

# Friends in High Places

One of the joys of living in New York City is to be able to visit great historic churches and participate in their worship services.

One Sunday in May 2000 I attended the Riverside Church, famous for the preaching of Harry Emerson Fosdick. The church was led until recently by Dr. James Forbes.

As a precaution, I called during the week to make certain Forbes would preach that Sunday. The *New York Times* church advertisements announced the sermon topic: "Having Friends In High Places."

Arriving early at the church, I met a crowd of reporters and photographers waiting. I inquired about the commotion and they told me that Hillary Clinton would be visiting the church that morning.

The hour arrived for the beginning of the service. Everybody looked to the back of the sanctuary in anticipation.

At the appointed time, the organ played the procession anthem. Heading the entourage was Dr. Forbes in his minister's robe escorting Mrs. Clinton. She was holding his arm, like in a wedding ceremony.

I had an aisle position got a good look at the procession. Forbes escorted the former first lady to the podium and sat beside her behind the choir.

The order of service was followed. When the time of introductions came, Dr. Forbes introduced Mrs. Clinton to speak. The senator presented a 20-minute social-action political speech, sprinkled with some prophetic quotations from Micah and Isaiah.

Just as in any political rally, Mrs. Clinton was applauded at the appropriate pauses. Her speech was politically and religiously correct for the occasion. We all knew it was a campaign speech. She was elected twice as U.S. senator from New York and now aspired to become the first female president in November 2008.

The best part of the experience came when Forbes spoke. To be true to his role as a preacher and minister of the church, he knew that he could not take another 20

minutes of the congregation's time to preach the sermon he had prepared and announced for that Sunday.

To demonstrate his honesty as a preacher of the gospel, he clarified for the congregation what had happened during the week. He said he had to provide the title of the sermon for publicity at the *New York Times* on the Wednesday. On Thursday, the Clinton campaign organization called him to ask if she could speak to the congregation. He agreed.

He then gave a summary of what he had proposed to preach. The title of the sermon, "Having Friends In High Places," was taken from the Transfiguration episode, in which Jesus is found in the company of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.

He said that if anyone interpreted Mrs. Clinton's visit to Riverside as a fulfillment of the title of the sermon, it was purely coincidental. He was willing and ready to show to anyone interested the notes he had made for the delivery of the sermon.

For me it was one-of-a-kind moment. It was one incident in the history of New York City, the history of Riverside Church and in my personal history, when I could say: "I was there. I saw and heard it."

As a teacher and occasional preacher, I will also think about it the next time I preach about the Transfiguration scene in the Gospels.

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