired not just black but also white, not just Christian but also Jew and Muslim and Buddhists and Atheists, not just the southerner but also the northerner. He led with words, but he also led with deeds. He also led by example. He led by marching and going to jail and suffering threats and beatings and being away from his family. He led by taking a stand against a war knowing full well that it would diminish his popularity. He led by challenging our economic structures, understanding that it would cause discomfort. Dr. King understood that unity cannot be won on the cheap, that we would have to earn it through great effort and determination. That's the unity, the hard earned unity that we need right now. That is the effort, the determination that can transform blind optimism into hope.

You know people have remarked on the fact that I talk about hope a lot in my campaign. You know they -- they tease me a little bit. Some have been scornful. They say, "Ah, he's talking about hope again. He's so idealistic. He's so naïve. He's a hope monger." That's okay. It's true. I talk about hope. I talk about it a lot because the odds of me standing here today are so



AmericanRhetoric.com

small, so remote that I couldn't of gotten here without some hope. You know my -- my daddy left me when I was two years old. I needed some hope to get here. I was raised by a single mother. I needed some hope to get here. I got in trouble when I was a teenager, did some things folks now like to talk about. I needed some hope to get here. I wasn't born into money, or great wealth, or great privilege, or status. I was given love, an education, and some hope. That's what I got. That's my birthright.

So I talk about hope. I -- I put "Hope" on my campaign signs. It doesn't even have my name on them sometimes -- just says "Hope." Folks don't know who they're voting for, but it makes them feel good. Say, you know, huh? I spoke about hope at the Democratic Convention. I -- I wrote a book called *The Audacity of Hope*. And so I -- so I'm puzzled when -- when some people, some of the other candidates make a mockery of the idea. They say I'm pedaling false hopes. "Get a reality check," they tell me. And I have to -- I have to try to understand what they're saying. The implication is is that if you are hopeful, that you somehow must be engaging in wishful thinking. Your -- Your head must be in the clouds; that you must be passive and just sit back and wait for things to happen to you. That seems to be the implication.

And so I have to explain to people that's not what hope is. Hope is not blind optimism. Hope is not ignorance of the barriers and hurdles and hazards that stand in your way. Hope's just the opposite. I know how hard it will be to provide health care to every single American. The insurance companies, drug companies, they don't want to give up their profits. I know it won't be easy to have a energy policy that makes sense for America because the oil companies like writing the energy bills. I know that alleviating poverty, or making sure all our children can learn, or eliminating the scourge of racism in our society -- none of those things lend themselves to simple solutions.

I know because I fought on the streets as a community organizer in poor neighborhoods on the Southside of Chicago alongside those without jobs or without prospects for the future. I have fought in the courts as a civil rights attorney for those who had been denied opportunity on the job or denied access to the ballot box. I've seen good legislation die because -- Well, I've seen that too -- I've seen good legislation die because good intentions weren't enough, because they weren't fortified with a political majority and political will. I've seen this country -- this country's judgment clouded by fear. I know how easily a country can be misled when it is afraid. I know how hard it is. Everybody here understands how difficult it is to bring about true change, change that we can believe in. But I also know this -- that nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except somebody somewhere decided to hope.



AmericanRhetoric.com

That's how this country was founded because a group of patriots decided they were going to take on the British Empire. Nobody was putting their money on them. That's how slaves and abolitionists resisted that evil system. That's how a new President was able to chart a course to insure that this nation would no longer remain half slave and half free. That's how the greatest generation defeated Fascism and overcame a Great Depression. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how workers won the right to organize. That's how young people and old people and middle-aged folks were willing to walk instead of ride the bus, and folks came down on Freedom Rides. They marched, and they sat in, and they were beaten and fire houses were sent on them, and dogs were sent on them, and some went to jail, and some died for freedom's cause. That's what hope is. Imagining and then fighting for and struggling for and sometimes dying for what didn't seem possible before. There's nothing naïve about that. There are no false hopes in that.

I don't believe in false hopes. Imagine if John F. Kennedy had looked up at the moon and said, "Well, that's too far." False hopes, we can't go there. If Dr. King had stood on the Lincoln Memorial and said, "Y'all go home; we can't overcome." There's no such thing as false hopes, but what I know deep in my heart is that we cannot bring about change unless we are unified, unless we do it together. Change does not happen from the top down -- in America or anywhere else. It happens from the bottom up. It happens because ordinary people dream extraordinary things. It's because all of you decide that change must come. That I know.

It wasn't just one voice -- It wasn't just one voice that shouted out before the walls of Jericho. All the voices came together, a chorus of voices. That's what gives me hope: not just those who ascend to high office, but the changes that are happening in ordinary places. The stories that give me my hope don't happen in the spotlight. When I think about Dr. King, I suspect he was sustained not by having dinner with Presidents; not by getting the Nobel Peace Prize; but coming back to church and seeing the mothers of the church and the deacons. Those who maintained their dignity were standing up straight in the face of injustice. That's where he drew his hope. He saw God in their faces. Those stories don't happen on a presidential stage; they happen in the quiet quarters of our lives. They happen in the moments we least expect. So, let me close by giving an example of one of those stories.

There is a young woman, 23 years old, white woman, named Ashley Baia, who organizes for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. Ashley has been working to organize mostly black folks. She's in Florence, South Carolina. She's been doing it since the beginning of the campaign, and the other day she...set up a round table discussion where everyone around was telling their story about who they were and why they were there. And so, Ashley explained, she started things off, by explaining why she was there. And she explained that



AmericanRhetoric.com

when she was nine years old her mother got cancer, and because she had to miss a day of work she was let go; and she lost her health care; and then she had to file for bankruptcy. They were on hard times, and that's when Ashley, nine-years-old at the time, decided she had to do something to help her mom, and she knew that food was one of their most expensive costs. They didn't have a lot of money. Ashley lived in a poor household.

And so Ashley convinced her mother that she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else mustard and relish sandwiches. She had heard that condiments like mustard and relish were cheap. And she -- she concocted in her own mind at the age of nine that she would convince her mother that that's the only thing she wanted to eat everyday, because she figured that would be a way of saving money for the family and helping them alleviate their hardships. So she did this for a year until her mom got better. And in that round table she told everyone that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too. She had heard me speak about my mother having cancer and having to worry about maybe not getting the health care she needed because of a preexisting condition, and she had connected with that. She thought, maybe Barack would fight for my mother. And if he would fight for my mother, then maybe I will fight alongside him. That's what had brought her to Florence.

So Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and different reasons: some bring up specific issues; some talk about, upset about, affirmative action; some talk about, you know, "I want to see more jobs in the community"; some are frustrated about trade; some just like me.

So they all got a bunch of different reasons, and finally, at the end of this discussion, they come to this elderly black man. He's been sitting there quiet the whole time, hasn't been saying a word. And Ashley asks him why is he there. And he doesn't bring up a specific issue. He does not say healthcare or the economy. He doesn't talk about the Iraq War. He doesn't say anything about education. He doesn't say that he's there because he likes Barack Obama, or he's proud of the possibility of the first African American President. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley. I am here because of this young girl, and the fact that she's willing to fight for what she believes in. And that reminds me that I still have some fight left in me, and I'm going stand up for what I believe in."

Now, by itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man, that's not enough to change a country. By itself, it's not enough to give health care to the sick or jobs to the jobless or education to our children, but it is where we begin.



AmericanRhetoric.com

It's why I believe that the walls in that room began to shake at that moment. And if they can shake in that room, then they can shake here in Atlanta, and if they can shake in Atlanta, then they can shake in the state of Georgia, and if they can shake in Georgia, they can shake all across America. And if enough of our voices join together, if we see each other in each other's eyes, we can bring those walls tumbling down. The walls of Jericho can finally come tumbling down.

That is our hope, but only if we pray together, if we work together, and if we march together. Ebenezer, we cannot walk alone. Brothers and sisters, we cannot walk alone. In the struggle for justice and for equality, we cannot walk alone. In the struggle for opportunity and justice, we cannot walk alone. In the struggle to heal this nation and repair the world, we cannot walk alone. So I ask you to walk with me and march with me and join your voices with mine, and together we will sing the song that tears down the walls that divide us and lift up an America that is truly indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

May God bless the memory of the great pastor of this church.

And may God bless the United States of America.

Thank you. Thank you.