

Obama evokes Niebuhr, black church

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

Expecting a speech, Americans instead heard a sermon. Drawing on scripture, theology and the rising rhythms of black preaching, President Obama was more pastor than politician at a memorial service in Tucson for the victims of the January 8 shooting in that Arizona city.

It was an aspect of Obama that galvanized his 2008 campaign but had scarcely emerged since he entered the White House, according to some observers.

"I was glad to see it back," said Martha Simmons, coeditor of *Preaching with Sacred Fire*, an anthology of African-American sermons. "I had missed that in his speeches over the last two years." There are a lot of good speakers in politics, she said. "But it's not the same as being able to hit that soul area. If you can tap into that, you tap into something powerful and important."

As with past presidents confronted by tragedy, Obama's pastoral side surfaced at a moment of national grief, when the commander in chief is called upon to comfort the afflicted and make sense of the senseless.

Obama both embodied and gently resisted that role on January 12. In the wake of the shootings four days earlier, partisans on the left and right sharply debated whether inflammatory political rhetoric inspired accused gunman Jared Lee Loughner to kill six people and wound more than a dozen more, including Rep. Gabrielle Giffords (D., Ariz.).

Wanton evil defies easy explanation, Obama said. "Scripture tells us that there is evil in the world, and that terrible things happen for reasons that defy human

understanding. In the words of Job, 'When I looked for light, then came darkness.' Bad things happen, and we have to guard against simple explanations in the aftermath."

Instead, Obama called on Americans to be more humble, "expand our moral imaginations" and "sharpen our instincts for empathy."

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Casey, an ethicist at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, said Obama's speech echoed the tenets of 20th-century Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who has been a moral touchstone for this president. For Niebuhr, pride and self-righteousness were cardinal sins, and evil an ever-present mystery. "Obama called for humility, the antidote to pride and self-righteousness," Casey said. "It was a way of addressing the polarization and vitriol by pointing the finger at everyone."

Again

drawing on the Hebrew Bible, Obama also quoted from Psalm 46, implicitly comparing Tucson to scripture's city of God. "God is within her, she will not fall," Obama recited from the psalm. "God will help her at the break of day."

Jacques Berlinerblau, author of *Thumpin'*

It, a study of how modern presidents have used the Bible, said the Psalms have been a popular choice for presidential rhetoric. "You cannot lose with the Psalms," he said.

Obama's chosen passage offered comfort to a traumatized city and echoed Ronald Reagan's evocation of America as a divinely favored "shining city upon a hill." "Obama is trying to get something across about a city resurrecting itself," said Berlinerblau, a professor at Georgetown University.

In its

contours and cadences, Obama's address drew on traditions of black preaching rarely if ever seen in presidential speeches, said Simmons, who directs an online African-American lectionary project. "You can tell this man has spent time in African-American churches, no doubt about that," she said.

For example, Obama employed call-and-response, repeating the phrase "Gabby opened her eyes" three times as the audience cheered the good news about Giffords. Noting the president's use of repetition, Simmons said: "I know where that came from. I hear that every Sunday."

After honoring the victims and extolling the bystanders who helped prevent further killings, Obama moved toward his speech's moral message. "We call that the close, or the celebration," Simmons said. "It's the higher point that people can take with them when they leave church."

Often a preacher will use a biblical parable or a psalm to deliver the take-home message, but Obama used the memory of Christina Taylor Green, an innocent and energetic nine-year-old killed in the attack.

"If there are rain puddles in heaven," Obama said, "Christina is jumping in them today. And here on this earth—here on this earth, we place our hands over our hearts, and we commit ourselves as Americans to forging a country that is forever worthy of her gentle, happy spirit." —RNS