

***Father Abraham: A Spiritual Biography of Abraham Lincoln***  
***Psalm 133; I Timothy 2:1-2***  
***February 22, 2009***

Abraham Lincoln is considered one of the greatest presidents ever to lead our nation. This month marked the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Time does not allow a comprehensive telling of Lincoln's life this morning. I have selected a few highlights of his spiritual journey and moral character. A new biography was released last month written by Ronald C. White, Jr., a Presbyterian pastor and former Dean of San Francisco Theological Seminary, which I attended. This biography, titled, *A. Lincoln<sup>i</sup>*, is the primary source for this message.

Abraham was born to Thomas and Nancy Hanks Lincoln on February 12, 1809 in Kentucky and named for his grandfather, Abraham. The Lincoln family attended the South Fork Baptist Church, a Separate Baptist congregation two miles from their farm. Separate Baptists, one of three varieties of Baptists at the time, were more experiential and emotional in their worship. A source of tension for churches at the time was the issue of slavery. A split in the congregation led Thomas and Nancy to join in the founding of a new congregation whose pastor was known to be against slavery.

When Abraham was 7, the Lincoln family moved to the free state of Indiana, where he grew from a boy to a young man of 21 years. Nancy died when Abraham was nine. He never mentioned her in his brief autobiographical writings, but others note her loving, nurturing presence and that her death was a tremendous loss for her son. A year later his father married Sarah Bush Johnson, a widow with three children. She was a solid, caring presence for the new blended family.

Abraham had an insatiable appetite for learning, although according to his own statement, he attended school for less than one year and was self-taught. Young Abe begged, borrowed, and devoured a small library of books, including *Aesop's Fables*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Arabian Nights*, and Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book*. He read the King James Version of the Bible, memorizing whole sections. His favorite portion was the Psalms. His selection of books shows that he was drawn to morality tales of the triumph of good over evil. A common theme was the possibility that ordinary people could do extraordinary things.

When his family joined the Baptist church in Indiana, Abraham did not become a member. He never said why. His stepmother said, "He sometimes attended Church. He would hear sermons preached—come home—take the children out—get on a stump or log and almost repeat it word for word."

Abraham's teen years were filled with work as a farm laborer, rail splitter, and boatman. When Abe was twenty-one, Thomas Lincoln decided to move his family to the prairies of Illinois. After helping his family settle, Abe sought his independence. He became a resident of New Salem with a job at a grocery store, earning \$15 a month. He made his first move into politics at the age of 23, running as a candidate for the state legislature. The Black Hawk War quickly intervened; Lincoln volunteered and served as a captain for 3 months, his only military experience prior to the Civil War. He was discharged two weeks before the election, which he lost. He was not disheartened, however, for he had discovered his appetite for politics.

He continued his intellectual pursuits and enjoyed the freedom to question. At this time in his life, "Having watched the sectarian rivalries among Baptists, and between Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, Lincoln's inclusive spirit was turned away by denominational divisions." (p. 54)

As postmaster, he had access to the newspapers delivered to residents. He voraciously read them to learn about politics and discovered the power of newspapers to influence public opinion. Two years after his first campaign, he successfully ran for the Illinois State Legislature. Relatively early in his career, his votes indicate his belief in the injustice of slavery.

After his first session in the state legislature, Lincoln was determined to become a lawyer. There were only seven law schools in the country, none in Illinois. Aspiring lawyers generally learned the profession by studying and clerking in the law offices of an experienced attorney. John Todd Stuart offered to be Lincoln's mentor, launching his law career.

Lincoln married Mary Todd on November 4, 1842. In Springfield Mary attended the Episcopal Church, but Abraham did not attend with her. The fact that he did not belong to a church caused some concerns for others.

Lincoln ran as the Whig candidate for election to Congress as a Representative for Illinois in 1846. His Democratic opponent was Peter Cartwright, a well known Methodist circuit rider and revival preacher. Cartwright charged Lincoln to be "an open scoffer at Christianity." In response, Lincoln declared, "That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true; but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular...I do not think I could myself, be brought to support a man for office, whom I knew to be an open enemy of, and scoffer at, religion." Although Cartwright was a popular preacher, he was a poor campaigner and lost the election to Lincoln. Lincoln served a single term in Congress and was not reelected.

He returned to his law career. He devoted the next several years to pondering the meaning of his life. He also continued his self-education, reading

literature and the Bible, history and biography, and poetry. At the end of each day he found time for solitude and reflection. It was a season for cultivating a profound inner life.

Lincoln did not keep a formal “journal,” but he did write hundreds of notes over his adult life. He recorded his thoughts on scraps of paper, filing them in his top hat or his bottom desk drawer. These reflections were written for his eyes only as he puzzled out problems, developed his thoughts on slavery, and honed arguments for formal presentation. One time he scribbled notes for a lecture remarking, “I am not an accomplished lawyer. I find quite as much material for a lecture in those points where I have failed, as in those wherein I have been moderately successful.” Lincoln was willing to admit mistakes and learn from them, one of the skills which developed his moral character.

Lincoln understood the heart of his work as a lawyer to be a mediator and peacemaker. He worked hard to understand the motives and attitudes of clients, witnesses, and judges. He was cognizant of the community contexts in which he served. He urged clients to settle so they could go on living as neighbors in their small towns after they had their day in court. His skills in mediation would serve him well throughout his career.

The Lincolns suffered the death of their son, Eddie, at the age of three and a half. It was a devastating loss for both of them. Pastoral care was provided by Springfield’s First Presbyterian Church, which Mary later joined as a member. Rev. James Smith’s logical presentation of the Christian faith would have appealed to Lincoln’s affinity for order and reason. Although in his youth he had been put off by the emotionalism of revivalist religion, Lincoln took another look at religion in the 1850s.

Discussions around the issue of slavery became more intense in the nation. Lincoln expressed his moral indignation over slavery, but also expressed empathy for the people of the South. He invoked biblical imagery to call for repentance and a return to the faith of the founders. Lincoln’s position on slavery was often misinterpreted and frequently he found himself clarifying his stance. “I have always hated slavery, I think as much as any Abolitionist. I have been an Old Line Whig. I always hated it, but I have always been quiet about it until this new era of the Nebraska Bill began.” Although he argued that slavery was morally wrong, at this point, however, he was unwilling to call an African-American his social equal.

Lincoln’s stature as a leader in the Republican party increased. He received several invitations to speak on the East Coast, gaining him national prominence as an orator. He was on the path toward nomination as the Republican presidential candidate in 1860, although he was the lesser known figure in the field. In his campaign “Lincoln’s genius was his ability to draw upon the talents of others, meld together diverse personalities who often did not trust one another, and then

listen to their advice, recognizing that it was sometimes wiser than his own.” (p. 319) The campaign policy was not to put other candidates down, but to lift Lincoln up. Upon selection as the Republican candidate, Lincoln’s first initiative was to reach out to his Republican opponents, uniting the party and consolidating allies. He was elected the sixteenth president of the United States, with inauguration slated for March 4, 1861.

Dissension was growing in the South. By the time of his inauguration, several states had seceded from the Union and elected Jefferson Davis as their provisional president. As he left Springfield for Washington, in his farewell to his friends and community he said, “Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every where for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me.” He was appealing to a God who acted in history and trusting in prayer as the invisible connective tissue that would bind him to his supporters.

Lincoln was determined to preserve the Union without war. In his first inaugural address he tried to strike a note of conciliation with determination. He had a steep learning curve in his new role, but he was a quick learner.

Upon their arrival in Washington, the Lincolns received invitations from a number of churches to attend Sunday worship. Many Protestant congregations in the nineteenth century charged pew rents as a means of raising money for the church budget. Although First Presbyterian Church offered the Lincolns a pew free of rent, the Lincolns chose to worship at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. They worshiped there on the first Sunday after the inauguration. The next week a deacon from the church brought a map of the pews to the White House for inspection. New York Avenue Church was an Old School congregation rooted in a rational doctrinal tradition and held that the church should not involve itself in political questions. Lincoln appreciated the Presbyterian belief that the sinfulness of human beings did not lead to passivity, because Christian men and women were called to be instruments of divine purpose in society. Lincoln became a regular attendee at the church and the pastor became a regular visitor in the White House. Lincoln sent his first quarterly check for the pew rent of fifty dollars a year.

Thirty-nine days after taking office, the first shots of the civil war were fired. Lincoln began to find his footing as he encountered the troubles of war and personnel matters, at the same time his leadership was critiqued. The first commissioned officer to die in the Civil War was a friend of Lincoln’s from Illinois. Lincoln was overcome with grief upon the death of this young man who was like a son to him. He wrote a letter to Ellsworth’s parents in which he said, “In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than

your own....May God give you that consolation which is beyond all earthly power.” It was the first of hundreds of letters he would write to the parents or spouses of fallen soldiers by a father who was also acquainted with grief. During his Presidency a second Lincoln son, Willie, died.

The title, “Father Abraham,” was bestowed in the midst of the Civil War as an expression of unusual affection by grateful citizens and soldiers. They had come to see their president as a loving father figure. Ever mindful of the sacrifices made by soldiers, Lincoln often visited hospital tents and talked with wounded soldiers. As commander in chief, he directed the observance of the Sabbath by the troops.

As the war dragged on, Lincoln brooded about slavery. Though he had long been opposed to slavery, as president he felt that in his oath he was constrained by the Constitution not to interfere with it where it already existed. In the summer of 1862 he began to prepare the groundwork for emancipation of slaves. At the beginning of the war, his single goal was to save the Union. Sixteen months later he redefined the purpose of the war to include freedom for the slaves. On January 1, 1863, he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Upon signing the document, Lincoln said, “I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper.”

In the face of ongoing warfare, Lincoln often found refuge in his bottomless barrel of humor. He told a friend that the visits of three critics reminded him of the boy in Sunday school who, when asked to read from the Bible the story of the three men in the fiery furnace, struggled over the difficult names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The boy read on, mortified, until he looked down the page and saw their names coming again. This time, in agony, he cried out, “Look! Look there! Here comes them same three damn fellers again!”

Lincoln retained a sense of respect for those who fought for the South. Upon the death of Confederate Stonewall Jackson, Lincoln read an appreciative newspaper editorial. He wrote a letter to the editor saying, “I wish to lose no time in thanking you for the excellent and manly article in the Chronicle on ‘Stonewall Jackson.’” Lincoln’s respect for a Christian gentleman and soldier knew no borders.

By the time of Lincoln’s second inauguration after his re-election as president, the war seemed to be nearing its end. Many expected Lincoln to tout the upcoming victory in his second inaugural address. Instead he once again sounded a note of conciliation. Referring to the Unionists and the insurgents, he said, “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.”

Lincoln concluded his address with an ethical imperative seeking reconciliation for the nation. “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.”

Shortly after the inauguration Lincoln visited General Grant in Virginia. Again he spent time visiting wounded soldiers in the hospital tents, especially acknowledging Confederates. When General Sherman asked, “What is to be done with the rebel armies when defeated?” the president said he wanted to “get the men comprising the Confederate armies back to their homes, at work on their farms and in their shops.” Lincoln said to a black man in Richmond who dropped to his knees, “Don’t kneel to me. That is not right. You must kneel to God only, and thank Him for the liberty you will enjoy hereafter.”

Early on Palm Sunday, April 9, 1865, General Lee surrendered to General Grant. April 11 became a national day of celebration. On Good Friday, April 14, the Lincolns looked forward to a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theatre. John Wilkes Booth had harbored disdain for Lincoln from the beginning of the Civil War. That night at Ford’s Theatre he fired one shot at the back of Lincoln’s head. The president died the next morning. On Easter Sunday he was remembered in churches throughout the North, many preachers declaring him the Civil War’s final casualty.

We remember and celebrate Abraham Lincoln’s moral courage to do the right thing in the face of many conflicting forces. His deep inner core with solid moral values enabled him to skillfully guide our nation through one of its most turbulent times. May President Lincoln’s qualities of compassion, inclusivity, and peacemaking be an inspiration for us.

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<sup>i</sup> Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009).