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St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
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Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Please be seated.

Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Convention: If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it.

That was Abraham Lincoln, June 17, 1858, in Springfield, Illinois, opening debate with Stephen Douglas. As candidates for the U.S. Senate, the two contestants would be debating the future of this nation with respect to its policy concerning slavery; beneath that, they were debating the morality of slavery; beneath that, they were debating the nature of morality as such.

Quoting Jesus, Lincoln warned there was a crisis coming: *A house divided against itself cannot stand.* He didn't believe this government could permanently remain partly slave and partly free. *I do not expect the union to be dissolved,* he said, *I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided.* With respect to slavery, the United States would inevitably become *all one thing or all another*.

And so it did. Lincoln lost that race for Senate, but he knew how to read his times. Largely thanks to him, in the end this house did, with respect to slavery, cease to be divided, and it did not fall.

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it.

Certainly, today Christianity is a house divided, and so now to some extent is our Anglican Communion. Certainly, today there continue to be divisions in America as well. But this is not going to be a sermon about divisions in America or the Anglican Communion. It's a sermon about the kingdom of God—where it is and wither it is tending. If we could first know that, we could better judge how we ought to live, what we ought to do.

Where is this kingdom? When is it coming?

As to "where," this kingdom must be as high and broad and deep as God. That means it is wider than our American political concerns, or fissures in the church. "He's got the whole world in his hands."

As to "when," the answer is "Already," and "Not Yet." The kingdom is everywhere: in, above, among, and around us. That's "Already." But it hasn't arrived in God's full glory.

That's "Not Yet." Christ was born. Christ has died, Christ has risen: that's "Already." Christ will come again. That's "Not Yet."

In Christ, we already see who God is and know what God will do. Karl Barth's teaching about prayer was, in essence, that in Jesus Christ all our prayers have already been answered and the answer is "Yes."

Dietrich Bonheoffer's understanding of the Kingdom of God is that it is not an ideal we must strive to achieve, but a reality in which we are invited to participate.[i] From Tegel prison, in the last months before his execution by the Nazis, Bonheoffer wrote this:

All that we may rightly expect from God, and ask him for, is to be found in Jesus Christ. . . . It is certain that we can claim nothing for ourselves, and may yet pray for everything; it is certain that our joy is hidden in suffering, and our life in death; it is certain that in all this we are in a fellowship that sustains us. In Jesus God has said Yes and Amen to it all, and that Yes and Amen is the firm ground on which we stand"[ii]

Such is life in a kingdom that is both "Already" and "Not Yet."

Last weekend, Julie and I visited Washington, DC to see our children, both of whom are there this summer working for the government. From our hotel, we looked out on the Washington Monument and Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials. We toured Mount Vernon and visited the Capitol. These visuals put me in a history-minded, patriotic mood. This affected how I heard this morning's reading from Colossians. Paul writes:

See to it that no one takes you captive . . . according to human tradition . . . and the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

This text is what made me think of Lincoln and the slaves. Imagine how African slaves, now transported to American plantations and living in the days leading to the Civil War, might have heard Paul's message: *See to it that no one takes you captive*.

And here they were, captives not "according to Christ," nor according to the deeper principles and true spirit of the American republic. They were trapped by a world that wouldn't live up to its own convictions.

Talk about "Already" and "Not Yet": In 1963, Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and told the world that black Americans had come to "cash a check" written by the architects of our republic.

In the Constitution, the principles of freedom and equality under the law for all persons were there already, but the slaves had not yet been permitted to participate. What held them back was, first, human custom and tradition, which treated them as less than fully human; and, second, an "elemental spirit of the universe," in this case the brute reality of the economics undergirding slavery. It was a profitable way to grow cotton and tobacco.

Then came Lincoln, laying an axe to the root of the trees.

Earlier, I said the Kingdom of God is wider than fissures in the church or American political divisions. That truth does not mean that God is "neutral."

Lincoln probably understood both parts of that statement, and appreciated the ambiguity of his role with respect to God's purposes, better than any president before or since.

Lincoln certainly did not buy the silly idea that "religion and politics don't mix." His politics were grounded in a deep-seated moral, in the last analysis a religious, worldview.

Lincoln's debate opponent, Douglas, regard the morality of slavery as finally a political question—something to be determined by voters. Lincoln believed that we, as voters, are ultimately accountable to a judgment higher than our own authority. He believed that in taking his political position he was, as best as he could tell, advancing the purposes of God.[iii] As he would put it, he was doing the right as God had given him to see the right. Lincoln did not believe that God was neutral.

But he was also deeply sensible that God's will is not always easy to discern. He didn't claim the North was pure. He knew some southerners were sincerely firm in their conviction that they were doing right as God had given them to see the right. He acknowledged that the rule of God, the judgment of God and the love of God somehow encompassed both parties, and their armies, in the war.

We took a tour of the Capitol, guided by an Arkansas Senate Intern by the name of Mary Olive Keller. Our guide was new to the job, but she knew her stuff. Passing through the halls of Congress, we paused at a small, unimportant-seeming table—it was the podium from which Lincoln had delivered his Second Inaugural Address.

March 4, 1865.

It was becoming clear that the war was nearly over and that the North had won. But rather than thumping his chest and celebrating victory, Lincoln lays before his audience a vision of the American republic under the ruling providence of God.

Both North and South had expected an easier victory he said, and

a result less fundamental and astounding. 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.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword, as was

said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'

It is July 25, 2010.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, as Americans, that happier days are coming around the bend; that the oil rupture in the Gulf is finally plugged and the clean-up can begin in earnest; that the economy will rise, and deficits will fall. We pray and hope for a rising tide of justice, peace and prosperity for our nation and the world.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, as Christians, for the church; that God will strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, restore the penitent, and heal our various divisions throughout the world. We hope and pray for a church that has been intellectually, morally and spiritually renewed.

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, as human beings, that God's will be done on earth, as it is in heaven—and that, in God's good time, this kingdom will at last arrive in the fullness of his glory.

Until that time, and as we hope and pray, let us also act, as Mr. Lincoln taught us:

With firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right;

And:

With malice toward none and charity for all.

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[i] A paraphrase from memory.
[ii] Dietrich Bonheoffer to Eberhard Bethge, from Tegel Prison, August 21, 1944. Bonheoffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972),391
[iii] I base this interpretation on a *Wall Street Journal* review of a book by Allen Guelzo, titled *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates That Defined America.* In those debates, the

central controversy had to do with slavery. The question was: as territories became new states and were added to the union, would these states be "slave" or "free"? Douglas argued that each state should decide this issue for itself. Guelzo suggests that this meant that Douglas placed ultimate moral responsibility in the body politic — and that's the notion Lincoln challenged. Quoting: "Lincoln, though hardly a fiery abolitionist, stood for a permanent, moral democracy based on God–given rights. This conviction placed limits on the public will and deemed slavery an illegitimate and unsustainable institution." Newt Gingrich, "A Famous War of Words," a review of Allen G. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America*, in *The Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2008, Section D, page 7.