

MARCH 4 DAWNED DARK, GLOOMY, AND FOGGY

SUNDAY MESSAGE

OCTOBER 16, 2016

March 4 dawned dark, gloomy, and foggy with a continuous downpour of rain.

Thousands of people had come to celebrate the occasion at an outdoor venue. It is reported that by 9:30 a.m. the rain stopped and by 10:30 a.m. the sky began to clear. But at 10:40 the rain returned. By 11 a.m. the parade preceding the main event moved forward regardless of the weather but without the main star of the show who remained dry inside busy signing his autograph.

The tenor of the diverse crowds lining the street was that of celebration, jubilation and vindication. Dressed in their finest clothes in spite of mud up to the ankles, they came from afar to see and hear the celebrity.

The main attraction was a man who had not enjoyed such fame during most of his public life. On the contrary he was accustomed to hearing great criticism from the tabloids and the media. This special occasion was his opportunity for proving them wrong...to enjoy the adulation of the crowds and review his record of achievements.

Can you guess who the star celebrity was? Abraham Lincoln. The occasion? His 2nd Inauguration held March 4, 1865 just 41 days before his assassination.

What an exciting moment. The Civil War was finally drawing to a close with the North sure of victory at last. The crowd was ecstatic with many wearing ribbons and medals proclaiming “Union and Liberty,” “Lincoln” ...but also, “A Foe To Traitors”, and some “No compromise with Armed Rebels.” The crowd burst into cheers when Lincoln appeared and took the oath of office. He then prepared to speak. Noah Brooks, a correspondent for the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported, “Just at that moment the sun, which had been obscured all day, burst forth in its unclouded meridian splendor, and flooded the spectacle with glory and with light.”

Many were disappointed in what has become over time one of the greatest speeches ever given in our nation’s history. Frederick Douglass, that day, noted “The address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper.” Even with Lincoln speaking as slowly as he naturally did, the speech lasted but 5 minutes. Rather than crowing about victory and how the South and southerners would be punished, Lincoln spoke of reconciliation. He pondered how such a war could have lasted as long as it did and why God would allow it to continue with so much

death and devastation. (Remember that loss of life during the Civil War totaled 623,000. The total loss of life during WWI, WWII, the Korean War and Vietnam together exceeded the Civil War by only 41,000). For several years Lincoln had pondered this question. His answer which he provided in this brief address suggests he had studied Jeremiah. It is well known that he read the Bible daily and reflected upon the scriptures and their relevance to his experiences and that of the nation. Lincoln's inaugural address did sound like a sermon in the form, even, of what is known as a Jeremiad paralleling much of the form of the Book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah in Chapters 1-29 speaks of the ongoing war between the House of Israel and the House of Judah – brother against brother and sister against sister -- and the punishment that **both** Judah and Israel would suffer for their sins. **Both are guilty.** Both paid dearly. But in the reading for today which follows those chapters, known as the Book of Comfort or Consolation, God redeems and restores both Judah and Israel with a return of the exiles and a new covenant to be written upon the heart. Healing is possible through God's act of forgiveness and occurs through one's own relationship with God and forgiving relationship with one another.

In reflection, Lincoln came to believe that in the case of the Civil War, as he put it, “Neither party expected for the war, **the magnitude**, or **the duration**, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* [slavery] of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease...Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other...The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.”

Lincoln had come to understand that slavery was the transgression against God **and** he had come to believe that **both** the North and the South had participated in the sin of slavery. The war and its length was punishment for this transgression... as was the continuing war between the House of Israel and the House of Judah in its disobedience to God both the transgression and the punishment.

The most famous quote from Lincoln’s address, however, is not his understanding of why the War occurred and why it went on so long, but the line that spoke to his vision of the future. His vision of healing. His vision of what was to be printed within the heart. Every one of you knows the line: “With malice toward none; with charity for all.” In the concluding paragraph of this short address he speaks of the need to (in his own words) “bind up the nation’s wounds...to do all which

may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.” Amen to that.

I chose to speak of Lincoln’s address today because I, like so many of you, are concerned about our nation and the many divisions that have arisen, or have revealed themselves, among, between and even within religions and churches; races and genders; ethnicities, groups and individuals. While we are not at war, we are well-armed with weapons, not only in the form of guns **but** words, words that can harm and kill one another. The outcome of the presidential election (regardless of who wins) will not erase the fear, the angst, the hatred and the righteousness that permeate our society. But as daughters and sons of God, the Creator, as followers of Jesus, we are called to bind up the wounds that divide us...if **we** are to enjoy the gifts that God and the founders of this nation bestowed upon us.

Malice is abundant these days. Charity, or caritas (that is the love of humanity) is scarce. The reading from Jeremiah along with Lincoln’s address remind us that we are **not the virtuous**...or that **others** are the cause of our divisions... but that we all hold responsibility for where we find ourselves in this time. I suspect to greater or lesser degrees or upon occasion we all have transgressed in our failure

to follow the invitation of God to receive and embrace the New Covenant written upon our hearts. We are not formally at war with one another but we cannot allow the war of words and violent actions in our nation to continue. Which means, I believe, we need to look into our own hearts and see what is written there. We need to look into our own hearts to see our own need for healing, to face our own words that are wounding, to see the harm to ourselves of cynicism and despair. We need to look into our own hearts and remember that relationships are far more important than rhetoric and sound bites. We need to look into our own hearts to see that charity or caritas is written there and so hope is there as well.

And when we have done this, but only when we have done this, are we ready to reach out to heal our country.

I speak these words because I have found I am in need of some healing on these points. I surely am judgmental over and above making a judgment about the country and the election. I can become cynical and righteous. I have joined in perpetuating “sound bites”, and inadvertently spreading more anger and angst. But most of all I feel sad for our country and our people...all our people. And I

can feel myself move to the edge of despair and hopelessness. **But**, this is not what is written in my heart.

It is time for me to move into a space of hope and remembrance of who I am in God and God in me. I can't change the world, I can't dictate what will happen and, indeed, I am not certain anymore that I know what should happen to this country. But I do know that I can have and voice opinions and positions that do not belittle or harm others. I do know I can hold the space of charity and caritas in my relationship to myself, to God, and with others...with everyone I meet whether friend or stranger.

And, so, I am going to attend a Celtic prayer service on Sunday, November 6, held here at the Church in the afternoon with the intention of healing and binding my wounds and the wounds of the nation and beyond. This prayer service is not about the election of specific candidates but about all of us...indeed all of humanity....ourselves and the burdens we carry, our families and friends, our local community, our country and across the world.

The first part of the service will allow those of us who attend to focus on healing ourselves to let go and give to God our burdens, our wounds, and our transgressions so we can, with integrity, seek to heal the nation and beyond

through prayer and intention. The second part of the service will be communal prayer with the remembrance: “With malice toward none; with charity for all” and so may we all come together as sister and brother. The final part of the prayer service will allow us to celebrate and “Sing A New Song Unto the Lord”... giving praise, gratitude, thanksgiving and celebration for the gifts bestowed upon us all; a rejoicing in the New Covenant which is written **forever** upon our hearts. And with that may we all say AMEN!

Resource: Ronald C. White, Jr., *“Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural”*