

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, October 4, 2020

“Now, at the Expiration of Four Years”

First sermon in a series entitled “With Malice toward None”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

Almost four years ago, I sat bleary-eyed at in front of the television with my students. They were all studying abroad in South Africa through Brattleboro's own School for International Training.



My students stayed overnight at my home watching the Presidential election returns and forecasts come-in. Like most, we expected a woman to be elected President of the United States for the first time in history. Yet, by dawn there was apprehension. We travelled to downtown Durban in the wee hours of the morning to the United States consulate where we had an invitation to join a gathering of preeminent South African dignitaries. United States embassies and consulates always invite host-country citizens to watch and admire how the

oldest and most successful democracy in the world has always has smooth and controversy-free elections.



By late morning, the unexpected was realized, and all shuffled out of the consulate stunned, dumb-struck, shocked, and silent. I remember being embarrassed, because no one, no one, stopped to even thank the consular staff for hosting us.

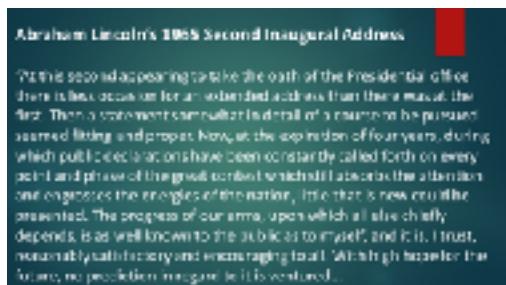
“Now, at the expiration of four years”, I find myself in Brattleboro, Vermont and a national election is just weeks away.



Our nation is polarized and divided. We have undergone four years of stress and chaos. We are more divided as a nation than ever. I have shared with many of you that I fear in the coming weeks and months, civil unrest, and even a low-intensity civil war, will erupt due to disputed and contest election returns and unsubstantiated claims that the election was rigged.

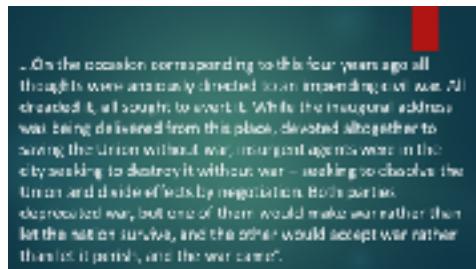


"Now, at the expiration of four years," I am reminded of Abraham Lincoln's 1865 second inaugural address given during the closing days of the Civil War, only the beginning of which I will read today, but all of which we will read for the next four weeks. On the last Sunday, November, 1st, I pray we will all pledge to enter into and emerge from the election with a spirit best articulated by Lincoln: "with malice toward none".



"At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then a statement somewhat in detail of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new can be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured."

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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, insurgent 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”.



What is so stunning about Lincoln's address is its self-deprecating tone. One would expect Lincoln to review all the recent battles won. One might expect such a victorious leader to be bombastic. One might expect that on the cusp of glory, Lincoln would explain all that has happened in his favour and remind all who would listen of his exploits and accomplishments. Instead, Lincoln essentially only said, 'A lot has happened in four years. You know about it as well as I. So, there is no sense in unnecessarily reviewing it'. In short, the address reeks of humility.



Lincoln's address is as brilliant as it is humble. Lincoln paradoxically took a stand, he took sides, in regards to who was in the right and who was in wrong *and simultaneously held all culpable for the horrific bloodshed that gushed forth onto the nation's battlefields*. Lincoln recognized that both sides wished to avoid war. Yet, one side would 'make it' while the other side 'accepted it' and both sides woefully and egregiously underestimated the stomach-churning cost.



At the conclusion of Lincoln's address, he called for healing; he called for compassion; he called for peace. Though having fought for that in which he believed, Lincoln plead for unity and reconciliation.



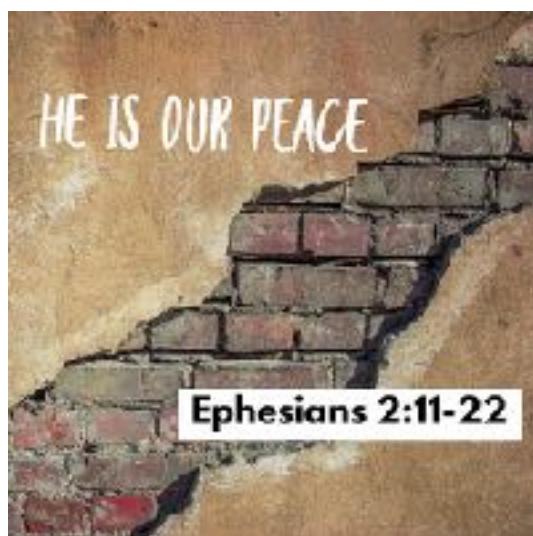
One who wrote in the apostle Paul's name also pled for unity and reconciliation in Ephesus almost two-thousand years ago. And as did Lincoln, the writer of Ephesians invoked the divine to engender charity and fellowship. You see, just like in the 1860s (with Rebels and Yankees), just like today (with Republicans and Democrats), there were divisions in Ephesus between Jewish and Gentile Christians (between circumcised and un-circumcised). And "a house divided itself cannot stand".¹ The author emphasized to the Christians that they needed to be unified despite their diversity. The author proclaimed

¹ Abraham Lincoln's House Divided Speech, *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln%27s_House_Divided_Speech, accessed October 4, 2020.

that as a people of faith, Christ is their common denominator. Their common faith is the basis upon which their enmity is converted to amity.



In our passage this morning, the term 'citizenship' is specifically utilized to describe the common bond between the Christians in Ephesus. Peace and reconciliation is borne out of the concept of a faith-based citizenship. The author pleaded that differences be overcome, barriers destroyed, and walls of hostility be surmounted.



While the concept of citizenship is nationalistic, citizens ultimately are first members of households. Our scripture reading this morning articulates that the Spirit of God binds us together as fellow citizens and as members of God's household. We as citizens and members of the household are combined

with the foundation of prophets and apostles and Christ (the cornerstone) to build a temple in the Lord – the church.



This Sunday, we recognize World Communion Sunday. In celebrating the sacrament of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, we join with others around the world to declare that we, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, “cherish a just and lasting peace in our homes, our church, our nation, and in our world of many nations”.



In being blessed at this table for being peacemakers, let us recall that neither the prophets nor Jesus advocated a peace that had as its only ingredient ‘an absence of violence’. No! The biblical record reflects, as did Abraham Lincoln, that there cannot be peace without justice. No justice, no peace. Christianity is not simply about love. Christianity is to be about love

saturated with repentance. If there is an absence of repentance, then there is no love of God or neighbor.



As we pray 'give us this day our daily bread', let us remember that the presence of bread brings peace and its absence is injustice for those who are enslaved by powers and principalities of this world.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".