

The Better Angels Of Our Nature

The Rev. Edmund Robinson

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Last Sunday I pointed out that this time of year presents us with convergences of notable people. So I talked about Charles Darwin, evolution and nature, and about St. Valentine and love, both erotic and non-erotic. I said that Darwin's theory of evolution as we have come to understand it supports the idea of love up to a point, but that the type of universal unconditional love preached by Jesus and touted in world religions was a bit unnatural, but it pointed the way we would hope to evolve.

But that is only part of the story. We now have to add in the third great figure from our February trilogy, Abraham Lincoln. What does Lincoln have to do with either love or nature?

To answer that question, I want to try to unpack this arresting phrase Lincoln used in his First Inaugural Address, "the better angels of our nature." What does that mean? What is "better"? Does this mean morally better or more skillful. Our word "angel" comes from the Greek angellaw which means messenger; who dispatches Lincoln's angels and does that give us a clue to how the divine interacts with nature.

Lincoln spoke these words on March 4, 1861 after he had taken the oath of office. The nation teetered on the brink of dissolution. What did he mean, the “better angels of our nature”? It would help if we set that in context.

I am aided this context-setting by a recent book by Jill Lepore, a Harvard historian and writer for the New Yorker, entitled *These Truths*¹. It is a one-volume history of the United States from Columbus’s landing to the present day. In it, Prof. Lepore looks at the values contained in the Declaration of Independence and how these ideals have intersected with the realities on the ground as the country developed. So the first piece of context for Lincoln’s First Inaugural address is the Declaration of Independence which, in the process of justifying the rebellion against Great Britain, claimed as a “self-evident” truth that “all men are created equal.” Logically, this is two levels of statement, one is a claim about the status of people and the other is a claim for the truth of the first statement.

Groucho Marx once said, “who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?” Our common experience gives us a certain trust in facts we can perceive with our five senses, and so propositions like “it is raining

¹New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2018

outside” can be justly called self-evident, but the equality of all people is not in that category.

Jill Lepore argues, as I have argued in a previous sermon that the equality of all people cannot be a statement which is “self-evidently” true, because so many Americans over the course of our history have refused to accept it as true. The equality of all people was not evident to the European colonizers of North America as they pushed the indigenous peoples of this continent from their land without legal cause, the equality of men and women was not evident to the men who denied women a say in their government while allowing men such power, and by the middle of the nineteenth it had become crystal clear that it was not evident to slaveholders that the human beings they order around unconditionally are the equal of their so-called masters.

The Golden Rule, to treat others as we would want to be treated was not only preached by Jesus but is found in most of the major world religions. It is utterly inconsistent with the system of chattel slavery which used to prevail in America and which was ended by the military force of the Union victory in the civil war. We know that now, Lincoln in 1861 could not have known how the war would come out.

It is the great paradox of American history and Black history that most of the white men who signed a document stating as self-evident truth

that all people are created equal themselves enslaved people. Moreover, those who supported legal systems of enslavement justified the enslavement by inventing a type of racial differentiation, claiming that people of African descent were constitutionally inferior to those of European descent.

This racism pervaded politics in the early nineteenth century, and it became impossible to have a dispassionate discussion. Congress itself, the highest deliberative body in the nation, imposed a gag rule so that the morality of slavery was off limits just where discussion was needed most. The compromises - the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act - held off actual warfare, but only temporarily.

Abolitionists talked to themselves and slavery's defenders talked to themselves but nobody was talking between the sides. Jill Lepore holds that there was virtually no place for honest and robust debate on the status of slavery under the U.S. Constitution until 1858, when U.S. Senator Stephen Douglas, Democrat of Illinois was running for reelection and was challenged by a former congressman named Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln tried showing up to Douglas' speeches and delivering his own speech in rebuttal, but the crowds that came to hear Douglas would not stay to listen to Lincoln. So Lincoln proposed publicly to Douglas that they have a series of debates, and to everyone's surprise, Douglas accepted. The debates

were printed in the daily newspapers and became favored readings among the public.

They were the first serious look in decades on the crucial issue absorbing the nation, whether human slavery was allowed under the Declaration of Independence and/or the Constitution and whether it could be practiced in the new territories being added to the union. Douglas argued that the signers of the Declaration of Independence did not have Blacks in mind when they said "all men."

"This Government was made by our fathers on the white basis. It was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever."

In effect, Douglas maintained that the purpose of the government was to maintain white supremacy.

Douglas charged Lincoln with being a zealot, which Lincoln denied: "I will say here, that I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so and I have no inclination to do so."

Douglas had also charged that Lincoln believed in the equality of the races. Lincoln replied, "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the black and the white races, but I hold that,

notwithstanding all this, there is no reason in the world why the Negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Douglas argued that Lincoln's assertion that Blacks were included in the Declaration of Independence was a slander on Thomas Jefferson, and Lincoln replied that the entire records of the world could be searched and not turn up one scrap of evidence that "the Negro was not included in the Declaration." Lincoln also reminded the audience that, while Jefferson certainly owned slaves, it was Jefferson who told a friend that he "trembled for his country when he remembered that God is just."

So we have our first piece of context for Lincoln's First Inaugural was the Declaration of Independence, and the second was the Lincoln-Douglas debates. The third piece is the Dred Scott decision.

Dred Scott was born into slavery but he was carried into a free state. He sued for his freedom. The case made its way through the courts until it finally reached the US Supreme Court. It is by common consent of legal scholars the worst supreme court opinion in the history of the country. A court is often faced with several lines of reasoning to reach a result. In the modern era, most Supreme Court opinions will not decide a constitutional question is there is a narrower ground for decision.

Chief Judge Taney turned that rule on its head, as if he were deciding not only whether Dred Scott was entitled to be a free man but also the justice of all the arguments for and against slavery. In the course of the decision, the court ruled invalid the Missouri Compromise, which set the whole nation back several squares in trying to balance the interests of slaveholders with abolitionists in the new territories. Most critically, Justice Taney ruled along the lines that Stephen Douglas had asserted in his debate with Lincoln, that there was no evidence that the Founding Fathers considered Blacks as persons under the law. This despite the fact that many states, such as Massachusetts, allowed free males of color to vote.

This crucial point of law rested on no evidence whatsoever, merely the say-so of the Chief Justice. It is hard to imagine a more despotic result. For the duration of the Civil War and until the postwar constitutional amendments were enacted, the Dred Scott case imported white supremacy officially into US law.

A fourth piece of context is the election of 1860, which was almost an extension of the Lincoln-Douglas debates about the Constitution and slavery. The Democratic party held its convention in Charleston, but they divided quickly into a minority (Northern) faction and a majority (Southern) one. The majority wanted a platform which would guarantee

the rights of all citizens to hold any form of property. When the minority faction would not agree to this, the delegates from the southern states walked out, and the convention collapsed.

The republicans met in Chicago in May. The party endorsed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and Lincoln, though a dark horse, won the nomination. Then the Democrats, reconvened in Baltimore found themselves still stalled but ultimately formed two parties, a southern and northern one. The Northern Democratic party nominated Douglas and the Southern party nominated U.S. Senator John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky.

Because the Democratic Party vote was split, the Republicans had an advantage. Lincoln won every northern state, all six states in which the Lincoln-Douglas debates had been published, and all four states in which Black men could vote. He won no states in the south, and there was unrest in the north, including attacks on abolitionists.

In the south, people began to talk seriously about secession. Although the US Constitution has pretty clear procedures for admitting new states into the union, it is completely silent on whether and under what circumstances a state could withdraw from the union. More to the point it was almost completely silent on the crucial question of whether

the national government could use force to prevent a state from seceding from the union.

This is what Lincoln faced as he took the oath of office on March 4, 1861: an incipient rebellion. His address reads today like a legal argument. He was a gifted lawyer, and had an exceptional talent for making a complicated issue sound simple.

In the opening paragraphs, he basically tries to assure the slaveholding states that he is not coming for their slaves. He quotes the position he took in the Douglas debates that he does not have any purpose to interfere with slavery in those states where it is lawful and does not think he has any right to do so. He quoted the Republican platform to similar effect:

“Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes.”

That is one of history's great ironies: the rhetoric of the Republican platform which Lincoln cites in his inaugural is almost identical to the guarantee of rights in property which the southern faction of the democrats had insisted upon, an insistence which split the party.

He then goes on to deal with the question of fugitive slaves, and says the constitution makes explicit provision for returning them to servitude.

Then Lincoln gets philosophical. He maintains that the entire scheme of the Constitution is a "Union that is perpetual." Of course, as I pointed out a minute ago, there is nothing in the constitution that says anything about the duration of the union or any one state's right to leave it.

He also tries to make the case that separation will be messy at best, using an example which might have been from his law practice:

Physically speaking, we can not separate. We can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them. A husband and wife may be divorced and go out of the presence and beyond the reach of each other, but the different parts of our country can not do this. They can not but remain face to face, and intercourse, either amicable or hostile, must continue between them."

He wraps up with a plea for the seceding states to wait and see what develops. He has tried his carrots; in the next to last paragraph he hints at his stick:

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the Government, while I shall have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend it."

Here is what Lincoln comes back to in the months and years ahead. The Constitution nowhere explicitly says that the Union created by it shall be eternal, or that a state, once it has joined the union, cannot un-join it. The only thing in the language of the constitution that gives the government created there any authorization for the use of force to prevent a secession is in the President's oath of office, to "preserve, protect and defend" the country. It is noteworthy that the oath is prescribed in so many words, and that it is so terse, but it is a very thin thread on which to hang the bloodiest war in American history. If this President or another one thought that negotiations or appeasement of the slave powers would best preserve the union, this oath would not stand in the way of such conduct that history would honor.

We all like to feel that the good guys won, and the fact that the Thirteenth Amendment was passed settling for once and for all that slavery was abolished in America and that the Fourteenth and Fifteenth followed in quick succession makes it easier to justify the horrendous costs borne by the Americans on both sides of the conflict.

And so we come, we twenty-first century explorers, into the last paragraph of Lincoln's First Inaugural address. Our orator has decided to try to end on a hopeful note, a note of unity.

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

This language envisions a musical piece, a song or sonata or symphony or maybe the angelic chorus heard by the shepherds outside of Bethlehem. The "mystic chords of memory" are meant to invoke our common history, the land for which our forefathers and mothers lived and died. It hints at the graves of Revolutionary War veterans but also those of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, even the bloodstained fields of

Kansas in the lead-up to the Civil War. The living and the dead join in this swelling chord which stirs the memory and makes us understand we have been friends before and can be again.

But what about those angels? Surely they will touch those chords of memory and make them resound deeper in the American soul.

As far as we know, Abraham Lincoln belonged to no church, but among all our Presidents down to our present one, he grappled most publicly with real religious questions. He was a crafty and subtle writer and astute politician, and it is hard to guess his real theological leanings, but Garry Wills, who wrote a book on the Gettysburg Address, concluded that Lincoln was most accurately described as a transcendentalist. His law partner, William Herndon, read the transcendentalists and was fond of quoting our own Unitarian forebear Theodore Parker, as Lincoln used Parker's phrase of government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" to close out his oration at Gettysburg. Theodore Parker belonged to the second generation of transcendentalists.

Transcendentalists are philosophical idealists. They know that a statement like "all men are created equal" is an ideal which will always be realized imperfectly in the real world. We have fallen short and will continue to fall short of its full promise. But the ideal, once stated, has a power of its own, a power which brought on a terrible swift sword, which

set brother against brother and buried the flower of a generation in graveyards throughout the south. It was a terrible price to pay, but it rid the nation of the practice of slavery, if not of its long moral stain which is the racism with which we continue to be afflicted.

I don't know that Lincoln was a transcendentalist or a Unitarian, but someone who writes the phrase "the better angels of our nature" is taking a theological stand. St. Augustine read St. Paul and came up with the idea of Original sin, a stain which is so basic that only the narrowest of winners gets into heaven. In the Reformation, John Calvin weaponized original sin by declaring that humans were inherently depraved and even fewer of them would make it into heaven. Against these gloomy prophets our Unitarian and Universalist forebears rebelled - including some who have served this very church. They want, we want, for the possibility to exist that we might be visited by our better angels. That we might be drenched in self-righteousness and ready to fire the cannons against those we have persuaded ourselves are our mortal enemies, though they were once friends, and just before we hit "send" on that email, [ping] the better angel of our nature is sitting on our keyboard and says, do you really want to start that Civil War all over again?

Now a word about the Second Inaugural, which took place on March 4, 1865, a little over a month before the war ended at Appomattox. It is

peculiar in American history in the depth of its theological speculation. Normally when American presidents invoke God, it is window dressing. They know that their audiences have different ideas about God and for most of the time there is no benefit to a president from stirring up purely theological controversies.

But the nation was bleeding, and though we know now that peace was a month away, Lincoln acted and spoke as if the war could continue for years more.

He talked about how both sides prayed to the same God, but that God could not answer the prayers of each side. That picture of a non-partisan God was quickly followed by a God who could not endorse slavery: "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."

And "If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him." This God is a fountain of vengeance, a terrible swift sword. It is also

worth noting in passing that Lincoln's phrase "the believers in a living God" avoids the question of whether Lincoln himself is numbered among those believers. He is using God as God is often conceived as a rhetorical foil but he is not adopting a belief in God for himself.

Then finally he wraps up the theological speculations of the Second Inaugural with a benediction as to how the humans listening to him must treat one another in the aftermath of this conflagration:

"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."

President Biden echoed these Lincolnian sentiments in the States of the Union speech last week: "let's finish the job."

Amen.

