

Sermon – Lincoln’s Battle with God

Sunday, February 12, 2023

Scripture Readings – Deuteronomy 30:15- 20, Matthew 5:38-48

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Our first scripture reading, Deuteronomy 30:15-20, presents the final words of a lengthy speech attributed to Moses right before his death. As the Hebrew people enter the Promised Land, Moses reminds them of the choices before them. This is the word of God.

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in God’s ways, and observing God’s commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying God, and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. Amen.

Our gospel reading for today is found in Matthew, chapter 5, verses 38-48. Matthew has recorded several of Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, which challenge us and call us to reflect the character of Christ. Today’s reading includes two of the six antitheses Jesus’ presents: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...* In the antitheses we read today, Jesus shares insight on revenge and loving one’s neighbor. Hear now God’s word.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes God’s sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Amen.

Title of the meditation: "Lincoln's Battle with God"

Text: See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. Deuteronomy 30:15

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, thank you for the choices you present in Scripture which challenge us to grow in our faith. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

On Lincoln's birthday as we grapple with today's scripture readings, let us pause to reflect on the faith of the man who saved the soul of our nation.

"A Faith Forged in Doubt" is how author Stephen Mansfield describes President Lincoln's religious journey in his book Lincoln's Battle with God: A President's Struggle with Faith and What It Meant for America. I received this book as a Christmas gift in 2019 from Peter and our son Paul. Over the years, I have been baffled by the opinion of some that because Lincoln never joined a church, he was not a person of faith, especially since his writings convey such rich scriptural references and a depth of understanding and respect for God.

When Peter and I moved to Springfield in 2013 to serve this congregation with ties to Lincoln, my curiosity about Lincoln's faith grew. Although Lincoln chose not to join this abolitionist congregation, he chose a friendship with our Founding Pastor. I can only imagine the complexity of meaning in the seven words on the plaque in our East Narthex honoring the ministry of the Rev. Albert Hale who was "friend and counselor to the Martyred President."

When Peter and I visited Paul in Washington D.C. the Spring of 2016 and worshipped at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church where Lincoln regularly attended, it was humbling to imagine the richness of the sermons Rev. Phineus (fine us) Gurley preached and what they meant to Lincoln during his Presidency as he wrestled with his faith, personal and communal losses, and the insurmountable challenges before him. Rev. Gurley was President Lincoln's spiritual advisor. He was with the Lincoln's when their second son died in the White House and by Lincoln's bedside after he was shot on that fateful Good Friday in 1865.

It would have been difficult for Lincoln to accept the simplistic premise in today's reading from Deuteronomy. If only life were this easy: those who obey prosper, and those who disobey face adversity. Certainly, life has a richer dimension when one walks in God's ways and keeps Torah; however, obedience does not guarantee prosperity any more than disobedience is the cause for personal suffering and pain. Lincoln understood that personal loss was a part of life and not a part of God's judgment. Lincoln was a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief. He knew loss in the early death of his mother when he was nine, the abuse and neglect of his father, the untimely death of his older sister during childbirth, and the tragic death of two sons. Lincoln also carried the suffering and hypocrisy of the nation on his shoulders and understood that the adversity, suffering, and unspeakable loss in this war was, indeed, a result of disobedience, hubris, greed and America's original sin of slavery, the stealing of life and liberty.

One cannot help but marvel at the strength of compassion, the depth of understanding, and the generosity of spirit with which Lincoln led this country through the horror of a civil war with brothers literally destroying brothers.

As Lincoln wrote in his Second Inaugural Address: *Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes God's 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.*

Perhaps it was his insight into the hypocrisy of religion that led Lincoln to respond to the question about whose side God is on with this response: *Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side, my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right.*

In Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address we hear words that resonate with Christ's message from the Sermon on the Mount: *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, and to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

It is especially poignant that we consider Christ's most challenging teachings on the birthday of Lincoln who faced an overwhelming challenge, and, who gained a profound and humble faith that grew out of his internal battle with God and the years of battle on the fields of the Civil War.

Long before the Civil War, in 1848, the year Lincoln went to congress, he returned to his boyhood home on the banks of the Pigeon River in Indiana to reminisce his childhood, to remember his mother Nancy, his sister Sarah, his stepmother Sarah Bush and the people who were a part of his early faith formation. A portion of the poem he wrote about his childhood home is the text for today's anthem "The Hallowed."

As we prepare to receive communion and partake of the elements in remembrance of Christ, may we give thanks for the gift of memory and never forget the hallowed ground upon which we walk. As we continue to grow in faith and consider the choices our Savior God gives us, may we surprise ourselves and one another by choosing compassion, forgiveness, and humility. Amen.