

WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE

LINCOLN'S SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

LINCOLN'S SERMON ON THE MOUNT



By Dr. Ronald White

Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:1-6

1. The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.
2. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.
3. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.'
4. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.
5. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
6. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

Ezekiel 37:7-14

7. So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
8. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.
9. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'
10. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.
11. Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."
12. Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
13. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.
14. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'



INTRO TO SERMON BY RONALD WHITE

With tribute, but without apology, I am going to quote one of the greatest sermons I have read, that

describes one of the greatest speeches ever given. I cannot improve on this sermon by Dr. Ronald White, that he entitled, "Abraham Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount." You will soon see why.

Many historic references have been made in the inaugural events that we have just completed, and their real and symbolic values. This is the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth. Barack Obama's reading list prior to the election included books on Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt. This is a very literate and intentional president, and I think if you listen carefully to Dr. White's words about Lincoln, you will find a spiritual commentary on the imperatives that lie before our country and its citizens in 2009.

You already know that our new president has tried to discover himself in the context of history. Again, I fully acknowledge this as the work of Dr. Ronald White, Professor of American Religious History Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary, and not my own. I have edited to remove specific references he made when he delivered this sermon at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.

But as I make these words my own words, I find my own hopes for our country at this important point in history when a rainbow of new faces prepares to guide our nation to yet another founding and another defining moment.

TO SPEAK OF GOD IN THE PUBLIC PLACES

In enjoying the privilege of speaking about Abraham Lincoln over the years, one question seems to come again and again. The question is usually prefaced by someone saying something like this: "You'll have to admit, Dr. White, that Abraham Lincoln spoke in the 19th century to a nation that was basically Christian or Judeo-Christian, but today we live in a nation that is mostly multi-cultural or multi-religious." Then the question is always phrased something like this: **"Do you think it is still possible in the 21st century to speak about God in the public places when we celebrate our country, the meaning of our faith?"**

I suggest that Abraham Lincoln can be our guide, and that after 140 years, his words are strangely and wonderfully timeless as we attempt to answer that question.

I've inserted into your bulletin this morning the text of Lincoln's second inaugural address. I'd like you to take it in your hand almost as if you'd had a scripture text. This is an American text, and we are

going to do our best to discover its meaning together.

Lincoln's address was delivered on March 4, 1865, before a crowd of 35,000 to 40,000 people. They had come through terrible wind and rain that day to hear the president after this tumultuous war in which 620,000 died. That's as many as our previous wars combined. But if you remember that this was a tiny nation of but thirty million people, and even compare it to World War II, that greatest generation now passing away, when the nation was 130-140 million, it would really be like 2.5 million people died during the Civil War.

So as I read the letters and diaries of those coming to the inauguration, you can find a mood of celebration, jubilation and expectation, but I found something else. In these letters, I found a mood of anger.

These persons present, almost every one of whom had lost a husband, brother, son, were deeply angry at the other side, the enemy, who had caused these deaths and they would have cheered had Abraham Lincoln given voice to that anger in this second inaugural address.

A SEVEN MINUTE INAUGURAL THAT MENTIONS GOD FOURTEEN TIMES

People were just settling in as he was concluding, as it was only six to seven minutes long - 701 words.

**But Abraham Lincoln, in 701 words,
mentions God fourteen times,
quotes scripture four times
and invokes prayer three times.**

This second inaugural address, that we will just barely begin to discuss this morning, offers us, I believe, a guide for how you and I can answer the question: How do we speak about God in the public places of our lives?

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE – INCLUDING OUR ENEMIES IN OUR VICOTRY

The first clue is Lincoln's use of what I call "inclusive language," including your adversary. Rather than demonizing the South, he was already asking the question: how do we bring the South back into the Union? And he understood that if they alone were to bear the blame and the shame that

they would never be brought back into the Union again. So notice at the beginning of second paragraph as you take the text into your hand, Lincoln says: “On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it. All sought to avert it.” Lincoln is giving the best intentions to the supposed enemy, the South, towards the end of the paragraph. BOTH parties deprecated war. And in just a minute we will hear him say that both read the same Bible.

In our multi-religious and multi-cultural world, as you and I wish to give witness to our faith in Jesus Christ, we need to begin with respectful listening, with giving our best intentions to others who are aspiring in their own way to discover some meaning of truth. We need to offer respect and to listen.

This is Lincoln’s posture and it sets the parameters for what he wishes to say. But the real question is: how will we give resources to our witness? How will we speak? It’s so easy, it seems to me, in the tumultuous times that are becoming less civil in our political discourse and our political campaigns to sort of drop back to the various political ideas or ideologies that we hold, instead of as Christians, beginning from the biblical resources that can sustain what we believe and think. Biblical language can bring us together.

PROPER POLITICIAN LANGUAGE

Dr. White says, I had been told when I started writing a book on the second inaugural address (I was told by academic scholars and friends), to not get too excited about Lincoln’s religious language. That’s what all politicians use, presidents and others, and you’ll find that all other inaugural addresses have used that same sort of language and so I thought I’d see if that was true. And I did discover that all previous inaugural addresses had used some form for the name of God, supreme being/deity, in their address, but always in the last paragraph. Sort of like: we need God’s help too.

What surprised me was that only once before was the Bible quoted in an inaugural address. And now Lincoln, not in the last paragraph, but in the

central third paragraph, will quote the Bible four times — twice from the Old Testament and twice from the New Testament. And to the listening ear, you will be able to hear other intimations of biblical verses from this man who had committed so much of the Bible to memory.

WE BOTH READ FROM THE SAME BIBLE

So from what do we speak when we give witness to our faith? Are we deeply rooted in the Bible that this is part of our witness?

As authorities in Gettysburg prepared for the dedication of a first national military cemetery, and had invited Edward Everett and, secondly, Abraham Lincoln to speak, they had a monumental task before them. They had 50,000 dead, wounded, or missing soldiers and they decided that they would take everything off the bodies of the soldiers - money, letters, diaries - anything that was theirs so it could be catalogued and families could come and collect it. What they chiefly found were Bibles.

What you find when you read the second paragraph, when Lincoln says: “Both read from the same Bible, and pray to the same God,” he is signaling to us that he intends to think theologically as well as politically about the meaning of the Civil War.

AN AFFIRMATION FOLLOWED BY WITHHOLDING A DAMNING JUDGMENT

His first words are words of affirmation. ... *After affirming in inclusive language that both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, he then puts the sticker into it as each invokes God’s aid against the other.* He had become very tired of the delegations of both politicians and ministers who came to him over and over again to say: God is on our side. God is on our side.

One day, he said: “Don’t you think if God is on our side that the President of the United States would become part of the conversation?” He also said, “I’m not as concerned about whether or not God is on our side. I want to know how I can get on God’s side.”

Central in his use of the Bible is this passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: let us judge not so that we may not be judged. Remember the expectations of the audience ... they wanted Lincoln to judge the South. Lincoln quickly disabuses that by invoking Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. You recall that Jesus’ sermon is rooted in

humility and compassion. It teaches *Blessed are those who do not follow the way of the world, the way of judgment and criticism.*

Jesus' moral light comes through this Sermon on the Mount and this is the center of Lincoln's second inaugural address. A lot of critics and cynics have said: Well, I wonder if this is just the shrewd language of a politician. (Probably not.)

All of those people who were close to him gave multiple evidences of his use of the Bible. Rebecca Pomeroy was a nurse who was called into the White House after the death of Willie Lincoln. Mary Lincoln was in a very difficult state so the nurse was there to care for her. As they would gather for lunch everyday, Rebecca Pomeroy would notice that Abraham Lincoln would sit there in a rocking chair and take his shoes off, and she would quickly put his slippers on, and he would take out the old Bible. One day he said to her, "What is your favorite portion of the Bible?" And she said, "Psalms." And he said, "Me, too. I've memorized a good portion of it." So here is a person whose resources for offering public address come from the Bible.

THE FINAL QUESTION: WHAT ARE WE GIVING WITNESS TO?

But the third question we have to ask when giving witness to our faith is: what are we giving witness to? Is it from our own experience or are we pointing beyond ourselves to a God who acts in history? If you look back now on the first and second paragraphs of the second inaugural address, it's as if Lincoln is somehow standing above or outside of the conflict. He's like a chronicler. He's describing the events. He doesn't use his own name. He only uses two personal pronouns in the second inaugural address. Lincoln uses not one personal pronoun in the Gettysburg address. But in that central paragraph, in the architectural center of the paragraph, there is a ringing affirmation: the Almighty has his own purposes. And now we see that Lincoln, who had been describing the actions of the soldiers, the generals, the commander in chief, is suggesting that the chief actor in the Civil War is God himself.

Lincoln was a deeply spiritual man, in the very best sense.

Most of the Lincoln biographers have chosen to depict Lincoln as a fatalist. A person who, yes, never joined a church, and one who believed in a

kind of deistic God, a God who was like a watchmaker, who had set the world in motion and then let it run down but did not intervene in history.

**I rather suggest that the Lincoln who grew to maturity through the Civil War, who sat under the preaching of Phineas Densmore Gurly, of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, was growing in his understanding of what I call a providential God —
yes, a Presbyterian God -
who understood that God is a God of personality, who loves and acts in history.
The Almighty has his own purposes.**

THE DEATH OF WILLIE LINCOLN

The greatest tragedy of the Civil War, in a personal sense, was not even the death of 620,000 men, but the death of Willie Lincoln. Willie was a boy of four who was most like this father. He died in February of 1862 and Lincoln invited Phineas Densmore Gurly to come and preach the funeral sermon. And while he was there, Gurly said to a grieving Abraham and Mary something that he called "very comforting," and these were his words. He encouraged them to get a clear and scriptural view of providence. The second inaugural address is one of clear and scriptural providence.

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When we come to the last paragraph, the one with which we are most familiar, we hear Lincoln's words that echo down through the century: "*With malice toward none and charity for all.*" Forty-one days after he delivered this address, he would be dead. The people in Washington, struggling to know how to honor their fallen President, put on silk mourning badges. Most of the badges bore this message: "With malice toward none, with charity for all." They had looked back at the prison of his death and understood that Lincoln had lived his life with malice toward none, with charity for all.

A reporter for the New York Herald noticed that there had only been four occasions of applause. (How surprising for a state of the union/inaugural address.) But the reporter, possibly with the eye of someone with a view from outside of this culture, noticed there was a different response from this

audience. It *started from the very back of the crowd and went something like this*: “Bless the Lord,” “Bless the Lord,” etc. It was the African-Americans in the crowd that day, most of whom had never been to an inaugural before. They understood what Lincoln was saying and they took up the response: “*Bless the Lord; Bless the Lord.*”

THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS WAS NOT A STATE PAPER, BUT A SERMON

Frederick Douglass, the greatest African-American of the 19th century later wrote in his diary that evening, *this was not a state paper, this was a sermon*. And if it is a sermon for us, this sermon, let me suggest that in protestant sermons then and now, there are usually two parts - if I may illustrate it this way. The first is what I call the indicative. This is where the minister announces what God has done. What God has done in bringing people through the Red Sea to the Promised Land. What God has done in the person, teaching death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But we all know as sure as we sit here, that coming at the end of the sermon, the minister is going to say: this is what you need to do this week and in the coming days.

So may I suggest that in this Sermon on the Mount, the first three paragraphs are Lincoln’s indicative of what God has done in grace, judgment and reconciliation. ... this moment of high expectation, Lincoln dared to say to those assembled: we have a great evil in our midst. Oh, the crowd would have cheered if he would have said “southern slavery” or maybe if he even had said “slavery” but he uses inclusive language “American slavery.” We are all involved in this terrible evil.

“THEREFORE,” HOW SHALL WE BEHAVE?

But then Lincoln comes to his close. I’m going to suggest that you put an unvoiced “therefore” before that last paragraph. The indicative is like Paul’s letters in the New Testament and then Ephesians 4, chapter 1: “Therefore, I, a prisoner of the Lord, lead you to a life of the calling to which you have been called.” Abraham Lincoln: “Therefore, with malice toward none, with charity for all.” How did Lincoln come to those words? Did he really think that a nation so deeply divided was actually able to come forward in acts of forgiveness, passion, and reconciliation?

We live in a divided nation today and part of the way we give witness to our faith is to listen to others speak from a biblical standpoint and to point to a God that acts in history and then our words become our deeds as we live out the Christian calling with malice toward none and charity for all. These are the words that reach across one-hundred-forty years and are so strangely and beautifully timeless for us after all of these years.

Abraham Lincoln always read out loud. Children used to always read out loud until someone in 1910 or 1920 got the idea: Shhh, read to yourself. Lincoln would read to Mary. Mary would read to Abraham. I suggest in reading about Lincoln, we say and read his words out loud. Listen for the word of God. Listen for Abraham Lincoln.

So this is our imperative: “(Therefore,) With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on 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.”

We thank God for this American text that echoes the cores of your biblical providence in our midst. By your Holy Spirit, may you take the words that we have just said and that they will become what we will do. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, Amen.

Ronald C. White, Jr. is the author of *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, which was published by Random House on January 13, 2009. The new book is the Main Selection of the History Book Club for January 2009. He has also written *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*, a *Washington Post* and *San Francisco Chronicle* bestseller, and a *New York Times Notable Book of the Year*, and *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln Through His Words*, a *Los Angeles Times* bestseller, and a Book-of-the-Month Club and a History Book Club selection. He is a Fellow at the Huntington Library, Visiting Professor of History at UCLA, and **Professor of American Religious History Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary.**

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address March 4, 1865

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it, all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, urgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union and divide effects by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war, while the Government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both 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, 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. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently 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 bondsman'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 was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on 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.



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