

**“...this nation, under God...”
(Reflections on the eve of Presidents’ Day)**

**February 17, 2019
Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

Abraham Lincoln has always been my son Danny’s favorite U. S. President. Danny is a history buff, and if you had asked him “Who was our 16th President?”, from a very early age he would have proudly responded correctly. We have been frequent visitors to the Lincoln Memorial, Ford’s Theatre and, across the street, the Peterson House. We have traced the furious escape route of John Wilkes Booth to the Surratt House and the Mudd House in the Maryland countryside. We have toured the sites and museums associated with Abe, the country lawyer, from Hardin, KY, to Springfield, IL, to Gettysburg, PA. In a Springfield, Illinois, cemetery, Abraham Lincoln’s tomb dominates among the headstones. I have learned that in 1865, en route from the nation’s stunned capital to be memorialized in central Illinois, Abraham Lincoln’s body passed through my hometown in Ohio, carried cross-county by a solemn funeral train, on tracks I rode across often on my bike.

As an admitted Lincoln groupie myself, and as a local church pastor, I have been struck by his understanding of Christianity: *“Whenever any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership—the Savior’s condensed statement of both Law and Gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself’, that church I will join with all my heart, and all my soul.”*

Me, too!

Though never associated with a particular denomination, Lincoln might have fit well with the Hyattstown Christian Church. Ironically, his roots and ours were in Kentucky! And though he never held membership in a local congregation, Lincoln is considered by some to be one of the most thoughtful of American theologians. Once, when pressed during an election campaign

for a definition of his religion, Lincoln quoted a faithful old man he had known in Indiana: "When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion".

Is there a more reverent eulogy...a more prayerful appeal...a more memorable sermon than that given by our 16th president on a hillside overlooking the Gettysburg battlefield, on November 19, 1863: "...that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom..."

We would do well, on this eve before President's Day, an annual commemoration in the United States of America, to consider briefly what that means: "...this nation, under God...", and perhaps, what it doesn't mean.

There are numerous religious pronouncements and events, long institutionalized in the fabric of a secular republic that coincidentally insists upon the separation of church and state:

The pledge of allegiance to the flag with its: "One nation, under God"

The currency with its: "In God We Trust"

The prayer that initiates the business of Congress every day

The annual National Prayer Breakfast

The Ten Commandments posted in courthouses across the country

The Declaration of Independence invoking the favor and protection of "God", and "Creator", and "Divine Providence"

And there are those pesky questions:

Why is it that most every politician, at the conclusion of most every public appearance, feels compelled to invoke the words: "God bless America"?

Why is it that every candidate for the U. S. presidency has had to subscribe to Christianity in some measure, be it Protestant, or in one case, Catholic?

Might a Jew, or a Muslim, or a Hindi, or a Buddhist, or an agnostic ever become President of the United States? What does religion have to do with a candidate's qualifications?

Why is it that a nation premised on the "self-evident truth" that "all men are created equal" required generations to pass before extending full rights to women and people of color?

Why is it that many of the educated, genteel founders of America abhorred slavery, yet bought and sold slaves? And why is it that the estate of only one of the founders, George Washington, freed those slaves upon his death?

It was Jonathan Swift who noted in 1711, well before thirteen determined colonies declared independence, in part so that they could enjoy religious freedom: "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

Ah, the shameful sin of slavery in the history of "...this nation, under God...".

I once attended a conference at Colonial Williamsburg on the subject of the inevitability of Civil War in the 1800's, given that the issue of slavery had not been resolved in the 1600's and 1700's. Among the Williamsburg actors portraying the realities of life and death for slaves in the colonial culture was fair-skinned, 29-year old Mary Hardy. I spoke with Mary following the performance, because she had shared with the audience that her mother is white and her father black, and that she has some Cherokee heritage as well. Exactly like my daughter Stephanie!

Mary the actress traces her mother's white ancestry to the first Governor of Rhode Island, a colony founded on the principle of religious freedom. That Governor bought and sold slaves—slaves who might possibly have been ancestors of Mary's black father!

“...This nation, under God...” begs for more conversation about race, and in turn about the tolerance and acceptance of different colors...ethnicities...orientations...religions.

America—“...This nation, under God...”—begs for more conversation about imperialism, as well.

There is a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation that we are the ones, collectively and individually, who must carry out God’s will on earth. Whereas the Psalms and the Proverbs, may speak of God’s favor upon the many nations, America historically exhibits a self-concept as the most-favored nation.

Consider President Lyndon Johnson’s advocacy before Congress of legislation as noble as voting rights for all citizens, in March of 1965: *“Above the pyramid on the great seal of the United States it says in Latin ‘God has favored our undertaking’. God will not favor everything that we do. It is rather our duty to divine God’s will. I cannot help but believe that God truly understands and really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight.”*

By multitudes crossing to a New World, America was likened not just to “the city on a hill”, but with Old Testament overtones as the New Israel. And W. H. Herndon, Abraham Lincoln’s law partner, spoke for many when he linked his friend to New Testament convictions: *“For fifty years God rolled Abraham Lincoln through his fiery furnace. He did it to try Abraham and to purify him for his purposes. This made Mr. Lincoln humble, tender, forbearing, sympathetic to suffering, kind, sensitive, tolerant; broadening, deepening and widening his whole nature; making him the noblest and loveliest character since Jesus Christ...I believe that Lincoln was God’s chosen one.”*

For a few months a couple of years ago, I received emails from an acquaintance who seems to me to confuse his nationalism with his religion. Among the most disturbing images that he sent me, and the most revealing evidence of his confusion, was the communication that included the impression of the American flag flying proudly within the outline of the Cross.

It is the venerated White House theologian himself who cautioned against our national vanity: *“We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom or 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.”*

“...This nation, under God...” On this eve before President’s Day, what does it mean...and what does it not mean? Is there not more conversation begging for attention on race...on color...on ethnicity...on orientation...on the role of religion...on religious diversity...on national fervor...on Divine favor?

Might we have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another? The church that inscribes over it’s altar the Savior’s condensed version of Law and Gospel is the church that would be of interest to me, as it would have been to a certain President of an earlier time:

“Whenever any church will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership—the Savior’s condensed statement of both Law and Gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself’, that church I will join with all my heart, and all my soul.”

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