

# “The Age of Reason”

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Mr. John H. Logie, Sr.



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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “The Age Of Reason”

## READING

And what was true of the continent was true of the Republic we created. Because our fore-fathers were able to conceive a freeman’s government, they were able to create it. Because those who lived before us in this nation were able to imagine a new thing, a thing unheard of in the world before, a thing the skeptical and tired men who did not trust in dreams had not been able to imagine, they erected on this continent the first free nation – the first society in which mankind was to be free at last.

The courage of the Declaration of Independence is the courage of the act of the imagination. Jefferson’s document is not a call to revolution only. Jefferson’s document is an image of a life, a plan of life, a dream – indeed a dream. And yet there were men as careful of their own respect, as hard-headed, as practical, as eager to be thought so, as any now in public life, who signed that Declaration for the world to look at.

The truth is that the tradition of imagination is behind us as behind no people in the history of the world. But our right to live as we imagine men should live is not a right drawn from tradition only. There are nations of the earth in which the act of the imagination would be an act in the imagination only – an action of escape. But not with us.

We have the tools and the skill and the intelligence to take our cities apart and to put them together, to lead our roads and rivers where we please to lead them, to build our houses where we want our houses, to brighten the air, to clean the wind, to live as men in this Republic, free men, should be living. We have the power and the courage and the resources of good-will and decency and common understanding – to enable us to live, not in this continent alone but in the world, as citizens in common of the world with many others.

*“The Unimagined America,” by Archibald MacLeish, 1967*

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## SERMON

This is indeed a day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice in it and be glad, and let us count our many blessings. Let us be grateful for the capacity to see, feel, hear, and understand. Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life. Let us be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

I am very grateful to be here with you today, and want to thank Fred and Nurya and Bunny for helping me with this opportunity to once again speak Duncan’s wonderful words. Susie and I joined this church more than 35 years ago because of his presence and the way what he said made us feel comfortable about our own religious

views and our place in this church's fellowship. But he often challenged us.

Today is also Guy Fawkes Day. Back in 1605, thirteen young men planned to blow up the houses of Parliament. They developed a plan and got hold of 36 barrels of gunpowder—that's why it's known as the Gunpowder Plot—and were able to store them in the cellar just under the House of Lords. But King James I got wind of it and when the cellar was successfully stormed, there was Guy Fawkes, who was caught, tortured, and executed. If, by the end of this talk, I get named a "Potential Enemy Combatant," I am hoping not to suffer the same fate.

We call this institution a "liberal church." But for decades now, there have been forces at work in this country determined to redefine this word to mean someone who is soft in his policies abroad or unconcerned with the taxpayers' dollar, and worse. What I believe to be much more accurate is a statement made by John F. Kennedy on the campaign trail in 1960, when he said:

But if by a 'Liberal' they mean someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people—their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights and their civil liberties, someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad—if that is what they mean by liberal, then I am proud to say that I'm a liberal.

This church has never shied away from controversy. As Fred mentioned last week, Clarence Darrow, having defended Scopes in the famous monkey trial and Leopold and Loeb in the terrible murder trial, came here to debate Alfred Wesley Wishart. Those were the days of formal debates, so there was a stated Resolution: "There is a God in the universe." Wishart took the affirmative and Darrow took the negative. The entire text of their marvelous jousting and repartee is captured fully in the Michigan Room at the Ryerson Library across the street. It was the topic of a sermon of mine here many years ago.

Nor have we backed away from leadership in this city when we have felt the government is on the wrong track.

When I won my third term in the Mayor's office, and assuming that I would be able to complete it, I asked City Historian Gordon Olson if he could figure out on what day I would pass George Welch to become our longest-serving mayor. Happily he reported it would take place on St. Patrick's Day 2003, nine months before the end of my term. But here is the rest of the story. I knew that George Welch had resigned from the mayor's job while heading the U.S. Conference of Mayors' annual meeting as its president in early 1949. While he was over in Rome presiding, Duncan Littlefair and Dorothy Leonard Judd of this church, and others including Paul Goebel, held a rally around the corner in Veteran's Park, because they felt that Mayor Welch had overstepped his powers and was insensitive to the needs of the people, and they prepared to circulate petitions to vote him out of office. One of his staff in City Hall on terror. Presidents Andrew Johnson and William Clinton were both impeached for significantly less serious matters, and therefore stayed in office.

Isn't it obvious that we are being led by "Wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law?" There is only one remedy: Impeachment of President Bush. Very few people fully understand that Impeachment is a special process to inquire and decide whether the President has violated the law enough to be removed from office. The House of Representatives approves one or more Articles of Impeachment. The Articles are like an indictment. The trial is in the Senate, with the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court presiding. The Senate should impeach the President if it finds that he has committed one or more high crimes or misdemeanors. If impeached, he is removed from office. No criminal trial, no jail time, simply separated from the job, and any opportunity to continue his wrongdoings.

NOW is the time to raise the issue.

We need a lot of people, like yourself, with seniority, honor, and character, to focus this November's elections on the only question with any real meaning for the future of our country. On November 7th all 435 seats in the House of Representatives are up for grabs, as are roughly a third of the Senate. EVERY candidate from either party for a House seat should be asked: "If the House Judiciary Committee votes out one or more Articles of Impeachment, will you vote AYE when it comes to the floor?" And every Senate candidate should be asked: "If you determine, after hearing the evidence at trial, that this President has committed "High Crimes and Misdemeanors", will you vote AYE to impeach him?"

There really is no other issue of equal importance before us.

I want to close with a piece of Justice Louis D Brandeis's opinion in *Olmstead vs. United States* (1928) on government accountability:

"Decency, security, and liberty alike demand that government officials shall be subjected to the same rules of conduct that are commands to the citizen. In a government of laws, existence of the government will be imperiled if it fails to observe the law scrupulously. Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by its example. Crime is contagious. If the government becomes a law breaker, it breeds contempt for law; it invites everyman to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy. To declare that, in the administrations of law, the end justifies the means would bring terrible retribution. Against that pernicious doctrine this court should resolutely set its face." When President Bush is lined up alongside this time-honored standard, he doesn't even begin to measure up, and should be ordered to leave.

John H. Logie, Sr.  
Mayor of Grand Rapids, MI 1991-2003

Will that make any difference? I don't know. But often you have to stick up for a principle and say what needs to be said. Move out of your comfort zone.

In last week's church bulletin, a portion of Margaret Meade's famous quotation is printed: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." The punch line after that was, "Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Serious as these topics are, let's not lose our sense of humor. H.L. Mencken was an interesting character. Born in 1880, he died 50 years ago in 1956. During the Scopes Monkey Trial, he had a wonderful time as a writer for the Baltimore Sun, poking ridicule at Williams Jennings Bryan, prosecutor of the case, who earlier had run for the President of the United States, about his zealous, narrow, fundamentalist beliefs. As a newspaper man, both writer and editor, he was once called the 20th Century's Ambrose Bierce. Here is his thought for today: "As democracy is perfected, the Office of the President represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. On some sent him a telegram warning that some citizens were mounting a petition drive against him. Welch fired back, "Don't worry, they'll never get the signatures." A day later, his helper in City Hall sent him another one saying, "They've got the signatures." He then sent a short one: "I resign." Things like that have continued to happen here.

Now our church is being asked to define a central role in this community to serve with joy, by interacting with other citizens. While this activity must become an organized group effort, I believe it starts with individual decisions about making a commitment to help make something happen. But perhaps it is something outside your comfort zone, or perhaps you are worried about negative feedback. That's the time to remember that Robert Browning said "A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?" Back around 1970, a little woman here in Grand Rapids, who still likes to refer to herself as "just a housewife," and who had been opposing the war in Vietnam in various ways, decided that she wasn't doing enough. So she organized and helped others by creating signs that they could hold while standing for 30 minutes on the steps of City Hall on Ottawa Avenue, mid-day every Thursday, in a silent protest against the Vietnam War. Every Thursday—summer, winter, fall, and spring—for three years. Dr. Walter Bergman in his wheelchair, other members of Fountain Street Church, some of whom are still here, and often her little son standing silently holding a placard that looked like a tombstone, reading, "Not One More Son," made this effort. They were called communists, or worse, but they persevered. I am glad Susie gave me permission to tell you that story. In this town, one person can sometimes make a big difference.

Fred recently said that he thinks education is the keystone of the liberal church, and asked us to consider whether or not we should make it our core mission. I want to suggest a "what if?" But to do so, I need to tell you about my late friend Verne Barry. Verne was a successful businessman in New York City. The pressures of his job and life, as for so many people, made him into an alcoholic. A few years later, he was living on the South side of Grand Rapids, living on the streets, sometimes sleeping on them, sometimes passed out. He found a spiritual home in a nearby church and got his life back together. He began an organization called Faith Incorporated. Its primary goal was to take men like him off the street, who were there by addiction or criminal record or, often, total illiteracy, and try to turn them into productive citizens. He succeeded. I appointed him to the Downtown Development Authority, and he became its chairman. I remember him telling me one story that worked to teach me how basic the problems are. I had a father, in fact a professional man, as a role model, getting up every day, going to work, coming home at night, so it became

something I took for granted. For many of these people, they never had that. They had no idea that that is what grown-up men did. So Verne had to teach them. What if this church were to make a commitment to try to help educate such men? What if we were to partner with the downtown shelters where many of them spend nights? We need to galvanize and organize ourselves into and around the kind of commitment we would like to make to this community. We all need to be engaged in that process. I'm sure there are even better ideas within this congregation.

The reality is that once you have made yourself do something that is outside your comfort zone, the next time it gets easier and then even more easier. That certainly has been true in my case.

Two days from now, this entire country will go to the polls to elect senators and congressmen, governors and attorneys general, and secretaries of state, plus state and county officials. On September 8th, 2006, the Senate Intelligence Committee's Phase II Report began to be publicly released. One of the first two reports released that day looked at what had been learned after the attack on Iraq about the accuracy of pre-war intelligence regarding links between Saddam Hussein and al Qa'ida. At the same time, our senior senator, Carl Levin, released a seven-and-a-half page statement making public his comments about the report itself. On September 14th, I sent him the following e-mail:

Good Morning Carl, Now in my 38th year of private law practice, including 12 years as Mayor of Grand Rapids, I have read with both interest and dismay the full text of your remarks. In 1866, writing the opinion for the Supreme Court's decision in Ex Parte Milligan, Justice David Davis wrote:

The nation has "no right to expect that it will always have wise and humane rulers, sincerely attached to the principles of the Constitution. Wicked men, ambitious of power, with hatred of liberty and contempt of law, may fill the place once occupied by Washington and Lincoln."

This recent "final" disclosure of the deliberate perfidy and treachery by the President and Vice President regarding a connection between Osama and Saddam and the suborning of CIA Director Tenet, are lies more egregious than even Richard Nixon's cover-ups. Not in the least because of the now thousands of American lives lost, and the tenfold loss of the people of Iraq.

But these latest revelations, must share space with numerous other assaults on our laws, e.g., Lying about WMDs, Lying about uranium from Niger, Deliberately disregarding laws passed by Congress and the Geneva Convention, through torture and secret detainee camps outside the United States, and much more. Indeed, this President has said, in direct violation of established statutes, and decisions of our Supreme Court, that he alone can justify such actions by including them in his war great and glorious day, the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White

House will be adorned by a downright moron." Now to be clear, I'm not saying that. Mr. Mencken is. I'll leave it to you to decide whether or not the shoe fits.

On a better note, Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes Senior, whose son sat on the United States Supreme Court, gave us this advice:

I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving. To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it. But we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.

We will help create an age of reason, if we do remember our past, and build a future on its teachings.

One of my more recently acquired maxims is: "I can do that." So can we all. Let's get on with it, and amen.