

Obama hosts Easter prayer breakfast with meditation on suffering

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) President Obama hosted his third annual Easter prayer breakfast at the White House on Wednesday (April 4), saying that Jesus's suffering and sacrifice during Holy Week puts the travails of his own life in perspective.

His five-minute mini-sermon provoked sympathetic laughter from the audience of about 150 clergy and other guests when he talked of the burdens of the presidency.

"In this world you will have trouble," Obama said, quoting Jesus from the Gospel of John. "I heard an amen."

Obama said Jesus's triumph over his own pain is what helps himself and others struggle with their own burdens, a line that earned him a few shout-outs of "right" and "uh huh."

"It's only because he endured unimaginable pain that wracked his body and bore the sins of the world that burdened his soul that we are able to proclaim "He is Risen," said Obama, who grew up in a secular home but joined a United Church of Christ congregation in Chicago as an adult.

Though the president is Christian, surveys have repeatedly shown that as many as one in five Americans believe he is Muslim. His Easter prayer breakfasts have served as a platform for the president to wax theological in familiar surroundings where he appears most comfortable.

Among the guests were Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl; civil rights leader Rev. Al Sharpton; Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter, a spiritual adviser to Obama; Archbishop Demitrios of the Greek Orthodox Church; the Rev. Julius Scruggs, president of the National Baptist Convention and Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Christian singer Sara Groves sang "He's Always Been Faithful To Me" and Rev. Cynthia Hale of Ray of Hope Christian Church offered the opening prayer.

One guest stood out in his gray hoodie, presumably a sign of solidarity for the family of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager whose death last month at the hands of a neighborhood watch volunteer has been called an act of racism.

Vice President Joe Biden, a Catholic, joked about his "12 years with the nuns" in Catholic school and spoke about Easter as a time of forgiveness, and an opportunity to renew commitments to bettering the world. "Without forgiveness there is very little hope," he said.