

“The Faith of Abraham Lincoln”  
Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address  
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church  
February 20, 2022

This year is the centennial or hundredth anniversary of the unveiling and dedication of the Lincoln Memorial. On a hot, cloudless spring afternoon on May 30, 1922, nearly 50,000 people assembled for the ceremony. Modeled after a Greek temple, the beautiful edifice was constructed with Colorado Yule marble and Indiana limestone with an immense Olympian-like statue of a tired Abraham Lincoln in a Roman-like chair. The distinguished audience included President Warren G. Harding, his cabinet secretaries, the justices of the Supreme Court, and the members of the memorial commission. Never was a President more worthy of such an edifice to be remembered by than Abraham Lincoln. Every few years or so, a new "Best Presidents" list is released by a group of prominent historians and the field is revised as their legacies are reassessed. However, what DOESN'T change is Lincoln's name at the TOP of those lists where he is CONSISTENTLY ranked as America's GREATEST President. In fact, thirteen years ago this week, *Newsweek* magazine celebrated the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth by asking a number of leading scholars whom they considered to be more important to history- Lincoln or Charles Darwin, a man who interestingly enough was born on the same day of the same year as our 16<sup>th</sup> President- February 12th, 1809. To my surprise, they concluded that LINCOLN was.

Today, interest in “Honest Abe” has never been greater. It’s said that more books have been written about Lincoln than any other historical figure with the exception of Jesus Christ- now going on 20,000 by common estimate. One can ALSO point to the proliferation of movies and documentaries year after year. This evening, the History Channel is debuting the first of a three-part series on what is being billed as the definitive biography on Lincoln. It wasn’t that long ago that the critically acclaimed historical drama “Lincoln,” produced and directed by Steven Spielberg and starring Daniel Day-Lewis as the 16<sup>th</sup> President, became a major hit and even won several major Academy Awards, while such quirky films as “Abraham Lincoln vs. Zombies” and “Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter” have ALSO proven to be popular with the masses. To everyone’s surprise, Lincoln has become his own film franchise in much the same way James Bond and Indiana Jones have.

By now, you probably know that Lincoln holds a special place in my heart- the one person in all of American history I’d most love to have dinner with if given the opportunity. Several times now, I’ve toured Fords Theater where Lincoln was shot, as well as visited the room where he eventually died, and each time, I found the experience to be just AS emotional. When I was twelve years old, I was already enthralled by him. On the evening of April 14, 1965, what kept going through my mind as I lay in bed was how Lincoln had been shot exactly 100 years ago that night by John Wilkes Booth. And then a few summers back, a long-standing dream was fulfilled when Rose and I traveled to Springfield, Illinois to explore the town that Lincoln spent so many years in. We visited the Old State Capitol building where he served and later lay in state, walked through the rooms where he and his partner–William Herndon–had their law office, toured the home he and his family lived in for seventeen years before leaving for

Washington, and of course took in the new Lincoln Presidential Center- a state of the art museum with holographic figures and lots of Lincoln memorabilia on display. But the HIGH POINT of the trip was the visit to his tomb at the local cemetery. The closest I have ever had to a SIMILAR experience was many years earlier, when I visited the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem where many speculate Christ was laid following his crucifixion.

This week, ANOTHER biography on him hit the bookshelves- this one entitled *Lincoln And The Fight For Peace* by CNN political analyst John Avalon. The author focuses specifically on the President's Second Inaugural Address arguing that it was originally intended to provide a roadmap for peace among the warring political parties of his time, and suggesting it could do the same for US, TODAY, within our OWN badly divided nation. In many ways, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address comes as close to scripture as any piece of writing ever has. It is saturated through and through with the language and thought of the Bible- for instance, God is mentioned six times in one paragraph alone. Yet Lincoln was never a Christian in the conventional sense, that is, as you and I may think of ourselves. He was never baptized, was never a member of any church, rarely, if ever, talked about Jesus Christ, and held most Christian denominations with all their creeds and dogmas with disdain. William Herndon, his old law partner, swore he was an atheist while others said he was just a healthy skeptic.

Lincoln, however, often said OTHERWISE. He had great respect for the Bible, one of the few books his parents possessed. He memorized large portions of it and frequently consulted it in later years as he struggled with the "mere quiet power" of God. In remarks before the Baltimore Synod of the Presbyterian Church on October 24, 1863, the President said, "I sincerely wish that I was a more devoted man than I am. Sometimes in my difficulties I have been driven to the last resort to say God is still my only hope. It is still all the world to me." Although he frequently attended the same Presbyterian churches in Springfield and in Washington that his wife was a member of, he is reported to have said:

*I have never united myself to any church, because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their articles of belief and confessions of faith. When any church will inscribe over its altars as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both law and gospel, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself," that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.*

There seems to be little doubt that Lincoln WAS a believer. What IS important to understand is how his speeches and even his LIFE became MORE spiritual as time went on. In his FIRST Inaugural Address, in March of 1861, Lincoln presented a fairly conventional view of God and his divine role in the affairs of the nation. He said that with the prospect of civil war only a week away, the "ultimate justice of the people" would prevail for in America there was no "better, or equal, hope in the world." He stated that God was with them for they were a blessed and favored nation, and by relying upon their intelligence, their patriotism, and their faith, God could be trusted to lead them through this national crisis. His concept of God was squarely rooted in a "civil religion," that is, a religion where, instead rooted in one's personal faith, God is

invoked to help support and promote a nation's cause.

However, as he dealt with the deaths of his two sons and the pressure of the Presidency amid the Civil War, his understanding of how God works in the affairs of the world began to shift. Such events drove him to a DEEPER contemplation of God and of God's will. While ministers on both sides of the conflict invoked the name of Jehovah to justify their own cause, Lincoln eventually rejected the idea of turning God into some kind of a tribal deity and instead discovered great mystery insofar as the will of God was concerned. Rather than using God as some kind of religious prop to galvanize popular support and promise victory, he began to see that divine Providence worked its will through "human tragedy." In the second year of the war, precisely when the prospects of victory for the North never seemed dimmer, he wrote the following "Meditation on the Divine Will":

*The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.*

Instead of a domesticated deity, a kind of "house god" who is clearly on the side of America and the Union forces, he began to see God as the ruler of ALL nations, that God was never at the beck and call of any one people but rather the nation at GOD'S. As the conflict intensified and the casualty numbers grew, his resolve on this matter deepened, ultimately achieving its clearest expression in his Second Inaugural when he declared: "Both [North and South] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces [i.e. slavery]; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." Even more to the point was his reply when a minister from the North told the President he "hoped the Lord is on our side." Responded Lincoln, "I am not at all concerned about that...But it is my constant anxiety that I and this nation should be on the LORD'S side."

What makes his Second Inaugural Address so very different from his first is that instead of appealing to God to justify this war and give them the victory because of what they perceive as the moral rightness of their cause, he now says that God CANNOT be linked to any particular side or cause. In times of war, NO ONE wins, EVERYONE is a victim, and that rather than a righteous crusade, this war may in fact be God's JUDGMENT UPON EVERYONE for their overweening pride and greed. It just may be that through this conflict, God was calling BOTH sides to account--both the North AND the South--for their sins against those human beings they had both enslaved. And yet, in spite of being the costliest war in American history with well

over 600,000 men killed--more than all the victims of all the wars from the Revolutionary War up to the present combined--God could not be faulted; God would remain true and righteous all the same. The ways of God must ultimately remain inscrutable, a great mystery to us all. Thus he could say as he approached the conclusion of his Second Address:

*Fondly do we hope--ferently do we pray--that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as we said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*

He ended his address with one of the greatest lines ever delivered:

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

Thus Lincoln concludes his address with an appeal for everyone to remain humble before this great mystery and to resolve to do what is right and best for the nation. Now that the war is over, it is time for healing, a time to bring all sides together. It is NOT a time for gloating or punishing or for the victors to demand reparations from the vanquished as there have been no winners- EVERYONE has lost! Rather, it is time to concentrate on caring for all those VICTIMIZED by this conflict- the wives who have lost husbands, the children who have lost fathers, the parents who have lost sons, and to work towards creating a truly LASTING peace so that the nation would never again have to face such a terrible conflict- EVER!

NOW can you see why his Second Inaugural has been called "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," perhaps the greatest Christian pronouncement outside of the Bible. Of course, its message is as relevant for us TODAY as it was for Lincoln and those fighting on the battlefields of Gettysburg and Shiloh over a hundred and fifty years ago. Plain and simple, war is the result of human sin- of our own hypocrisy, treachery, greed, and pride. War becomes humanity's worst judgment upon itself, and in the case of the Civil War, it reflected God's unhappiness with BOTH sides of the conflict- the NORTH as well as the SOUTH. God does not support one nation or one army over any other, but rather, God supports PEOPLE, INDIVIDUALS, HUMAN BEINGS. God cares for all the VICTIMS of war- for those who have lost limbs, for those who cry out at night from their hospital beds, for those who tremble in foxholes, for those who are lonely for their loved ones. God cares for those widowed wives, for all children left fatherless, for those families left homeless and bereft of their possessions. God was NEVER pro-Union nor was the Lord EVER pro-Confederate.

I find it ASTOUNDING that someone who held so little reverence for the church along with her dogmas and creeds could arrive at such a profound understanding of suffering and the will of God, while at the SAME time, so many supposedly "God-fearing Christians" who faithfully attended services each Sunday could view that war as a "righteous cause" and see slavery as God's will for our nation. EVEN TODAY, I feel it must grieve God when he hears

so many “Christians” declare how we live in a “Christian nation” and claim that AS “God’s people” we can do no wrong, or that God only hears the prayers of Christians and not of Jews or Muslims or persons of any OTHER faith as a former head of the Southern Baptist Convention once asserted. The fact is that God is NOT an American, an Iraqi or and Afghani, but neither is God a Christian, a Jew, OR a Muslim. God takes NO sides because on all sides God can see nothing but hatred and pride and self-righteousness- the consequence of human sin. Rather, God is on the side of the one who ACKNOWLEDGES him, the one who calls out to God for help, the one who looks to God for comfort- that is the ONLY side God ever takes!

Today, we no longer have American troops in Iraq or Afghanistan- in what had become the longest war in U.S. history. After two decades, we finally grew tired of investing American blood and trillions of our dollars into both conflicts with little to show for it. However, in light of the imminent possibility that Ukraine may be invaded by Russian forces, we have to be REAL and face the fact that such a conflict would lead to a tragedy of IMMENSE scale, that thousands, perhaps HUNDREDS of thousands of deaths may result while drawing many MORE nations into it as well. Hence, I am more convinced than EVER that God's will for us is that we PRAY: PRAY WITHOUT CEASING for a speedy and bloodless conclusion to all the threats and saber rattling that invite such combat; PRAY that EVERYONE involved in this or OTHER conflicts, whether Russian or Ukrainian, Allied or Taliban, Muslim or Christian, would eventually return to the outstretched arms of their families; PRAY for the solace and comfort of those families who DO lose loved ones; PRAY that the hearts and minds of EVERYONE involved might recognize the folly of such wars and the utter destruction it brings to so many innocent victims. But, if Lincoln was right, it is ALSO God's will that we pray for OURSELVES- PRAY that we might understand how God abhors ALL war, that it not only tears apart God’s CREATION but God’s HEART as well. It is God’s will that we be honest enough to first RECOGNIZE and REPENT of all the greed and the pride, the hypocrisy and self-righteousness in our OWN hearts that make wars possible. And it is important that we PRAY that God might continue to show mercy towards us and assist us as we struggle for greater peace in the world.

Friends, please don’t misunderstand; I’m not a pacifist and so I’m not arguing that we should never defend ourselves or go to war again. With a son who’s a lifer in the U.S. Navy, I believe in the importance and necessity of a strong defense and that there are times when we HAVE to employ our military in order to stem or stop an even GREATER evil from spreading or ultimately succeeding. For Lincoln, that meant that war was the ONLY option in order to preserve the Union, to prevent her from dissolving entirely, while for Roosevelt, our entrance into World War II was the ONLY way to defend democracy against the continuing spread of Nazism throughout Europe. However, Lincoln cautions us against baptizing war in the name of God or thinking it is EVER a “righteous cause.” As the great Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman said many years ago, "War is hell" and if, indeed, war IS hell, then God is certainly no architect or supporter of it- EVER! It DOES mean, however, that in a fallen world such as our own, war should ALWAYS be the LAST option, a FINAL resort; and that when we DO find ourselves having to fight, that we ONLY do so for the RIGHT reasons and in a RIGHT spirit, that is, “with malice toward none, with charity for all, and with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right.” Amen and amen...