

For those still yearning for a woman president

Nicole Sotelo | Jan. 22, 2009



I was part of the 54 percent of

Catholics in this country who voted for Barack Obama and this week I rejoice in the inauguration of our new president. However, I must be honest: I was an early Hillary Clinton supporter.

I felt my faith called me to be. Compared with Obama, Clinton's policies on health care and gay rights were slightly more expansive and seemed closer to the gospel values that call us to share our tables with those on the margins. I'll admit, it helped that she was a woman, too. With 88 long years spanning the distance of history since women won the right to vote, my heart quickened at the vision of a woman president.

Despite this, I understand why she lost. Political analysts have ground the reasons between their teeth and picked out a number of factors that contributed to her loss in the primaries. For me, the reason Hillary Clinton lost lies in the crucible of this Sunday's gospel.

This Sunday, Catholics heard the story of Samuel, a young man seeking to serve God's people. In night's darkness, God calls Samuel who was sleeping in the temple. God calls three times. Instead of answering God, Samuel answers to Eli, the elder under whom he was ministering. Samuel presents himself to Eli saying "Here I am. You called me." But Eli responds with "I did not call you" and "Go back to sleep."

I believe Hillary Clinton was a little like Samuel. She crafted a presidential campaign that answered to the "old guard," like Eli. She and her advisors modeled her campaign on the symbols and rhetoric of the old rules. These rules read that you need to conjure memories of hunting ducks and dodging sniper fire in Bosnia. You must present yourself as servant to the old masters who desire military prowess and readiness to gun down terrorists. You must cast half-truth shadows on your opponent's ability to lead, rather than leading yourself.

Clinton could not hear the voice in this night of our nation's history that was calling her to serve with a broader vision. The voice yearned for truth-telling politicians who would not hide behind weapons of mass destruction. The new voice yearned for politicians who would present themselves authentically, rather than clothe themselves in military garb under a "Mission Accomplished" banner.

Like Samuel in Sunday's reading, Clinton kept saying "Here I am" but it was not herself she was presenting. She could not discern the new voice calling her nor could she hear and present her own voice, perhaps obscured from years of trying to fit her feminist form into old political paradigms. Instead, she listened to former advisors who, from revealed memos and meeting minutes, clearly misguided her. During her campaign I wanted to say: remember the voice that called you here. Remember the voice that called you to care for those in poverty. Remember the voice that called you to be a child advocate. Go back and listen again. Listen deeply.

Instead, this week we celebrate Obama's inauguration. His presidency, however, in no way diminishes our hopes for a woman president -- or, in the context of our church, our hopes for woman priests. Rather, his presidency enhances the possibility for both of these desires. He stands as a reminder that we must no longer respond solely to the paradigms and calls of the hierarchy of politics or religious polity. Instead, we must dare to listen deeply to the true voice or voices that call us into leadership. We need the courage to respond authentically with the fullness of "Here I am," with the fullness of who we are as women.

At the end of Sunday's story, Eli finally proclaims that what Samuel is hearing is a call from God, not a call from the temple elder. Samuel returns to the temple and upon hearing God's voice for the fourth time in this long night, rises and responds to the One who has called him. For those of us still yearning for a woman president or a woman priest, let us pray that in the coming years we will continue to have the courage to listen deeply and respond, not to the old models of priesthood or politician, but to the true voice that calls us to a broader vision of leadership. May we respond to our call in the presence of God and God's people and say, authentically and without shame, "Here I am."

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