

Opinion: Los Angeles for president

By Joe Mathews

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti is flirting with a presidential bid. Here is the announcement speech he should give.

America, I am running to restore a sense of decency, kindness, propriety, community, morality, and—of course—a fear of God.



Joe Mathews

I can lead this righteous crusade for one reason:

I come from Los Angeles.

I hear you laughing. I know you think my candidacy is a joke. I'm a mayor, not a governor (though my city has more people than 22 states). And I know people love to hate L.A.—a modern Sodom, fake, superficial, cynical.

Now, L.A. can be all of those things. (On the cynicism charge, we plead guilty to greenlighting 10 “The Fast and the Furious” films.)

But L.A. also represents something that America needs most desperately right now. All of today's American crises—around Trump, democracy, climate, economy, immigration—are really one

larger crisis of faith.

And Los Angeles is the American capital of faith.

You are dubious and ask: Aren't we just a bunch of godless liberals? Liberal, sure. But godless? Hell, no.

For a century, Southern California has been our country's Jerusalem, a cradle of religions. We birthed Pentecostalism during the Azusa Street Revival, and established the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. The 1940 Works Progress Administration's guide to L.A. reported: "The multiplicity and diversity of faiths that flourish in the aptly named City of Angels probably cannot be duplicated in any other city on earth."

After World War II, Southern California was the site of Billy Graham's first great evangelistic crusade, and pioneered the American megachurch, with the Crystal Cathedral and Calvary Chapel, and more recently Rick Warren's Saddleback Church. Today, we're home to innovative big churches like Oasis and Mosaic, and major houses of worships of every significant world religion.

Why all this fervor? Because, even though Angelenos might look like life's winners, with our pretty faces and whitened teeth, our region is actually the world's biggest collection of losers. We are people, or descendants of people, who lost at politics, commerce, love, family, or religion someplace else. My own diverse ancestry—I'm Jewish, Italian, and Mexican—is really just different flavors of loss.

We would never have made it through terrible times without faith. Heck, the traffic is so bad that we can't make it to work without murmuring "Hail Marys" or "Allāhu akbar!"

There are three strong L.A. faiths—a welcoming spirit, a can-do spirit, and a fear of God—that have grown weak in the U.S. Here's a religious text for each.

"The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Leviticus 19:33

Through riots, serial killers, and Proposition 13, L.A. has retained its first faith—a welcoming spirit. We love to see people come here from elsewhere. And we have learned to appreciate immigrants, because they make our neighborhoods safer, buy our homes when we retire or die, invent new things, and join our families. When I see shrinking Midwestern towns, my first instinct as an Angeleno is to say, "You folks could sure use more immigration."

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13

I don't often quote St. Paul, but that's one famous expression of the can-do spirit. And our city does. We have constructed a new transit system, reduced crime, revived South L.A., rebuilt schools, transformed downtown, and won the Olympics. If L.A. can do all this, there's no earthly or divine reason that the U.S. can't tackle its big problems.

"His judgment cometh, and that right soon."

OK, that's from "The Shawshank Redemption," not the Torah. But it's true: We Angelenos fear God's destructive power.

We know that we are one great fire, one mudslide, one earthquake away from the end. And we take apocalyptic threats seriously. So should our country. Stop denying climate change—and start fighting it.

I know we elect people, not spirits, as presidents. I have as many faults as the ground beneath L.A. Angelenos will tell you that I'm way too cautious, and afraid of conflict. They may have a point. But when you look at President Trump, caution and risk aversion don't sound so bad, do they?

Still, I'm not cautious about expressing my city's faith in the future. As Aimee Semple McPherson once preached in Echo Park: "With God, I can do all things! But with God and you, and the people who you can interest, by the grace of God, we're gonna cover the world!"

My fellow Americans, let's get back to that spirit! Let's get this country back to God! And let's get this country back to Los Angeles!

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