

## “Where Are You Mr. Lincoln?”

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ  
Burlington, Vermont

Mark 13:1 to 8

*As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”<sup>2</sup> Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”*

*<sup>3</sup>When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, <sup>4</sup>“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?”<sup>5</sup> Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. <sup>7</sup>When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. <sup>8</sup>For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.*

Our passage this morning was written by Mark during a four-year war between the Jewish people and the Romans in Judea from the years 66 to 70 of the Common Era. When you are in the middle of a war, a familiar moral code often seems to be thrown out the window and all bets are off. The foundations that you thought were strong can begin to crumble. Look teacher, what large stones and what large buildings! To which Jesus responded, “it will all be destroyed” You can’t count on anything. “All will be thrown down! This is a sign that the end is coming when nation will rise up against nation and kingdom against kingdom”, Jesus said.

These apocalyptic words would have made sense to those living in that war zone. Jesus’ words may also make more sense to those who find themselves in war right now. For those who are fighting in Afghanistan as we speak its possible they feel they live in a chaos of biblical proportions where, not unlike the 1<sup>st</sup> century where the temple was burned to down, the ground seems to shift under their feet. In Iraq and now Afghanistan as Americans so many of us are shielded from these horrors. Only about 1% of the United States population serves in the military.

And yet there are many of examples where these horrors can really brought home to you. A few years ago, I was asked to do a wedding for a young couple from Texas. The man was very focused on getting his degree, after doing two duties of combat in Afghanistan. He was to marry a woman who was the child of two undocumented parents

from Mexico. As we prepared for the service, I asked about his best man. The groom explained that the man he wanted to be his best man could not attend. They he told how he stood just a few feet from his fighting buddy who was completely blown to smithereens by a landmine. Latter, as he prepared to stand on the altar he was so deeply over come with emotion. He was so happy that he was getting married and so overcome with grief in the same moment.

In Afghanistan, you can spend your days finding it difficult to sort out who are your enemies and who are your friends. Some Afghani soldiers who are trained to be loyal to our cause end up being embedded enemies. We also support these drone attacks to catch terrorists but there are a lot of civilian casualties in the process.

You are taught a lot about the difference between right and wrong as a child. Sometimes out of necessity you end up doing things or seeing things that can run so contrary to what you had been taught. During wartime, we can get so lost. The larger issues of justice and economic inequity that may lead to war in the first place can be obscured in the heat of battle. We can't see another person's humanity anymore. There are times in history and in the present time when we can be convinced that all that has mattered to us is being destroyed. The world is being turned on its head.

The opening scene in Lincoln shows a very and violent civil war scene. It is a graphic reminder of the shifting political ground in the civil war that ripped this country to pieces. So many tensions contributed to this conflict. To name just a few, there were plantation owners in the South, which deeply relied on being able to use the labor of slaves to harvest their cotton, willingly concocted elaborate moral and biblical explanations to justify their exploitation and preserve their economic position. Poor whites, feeling their wages were depressed because of the use of slave labor, would express their frustration by embracing some racist ideology. There were African Americans who found ways to speak out or who risked their lives to escape on the Underground Railroad. Others wanted speak out against this injustice but could only communicate their resistance in opaque ways. Negro spirituals became acceptable ways for blacks to express their frustration and speak of hope.

In the North, many may have fought against slavery not because of some deep moral quandary about slavery but because the use of slaves gave southern businesses an unfair economic advantage over the North. While there were many luminaries who found slavery a moral outrage, for others emancipation was really seen as a pragmatic matter to preserve their profits. For many in the North, abolition of slavery did not flow from any burning conviction to seek equality for all people. It sprung from a desire to relieve economic pain.

The complexities of the abolition movement played out in this very congregation where many left this church to form College Street Congregational Church which was more eager to take an anti-slavery position. It is not that we were without Christian principle in this place. One of our parishioners General Oliver Howard who fought for former slaves and went on to become the first president of Howard University to provide

education to black Americans in the reconstruction period. People here were all over the map about what they thought of slavery, the 13th amendment and equality for blacks. The variance of perspective mirrored the morale quandaries of our country as a whole.

As we ponder the chaos of the civil war period, we remember that Lincoln, with un-parallel skill, led this country forward. The pressures on President Lincoln were just so immense as he sought to hold together a deeply divided country embroiled in a war, which claimed the lives of over 3 quarters of a million people. Lincoln had his enemies from the beginning within his own party. His credentials were not the most impressive. According to Doris Kearns Goodwin in her book Team of Rivals Lincoln had seemed to come out of no where—a backwoods lawyer who had served one undistinguished term in the House of Representatives and had lost two consecutive contests for the US Senate.” The New York Herald in commenting on Lincoln’s nomination for president at the Republican Convention said, “The conduct of the Republican Party this nomination is a remarkable indication of small intellect growing smaller. They pass over statesmen and able men, and they take up a fourth rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar.”

Men with far more impressive credentials than Lincoln possessed surrounded Lincoln. A few of which were contenders for the Republican nomination. These men were highly critical of Lincoln. Before he became Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton was known to spread the most malicious gossip around about Lincoln seeking to discredit him at every turn. Some called Lincoln two faced because he could not bring himself to completely side with one faction over another. Indeed, there were Abolitionists in the Republican Party who felt he was moving far too slowly to abolish slavery. He would say he wanted to abolish slavery but in his public pronouncements suggested that he wanted to proceed more gingerly. Lincoln, however, had a remarkable self-deprecating wit. In response to being called two faced by Stephen Douglas his Democrat opponent, Lincoln, who was not known for his stunning complexion, asked the crowd if he had two faces, why did he think he had this one.

What was perhaps remarkable about Lincoln was his willingness to turn his fiercest critics into his closest advisors. Edwin Stanton, who was so critical of Lincoln and spread vicious rumors all around about Lincoln, was admired by Lincoln for his brilliance and was asked to lead the war effort. Lincoln had a big heart and could see good in people who could not see much virtue in him. Lincoln was prone to deep bouts of melancholy, but he could see glimmers of promise and hope amidst the chaos when others could not see it. He might have resonated with what Jesus said, “you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. These are birth pangs of a new world order yet waiting to be born.”

When Lincoln was assassinated, the grief that swept this land was so immense. Here was a man who brought the country through the worst imaginable war and offered hope, courage, wit and principled strength when everything familiar had fallen apart. It is said that Stanton, after delivering the most beautiful eulogy at Lincoln’s funeral, was consumed in grief and tears for days.

No matter what people thought of the president, his death had such a profound effect on the soul of this country. Indeed, the story goes of how this sanctuary for days was draped in black as people in this parish came to terms with this tragedy. During the civil war there were those seeking to divide and inflame.

In our current time, as we recover from the wounds of Iraq and still find ourselves immersed in the war in Afghanistan there are plenty of people out there who will not speak to our better angels. We also live in a confusing and charged political atmosphere when there are people who are willing to take advantage of our deepest held fears and lead us astray. There are pundits, preachers, politicians, who tell a lot of stories that have little basis in fact and are laced with deep prejudice. They spin these tales of deceit not because they care about the truth, their country or equality but because they care about their fame and profit. As Jesus said, "Beware that no one leads you astray. <sup>6</sup>Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." At this moment in our history when the world seems turned upside down and wars persist, I think we long to live with hope when despair seems more evident.

We must not be frightened by moral complexity. And yet we can also dare to find the courage to clear away the political brushfires, and with a loving heart and clarity of mind, have the courage to say what is true. We also need to have the courage to see virtues in our enemies and ask them to be our closest advisors and friends. In these complex times, I wonder where are you Mr. Lincoln? But it just may be the case that there are many Lincolns already in our midst if we but open our eyes. We just need to look for them.

In fact, it is very possible that Mr. Lincoln is not just out there but there is, in fact, a little bit of Lincoln, in your own soul. As the temples of our lives may seem to crumble sometimes, let us read the hidden signs and learn to live with hope truly believing that a new world is waiting to be born.