

His Hand Was on Lincoln's Bible, but . . .

Colleagues,

His hand was on Lincoln's Bible.

I too wept to be a TV witness of it all. For joy.

But his theology wasn't Lincoln's. Nor the Bible's.

Obama's first address from the famed Bully Pulpit of the American presidency was FROGBA, the Folk Religion of God Bless America. And God will bless America because "Yes, we can." Yes, we can make it happen—with no repentance, just our own historic American goodness. Our enemies may be sinners. We are not. It was the out-going president's theology. No change. No change from the national theology of his predecessor.

When the address concluded, I wept again. Not for joy.

Lincoln's Bible had told him, the 16th US president: "No. we can't." Better said, "No, you can't." He heard God addressing America in that Bible in direct speech. Even though any mention of Christ was rare when Lincoln spoke from that bully pulpit, his Deist(?) faith was "bully" Biblical in this one point for sure: In a world of sinners God is first of all everybody's critic. Every nation's critic. America's critic too. America was an "almost chosen nation"—Lincoln's very words—but just like all nations in world history. In Lincoln's Bible "the nations" are never the good guys. God weighs the nations and they are ALWAYS "found wanting."

But FROGBA has no antenna for that message. Neither did this week's inaugural utterance, the first one from Number 44 from that bully pulpit.

And it could have been “easy.” At least textually “easy.” For the inaugural address was bumping up against Lincoln’s theology in Lincoln’s Bible all the time. But it stayed on the surface in its call for “change.” Never got beneath the band-aid level of analysis and proposed remedy. Never got to the change—Big Change—that Lincoln (and his Bible) called for, God’s direct address to America: “Repent.” It’s been cited before in these ThTh posts, Lincoln’s words to the nation in 1863. Remember, this was right in the middle of America’s own four years of self-destruction. Didn’t we have enough trouble already? No, said Lincoln, the trouble was even worse than that. America was in trouble with God.

1863. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Not that it’s ever easy to call your own people to repent instead of just asking the “others” to do so – e.g., as on this past Tuesday: You, our enemies “unclench YOUR fists”—for our hands are always open. Not easy at all when the folks needing to

hear the call are your own people. Dangerous too. The first such repentance-caller in the NT was decapitated for his efforts. Gilbert and Sullivan put it this way: "When constabulary duty's to be done, a policeman's lot is not a happy one." President Obama might not have gotten elected had he telegraphed Lincoln's change-message to America during the political campaign. His then pastor, Jeremiah Wright, gave the Lincoln message, but Obama deserted him. "Not a plank in my platform."

However, the campaign is over. Now he IS the president, he's head-honcho of America's constabulary. So be Lincolnesque, Mr. President. That's your job. All the more since you counsel us on facing up to "the test" we are undergoing. Be Lincolnesque and remind us—as Lincoln did—just who THE Tester is. Who's putting us through this exam? Is it the Final Examiner? Lincoln thought so in the midst of the Civil War. Why is it different in the current wars we are waging? And if it is the Final Exasminer—Lincoln would have said, SINCE it is the Final Examiner—how do you pass that test? Lincoln said it with the Bible's word for change. Repent.

"The powers that be are ordained by God," St. Paul tells us—ordained to be our critics when we do wrong and our benefactors when we don't. Yes, that's their "duty"—not always a "happy" one. Now President Obama's too. Remember, Paul gives such theological clout, such divine authorization, to the Roman emperor, a very non-Judeo-Christian guy. When Paul wrote those words, Nero was emperor!

Be Lincolnesque, Mr. President. From Lincoln's Bible take Lincoln's words, and claim them as your own:

"My fellow citizens, I stand before you today humbled by the task before us. I must tell you, as did President #16, whose Bible was under my hand, that

- we have forgotten God.
- We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us
- we have vainly imagined,
- in the deceitfulness of our hearts,
- that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.
- we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace,
- too proud to pray to the God that made us!
- It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power
- to confess our national sins,
- to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

Is it not your duty, Mr. President—indeed not a happy one—but duty, God-given duty, naytheless, to put these Lincolnesque add-ons into that inaugural speech? To move us Americans from the band-aid level of your analysis to the depth dimension (diagnosis level 3, in Crossings lingo), the God-problem confronting all your fellow citizens? The first-ever president to come from Illinois did. Yes, you can do it too. It’s your job.

Here are some possibilities for Lincoln Add-Ons [hereafter LA0] to what you told the world 48 hours ago.

We the People have remained faithful to the ideals of our forbearers, and true to our founding documents.

[LA0 Not true. Surely not to the founding document under your hand as you took the oath.]

That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood.

[LA0 Radical revision needed here in your text. Until the God-problem confronting us is admitted, there is no understanding of the crisis at all. Crisis is the Greek word for judgment. You’ve

got to talk about the Judge. Worse still, confront that Judge].

Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. . . . a sapping of confidence across our land; a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable . . . These are the indicators of crisis.

[LAO Indicators, yes. But when you say "crisis," tell the people who the critic is. I did.]

The challenges we face are real But know this America: They will be met.

[LAO Not if you ignore the critic. Help this hapless nation "meet the critic," step one in meeting those real challenges.]

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear.

[LAO That Bible your hand's on says neither hope nor fear are items of choice. They are responses to two opposite realities coming from the outside. When God's the critic, then fear-of God!—is the appropriate response. That was absent in the nation in 1863. Most likely it's still absent in 2009. Btw, President #32, Roosevelt, was mistaken when he said "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." He too "forgot God."]

On this day, we come to proclaim an end to . . . worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics.

[LAO Biggest dogma that strangles is FROGBA. Worn-out in the USA it is not. Seek to lead the nation away from it. First of all "Physician, heal thyself."]

We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things.

[LAO Good line from that book under your hand. FROGBA is the nation's super "childish thing." Kids never think they need repentance. Set it aside. In your own theology—and in that of your people.]

The God-given promise that all are equal, all are free . . . The long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth.

[LA0 God's freedom promise is not the one you're talking about. Paul and Silas were enjoying God's freedom-promise when they sat in chains in the jail of Philippi. And prosperity is not a promise. Sufficiency, "enough-ness" has Biblical support. Not prosperity. See if you can't get that word removed from the American shibboleth. And whether on January 20, 2009 America still is—or will remain—as the most prosperous, powerful nation on earth is God's judgment call, not yours.]

Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

[LA0 Won't work if you don't acknowledge the Judge. It never has for any prior empire on the earth. Why should it work now? Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.]

We will

We will

We will

All this we can do. All this we will do.

Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions.

[LA0 Yup. The one administering the current testing.]

[Such questioners] have forgotten what this country has already done, what free men and women can achieve.

[LA0 Oops. The forgetfulness is more drastic than that. Look again at my words about what we have forgotten.]

What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them, that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long, no longer apply.

[LA0 The ground shift in 1863 was more seismic than that. Isn't it also true in 2009? Jeremiah Wright said so. He was making my speech. You will conclude this address with the ancient American

mantra—GBA. But to do that without acknowledging the de facto relationship of God and the nation is whistling in the dark. That mantra is indeed “stale” politics. That is what “no longer applies” to America. Worse still than stale politics, it borders on blasphemy.]

We . . . will be held to account

[LAO Tell them to whom you and all of them are finally accountable.]

The market. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched. . . . The market can spin out of control.

[LAO In that book under your hand this is called Mammon. Mammon is not money per se, but money becomes Mammon, an alternate deity, when you trust it as you seem to do. And from your proposed rescue packages surely you do. As do your fellow citizens. Money will save us. Just trust it—and us the money-managers. Here there is no “change” at all. But here is where change, BIG change, is needed. If my kind of call for repentance is too tough for you to follow, why not make this the message of your first four years: “In God we trust. Which one?”]

And so, to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.

[LAO Ready to lead once more? Prior question for the nation was the one I raised: are we ready to follow? Follow you know Whom. Besides that, when did God ever designate this “almost chosen people” —or any people—to be world leader? Follower is the divine mandate. Collaborator is the world’s wish. Claims to world leadership (again) approach blasphemy. I expect that you will hear from voices elsewhere in the world about this sentence: “Haven’t you noticed that you aren’t leader any

longer? And the evidence is scant that by your bootstraps—or by Mammon— you can ever put Humpty-Dumpty back together again.”]

Our security emanates from the justness of our cause; the force of our example; the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.

[LAO Wrong. Just plain wrong. Read that book.]

We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense.

[LAO Wrong. Just plain wrong. Read that book. Or my 1863 speech again.]

And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that “Our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.”

[LAO As to who will outlast whom, who will defeat whom, be much more cautious. Those outcomes are in Someone Else’s hand. My take was to call for humility: “It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.” Why not add humility as a major term to your bully-pulpit vocabulary in the days to come? And while you’re at it, help your fellow citizens learn that “pride”—almost as American as motherhood and apple pie—is not a recommended virtue in the book under your hand. It’s a vice. To be expurgated, repented. No divine approval at all for pride.]

We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass.

[LAO No grounds in The Book for that ever happening on its own. Much more major renovation must come to pass before hatred passes. Namely, the BIG change.]

To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict . . .

know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.

[LA0 By the same measure with which you measure, you too shall be measured.]

We will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

[LA0 We are not innately benign to our fellow humans. We killed each other, fellow citizens, from 1861-65. The clenched fist is not unknown in our midst. Denied routinely, but not unknown. Yet more unknown is the divine set of clenched fingers holding our fate. Give attention to that, as I sought to do.]

Nor can we consume the world's resources without regard to effect.

[LA0 Here's a thought that's in the Book. God made a primordial covenant in Noah's day that he would not destroy the earth again. It was actually a covenant with the earth itself. If "we" are the major consumers—and we are—consuming the planet, then one of the "effects" we can anticipate is that the Creator, remembering his covenant with the earth, will move against the earth's destroyers and measure out to them what they are measuring out to the planet. One more reason for ringing the repentance bell. For our own survival.]

What is demanded . . . What is required . . . We have duties. .

[LA0 Were my own theology even more Biblical (say, for example, Lutheran) I'd note the language of God's law in these words. Good law. Which is God's own program in preserving and also evaluating the world and all its citizens. But remember who the final demander, requirer, duty-giver is. And if the people have forgotten, tell them.]

This is the source of our confidence: the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

[LAO Oops, misplaced confidence. Destinies are bestowed. Uncertain they may well be. But Someone Else is the shaper.]

So let us mark this day in remembrance of who we are and how far we have traveled.

[LAO Above all, remember whom we have forgotten.]

In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by nine campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At a moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words be read to the people: "Let it be told to the future world that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it."

[LAO U.S. President #1 was a deist too, but his deism was different from mine. His God was distant, sent instructions to humankind, but never engaged in face-to-face confrontation. In my deism God is down on the ground, and in 1863 "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." Better, President #44, would have been for you to cite my words from that year. Then your final paragraph might have been more promising. Here's what you did say:]

America, in the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words; with hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come; let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

[LAO This would have been better: America, in the face of our

danger with God, in this winter of our forgetfulness, let us remember Lincoln's timeless words; with hope and virtue, let us follow his call to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness. Then only can we hope to brave once more the icy currents, to endure what storms may come. Then, then only, will our children's children be able to say that when we were tested by the Final Examiner, we did not turn our back on that repentance call. But with humble eyes, and humble hearts we answered that call, and listened again for God's word of grace upon us-and from that posture we carried forth that great gift we have received and handed it on to future generations.

Were this to happen to this nation it would indeed be God blessing the United States of America.]

One more Lutheran addendum.

The benediction offered at the close of the ceremony on Tuesday referenced the line from the song, "He's got the whole world in his hands." More than once I remember Blessed Bob Bertram citing that line with this add-on. "Whole world in his hands. Yes, both of them. And with the left one God is doing such and so." Another LAO to that might be: "And in that left hand, America, God is holding Amos's famous plumbline measuring the nations—our nation too. Measuring what—better whom—our nation has forgotten."

God's blessing business throughout the OT, says super scholar Claus Westermann, is the work of God's left hand and the salvation business is God's right hand work. [Yup, he's Lutheran.] So un-saved people, un-saved nations, can and do enjoy God's blessing. They have been getting blessings since time immemorial —rain and sunshine, seedtime and harvest, progeny and

achievements. The rubrics for that are legal. Do right, get blessed. Do the opposite, expect the opposite. Doesn't get you reconciled to God, but it does forestall your demise.

In Lincoln's 1863 call to repentance he was executing God's left-hand work. A call to change our behaviors—to preserve the nation, to forestall our demise. It was not a call to “Repent and believe the Good News.” Read his text again. That other repentance in Mark 1:15 above comes from other agents, agents of God's other hand.

But left-hand work is the God-given calling of secular governments. It is constabulary duty, including the agenda of left-handed repentance. So even though such duty is not a happy one, when you're the nation's chief constable, just do it.

In our OT reading for this past Sunday (Epiphany 2) we heard this from I Samuel: “The Word of God was rare in those days.” Ouch, I said. Even words from the left side of God's mouth are rare in our land in these days—in both church and society. Will the inaugural message be different? It wasn't. But it is your duty, Mr. President. Just do it.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder