

Good news: The vision Jesus offers

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

It's the day after the election, and I am clicking around on one of the many interactive maps of the nation available on the Internet. I've found one that shows, in reds and blues, how every single county in the nation voted. You click on a state and the data for each county appear, down to the very last vote.

Although Barack Obama has won the election decisively, my home state, North Carolina, is still too close to call. I move my cursor around the eastern part of the state, looking for my hometown.

Thirty-eight years ago, when I was going into the second grade, the courts ordered my town to get serious about integrating the schools. Like many southern towns, mine had for years resisted the demands of *Brown v. Board of Education* with a "school choice" plan. Now faced with a court order, my town refused to open the schools. Choosing no school for anyone over integrated classrooms, the town kept the schools closed for months.

Finally I find my home county, and the voting statistics pop up on my screen: Obama carried it by a margin of nearly 4 percent.

I move the mouse north and west, searching for the county about 90 miles from my hometown where my family used to visit a small Trappist monastery. For years a billboard stood at the county line, proclaiming "The Ku Klux Klan Welcomes You." I roll the mouse over a red county, but that's not it. I keep rolling, and eventually I find it. A blue county. Obama carried it by a margin of 7 percent.

All across the country, people are telling stories like these, stories of change you can see and even quantify. The big story of the change this election represents is made up of countless smaller stories: stories of struggle and sacrifice, stories of courage, stories of communities gradually choosing a new narrative in which to live.

This is not to say that every vote for Obama or McCain had only one meaning, or that racism has suddenly been eradicated in the United States, or that we have finished with the work of coming to terms with the legacy of racism in our nation and

in our lives.

But the stories of change that people are sharing around the country make stunningly evident the fact that change is possible. In the light of this election, we can see once more how indispensable to the good of this nation the struggle for civil rights has been and continues to be. We can feel how breathtaking it is when changes wrought in hiddenness come suddenly into view. As anyone who has experienced depression knows, it is debilitating to believe that change is not possible, that things will go on as they are. When change is made startlingly visible, it feels—as the hopeful faces of the crowd in Chicago’s Grant Park communicated on election night—like resurrection.

My pastor, Dan Smith, recently interviewed Harvard professor and pastor Peter Gomes for the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. He asked Gomes for his definition of the good news, and Gomes did not hesitate in his reply. “You don’t have to be as you are,” he said.

We don’t have to be as we are. This is good news indeed. We can change, and we can keep changing. We are not trapped in our histories or our fears. We can set ourselves, and our communities, on a new course. Even fancy maps and exit polls are not the last word to be said about us. “What we will be,” the first letter of John reminds us, “has not yet been revealed.” We can be born again and again and again.

Gomes goes on to say, though, that this good news is not only liberating, it is also unnerving, destabilizing, even frightening. “We can’t rely,” he says, “on things always being the way they are.”

As he moved among the people of his time and place, Jesus never seemed to tire of inviting people to change. To the ruler who sought his counsel, Jesus said, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” To the woman he saved from being stoned to death, he said, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” To the fishermen he met on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, he said, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.”

Jesus believes that human beings are capable of radical change; that in itself is good news. Jesus asks more of us than any political leader, no matter how wise and sincere, would ever dare. Even when we do not rise to his invitation, he never stops

offering it. Our progress toward the vision he offers may be slow and halting. But at moments like these, when together we regard with awe a change that no one can deny, we catch a glimpse of the people we might become.