

“Lincoln’s Second Inaugural: The Purposes of the Almighty are God’s Own”
Sermon based on Jeremiah 23:16-18, 21-22, 31-32; Isaiah 55:6-9

Rev. Paul E. Capetz
Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach

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Tomorrow is Presidents Day. When I was growing up, we used to have two holidays in February, one celebrating George Washington’s birthday and another one celebrating Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, but for some reason we now have only a single holiday in recognition of all the men who have ever served as president of the United States. Since our nation is currently so polarized by political divisions, let us take the occasion of this holiday to reflect on what we as Christians should expect from our political leaders in a democracy.

The first thing I ever learned about our first president George Washington was that he never told a lie. In my first-grade class at elementary school our teacher told us the story of how as a boy Washington had chopped down his father’s cherry tree with a hatchet. When his father discovered that the tree was gone and asked his son about it, little George did not try to avoid the consequences of his actions by lying, but told his father the truth, saying, “Father, I cannot tell a lie.” I suppose we were taught this lesson about our first president so that we little boys and girls would always strive to be like George Washington and never tell lies ourselves. But I wonder if we were also taught this lesson so that we would trust our presidents never to lie to us.

I came of age in the aftermath of two disillusioning events in our nation’s history when the American people had lost faith that our presidents were always telling us the truth. When Walter Cronkite of CBS news, said to have been the most trusted man in America, took his news cameras to Vietnam to investigate for himself what was really going on with the war there, he

told his American television audience that he didn't think the war was winnable. That was a very different picture of what had been going on in Vietnam than the one President Johnson had been painting for the American people. That's when the tide of public opinion began to turn against the war and against Johnson. I recall how disturbed my father was by Cronkite's report. My dad had served his country in WWII; he had fought on the front lines in Europe and had even been a prisoner of war in Germany. The possibility that our president and his generals might be deceiving the American public about a matter so critical as a war in which young American lives were at stake was initially too repugnant for him to take seriously. But eventually, he came to believe that Johnson had in fact been lying about Vietnam and my father reluctantly changed his opinion about the war, from supporting it to opposing it. Since he had experienced the horrors of combat himself, he knew the stakes were too high ever to lie about war. I recall him telling his brother, my uncle, who still supported the war and was shocked to learn that my father now opposed it: "I don't want any president to send my three sons into war under false pretenses."

Then, when President Nixon was shown to be lying about the Watergate coverup, my parents were in utter shock and disbelief. They had been ardent supporters of Nixon, but when the tapes of his conversations in the Oval Office were published in the newspaper, there was no denying the facts. They had to acknowledge that their faith in the president had been misplaced. The age of innocence was over. Like so many Americans, my parents now had to accept that their presidents could lie to them. The trust of the American people had been betrayed.

It's been just over forty-five years since Nixon was forced to resign the presidency and I suppose that none of us any longer really expects our presidents to be truthful persons the way

my parents' generation did before Vietnam and Watergate. Since then, two presidents have been impeached, one a Democrat, the other a Republican. President Johnson, you will recall, was a Democrat, and Nixon was a Republican. So, the moral of this story is that vice, like virtue, does not belong to any single political party. And this sermon has no partisan intent. For while I have been both a Republican and a Democrat at various times in my life, I am no longer affiliated with either of these political parties. I have become disillusioned with both of them and think that the American people deserve much better than what they offer us. The point I want to make transcends the division between political parties. I speak to you today simply as a Christian who seeks to take our Christian faith seriously as it pertains to being a responsible participant in our American democracy. And I am afraid for our democracy. Democracy is a very fragile kind of government, and numerous commentators and historians of American politics have observed that not since the Civil War has our nation been so polarized and divided into warring factions as it is now. There is no longer any bipartisan collegiality in Washington. Even civil conversation between representatives of differing political parties seems virtually impossible nowadays. Americans seem to hate each other with an intensity and a ferocity that I have never seen before.

An indication of just how dangerous the threat to our democracy is right now is that we can't even agree on what the facts are, on what is true. When Cronkite came into our living rooms each evening, all of America trusted him to be truthful. But now each political party has its own media outlets and we no longer get our news from the same sources. Now the news comes wrapped in different political ideologies, which only deepens the crisis of our democracy; for if we as a nation can no longer agree on what is true and what is false, then how can there be rational and informed debate among citizens and politicians about the best policies to implement

and the proper courses of action to take? If our politics is no longer guided by reasoned debate based on the facts, then for all practical purposes our democracy is finished and our nation will from now on be ruled by brute force, by the rule of the strong over the weak, by the rhetorical power of those who are most effective at manipulating public opinion regardless of the truth.

The survival of democracy not only depends on truth but also on shared values. But do we still have any shared or common values as American citizens? Is our political process still about pursuing common moral purposes such as “liberty and justice for all”? Do we even care anymore whether our political leaders are persons of moral integrity? Or have we become so cynical that we simply want them to be as ruthless as possible in defending *our* privileges and special interests? Are we still pursuing a shared experiment in democracy or do we just want our party to win at all costs regardless of the consequences to our fellow Americans? Do we have any sense left of a common good for which we are all willing to sacrifice? Is being an American more important than being a Republican or a Democrat? Are we still “one nation under God”?

During the Civil War, that other time in our history when Americans were so divided, we took up guns and started killing one another. Quite literally, we became two separate nations at war. Just months before the end of the Civil War, the first Republican president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, delivered his second inaugural address. It consists of a mere four paragraphs. It didn't take more than a few minutes to deliver, and yet it is the most profound inaugural address any president has ever given. Not long ago a theologian wrote an entire book about this short speech, which some have even called “America's sermon.” And it really is a sermon instead of the typical inaugural address because Lincoln, like an Old Testament prophet,

summoned his fellow citizens to look upon the war and the terrible sufferings it had inflicted as a divine visitation, as God's judgment upon the American people for their sin. How strange and unexpected, since all signs indicated that the North was on the verge of victory over the South, that the Union was about to vanquish the Confederacy. For this reason, one might have expected Lincoln to sound a triumphalist note: "We are going to win!" But he didn't. One might have expected Lincoln to assure his listeners that God was on their side, and that the Confederates were terrible people. But he didn't. One might have expected him to incite the North to hate the South. But he didn't. Instead, he called for "malice toward none" and "charity for all."

Let me read to you the most crucial section of Lincoln's address. After acknowledging that both sides, North and South, agree that slavery is the issue between them, Lincoln says:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. 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...[and] woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." [Shall we not] suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God...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....? 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.

What has Lincoln said here that is so unusual and so significant? He begins by noting that at the start of the war neither side could have predicted just how horrible things would become, how terrible would be the toll in human lives and suffering exacted by the war. He is pointing to the truth that our actions, especially the actions of our political leaders, often have unforeseeable consequences that lead to disastrous results for many innocent people.

Lincoln then points out the absurdity that people on both sides of the conflict were devout Christians who claimed in all sincerity that God was on *their* side: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other." Armies in both the North and South had their chaplains who blessed the soldiers before going into battle, assuring them that their cause was God's cause. Preachers in northern and southern churches stood in their pulpits every Sunday and proclaimed to their congregations, "God is on our side because our side is

righteous, good, noble, and just.” Lincoln knows that there is something blasphemous about putting God in the service of our political causes, no matter how morally right and just we may believe them to be. This is one of the ways preachers and politicians take the Lord’s name in vain, and it is the indictment made against the false prophets of ancient Israel that we read about in the Books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. As Lincoln recognizes, “The prayers of both [sides] could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. *The Almighty has His own purposes.*” God’s purposes are larger than our human purposes; sometimes we cannot even understand God’s purposes. As God declares through the prophet Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9). Lincoln is pointing out what Isaiah pointed out: God will not be domesticated by us; God will not be put into the service of our political causes. Those who declare with arrogant self-assurance that “God is on our side” should ask themselves the question that Jeremiah posed to the false prophets of his day: “When did you stand in the council of the LORD and when did God authorize you to speak?” (Jer. 23:18). But in making this biblical point, Lincoln was not ingratiating himself with his audience. As he correctly noted elsewhere: “Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them.”

After having warned against invoking God for our side in a political and military conflict, Lincoln does acknowledge that we all still have to make moral choices according to whatever our conscience tells us is right. So, as a northerner and an abolitionist, Lincoln is not claiming that both sides are equally right about the moral issue dividing North and South. He is not a moral relativist. He says, “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." As human beings faced with unavoidable moral questions, we have to decide. Still, Lincoln urges humility even here. Immediately after saying how strange it may seem that those defending slavery should ask a just God's assistance, he cautions: "but let us judge not, that we be not judged." Toward the end of the address he strikes this same note of balance between moral conviction and humility when he exhorts his hearers: "let us strive...with firmness in the right *as God gives us to see the right.*" Each of us sees whatever little bit of truth we do see from a partial perspective. It is not easy to hold one's moral convictions firmly yet humbly; but that is exactly what Lincoln is calling for. After all, we may be wrong; how *we* perceive what is right may not always be right.

Lincoln could have laid the entire blame for the war on the South, but he didn't. He could have said, "The Confederates are to blame. They are terrible people." Instead, he says that God "*gives to both North and South* this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense [of slavery] came." The war was brought on by the sins of the nation as a whole, not just by the sins of the South. Lincoln is asking his Northern compatriots to accept responsibility for their complicity in this national tragedy. Early on in our history as a nation, something had gone terribly awry and now we all had to pay the consequences. A nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" had turned a blind eye to one-eighth of its population living in chains of slavery. The war was the result of not having addressed the issue of slavery head-on at the nation's founding in 1776.

Lincoln knows that everybody is weary and wants the war to end soon: "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass." But then he

suggests that perhaps *our wishes may not coincide with God's will*: “Yet, if God wills...” If God wills that all of the wealth unjustly accumulated as a result of slavery and all of the suffering unjustly inflicted upon the slaves should be requited, then no one has a right to say that God is unjust. Imagine how offensive these words would be if spoken by an American politician today. Who wants to hear that God is standing in judgment upon the United States for its national sins? That’s not bound to win any votes. Yet Lincoln is saying that if God should decide to extend the war for many more years, God’s judgment upon our nation and its history would be righteous and just. How many of our preachers today who wed religion and politics ever preach a message that calls us as citizens to such honest soul-searching and moral self-examination?

Finally, Lincoln concludes his address by summoning us “to bind up the nation’s wounds” in order that we “may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace *among ourselves*.” He does not throw stones at the South, he does not vilify and demonize the Confederates, he does not say: “Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, is a horrible person.” Instead, he urges his fellow citizens to strive to heal the nation’s divisions “with malice toward none” and “with charity for all.” Here is a president calling us not to hate those with whom we have been in conflict, those with whom we have been at war; instead of malice, he calls for charity; instead of hatred and revenge, he calls for love and generosity. He asks his fellow citizens to love those on whom their guns have been aimed for the previous four years and whose guns have been aimed at them. “With malice toward none, [and] with charity for all.” Can you imagine our politicians today saying such a thing about our fellow Americans on the other side of the aisle?

In ancient Israel it wasn't always easy to discern who were the true prophets and who were the false prophets. But in retrospect, we can look back and see that the prophets whose writings are preserved for us in the Old Testament were not the ones who were popular in their own day. And that's because they were the ones who summoned the people and their kings to humility and self-criticism. By contrast, the false prophets were the popular prophets; they were the court theologians, the ones who curried favor with the kings and assured them that God was on their side. They assured the people that their nation was invincible because they were God's chosen people; in a conflict with other nations, God would surely rise to defend Israel against its enemies. Yet when military and political disaster struck and the nation collapsed, and the king with his retinue was marched into exile, the court theologians were shown up for what they truly were: false prophets. That's why we read of God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah: "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy *lies* in my name... Therefore, I am against the prophets, says the LORD" (Jer. 23:25, 30). Lincoln understood this profound insight of our biblical heritage. The true prophet does not say, "God is on our side," or "We can do no wrong."

The psalmist in our responsive reading reminds us of a truth that we rarely if ever hear our politicians and political preachers acknowledge: nations can die. The psalmist says, "let the nations know that they are mortal" (Ps. 9:20). Think of the great empires in history and tell me where they are now: Where is the Roman empire, the Hapsburg empire, or the Soviet Union? Lincoln also said: "Nations do not die from invasion; they die from internal rotteness." As Christians who are also American citizens, we should hold our political leaders accountable to the highest standards of moral integrity because the stakes are so high for all the rest of us who are not in positions of political leadership. Our lives depend on the wisdom or foolishness of

their decisions. As Christians who seek to be responsible participants in our democracy, we should never absolutize loyalty to a political party or a political leader. Our chief political loyalty should always be the good of the nation as a whole. If our democracy is to survive, we have to find our way back to a vision of a common good that enables us to see clearly that we are all in this together, for better or worse. Because if we don't, our democracy will surely die, and its death will be God's righteous judgment upon us as a nation for our sins.

At our Bible Study last week Cathy Saari observed that so many people in our society are weary of the hateful rhetoric that abounds on every side and has poisoned our national life. She asked whether our church might become a place where people of every political persuasion could come together to discuss the real issues facing us as a society without fearing that they would be demonized by others for honestly sharing their viewpoints. That's a great suggestion. Can we be this sort of community? Can we exemplify for others an alternative way of being together as American citizens? Perhaps the long-term survival of our democracy itself will depend on little congregations like ours that commit themselves to becoming havens for constructive discussion about the common good, where the pursuit of truth is more important than rhetoric and where the only rule for participation is that all who join the conversation do so "with malice toward none, with charity for all, [and] with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right."