

LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG
4th of July Sunday –July 6, 2014 –Communion –I Corinthians 15: 51-58
The Church of the Covenant

At the height, or perhaps I should say at the depth of the Civil War (19 November 1863), Abraham Lincoln traveled to a small town in Pennsylvania, Gettysburg, to deliver an address, commemorating the war dead and a new cemetery. His "Gettysburg Address" is referred to as "the words that remade America". (Gary Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg). In a mere 272 words the President fortified the country to continue the bloodiest war in our history. The writing and delivering of the address was fraught with obstacles; Lincoln at every turn could have decided not to persevere. But he did nevertheless. And penned the words which school children to this day memorize and study. How was Lincoln to persevere? And how are we in adversity to do the same?

He was not originally invited to attend. He was not originally invited to speak. Indeed, his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, had a sense of foreboding and urged him not to go. He persevered. He was not feeling well and could have begged off for this reason alone. He was ill-prepared; he was still writing his address on the train as he made his way to the battlefield. He was roundly criticized at this point in the war for the terrible casualties. Every Mother's son who was lost on the battlefield impacted his heart; he wrote handwritten, personal letters to every Mother who lost her son at Gettysburg. One Mother lost three sons; he wrote –"never has anyone laid so great a sacrifice on the altar of liberty". It hangs on the wall of Harvard University as the premier example of the best prose ever written by an American. Presidents often did not speak publically after election to office; it was deemed unseemly and beneath the office. So the main speak of the event, Edward Everett, the greatest orator of his day, spoke for 2 and ½ hours without notes. It was said of Edward Everett he could make people cry simply by saying the word "Mesopotamia". And then the tall and gangly, physically unimpressive Lincoln got up to speak and took out the most recent draft, intoning among other words that "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here..." he spoke those 272 words that most of the crowd couldn't even hear, and sat down. Presidents ordinarily did not speak at such events but Lincoln persevered. People thought he hadn't even begun, so short were the remarks. Initially, it was deemed a great failure. Lincoln now clearly sick with small pox, climbed back on the train to Washington, D.C. and his faithful friend and close confidant and valet, William Johnson, a freeman African American, who Lincoln had tried out his address on earlier, tried to nurse the sickened President back to health. Lincoln recovered, but Johnson contracted small pox, succumbed and died. The President lost one of his dearest friends and closest confidants in order to deliver the Gettysburg Address. Time after time he could have quit; but he did not. Time after time he had every excuse to turn back; but he did not. He persevered. And because he persevered we have one of the finest set of remarks that reshaped the nation and its history; words that still soar and live; words that have long outlived their maker.

And Lincoln persevered throughout the darkest days of the Civil War. Many counseled him to sue for peace; but he did not. Many said the cost of the war in the lives of men was too great. But he had promised to preserve the union, one and inseparable, now and forever. "That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion". And he had come to believe that slavery was a sinful blight on the nation; the war, God's judgment on an America that said it believed in freedom...but only for some. "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. " Thank God Lincoln persevered. Thank God that Lincoln did not turn away from a UNITED COUNTRY and a proposition that all men are indeed endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that indeed all men are created equal. What an ignoble, sad and

poorer country we would be today had not this one man persevered; had he not stayed the course; had he not fought the demons of doubt within his own soul; had he not lived and died for the freedom he professed in his heart and believed with all his might to be true. There are times and seasons to persevere. There are times to stand up for what one believes, no matter the cost. We are tempted to give up. But the dawn always comes at the darkest moment. We are tempted to give up just at the cusp of victory. Never give up. Never cease to believe. Never lose hope. Remember always the words of our scripture for today –“*BE STEADFAST, IMMOVABLE, ALWAYS ABOUNDING IN THE WORK OF THE LORD, KNOWING THAT IN THE LORD YOUR LABOR IS NOT IN VAIN.*” (1 Corinthians 15: 58)

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, persevered for us and our salvation. He set his face to go to Jerusalem, full well knowing that he would find mockery, torture and death there. He endured the abandonment of his disciples, for when the shepherd was struck down, all the sheep fled. He endured the agony of prayer in the garden and the silence of His own Father in heaven. He endured betrayal from his friend, who betrayed Him with a kiss. He was beaten and scourged beyond recognition. He was nailed to a cross where the weight of His own body finally suffocated Him. At any moment he could have cried out to His Father in heaven and asked for an army of angels to come and take Him down from the cross. This, Jesus did not do. For the love of us, He gladly went to the cross. Steadfast, immovable, abounding in the work the Lord had given Him to do. Knowing that His life would not be in vain, but that His heavenly Father would vindicate Him and bring life out of death and victory out of ignominious defeat.

Many here today might be discouraged by the recent actions of the General Assembly; some on either side of the arguments might be tempted to give up on the church; it would be easier, wouldn't it? Go some place where everyone *seemingly* agreed with one another, the grass appears to be greener (it never is), to go off into some backwater never to be heard from again, to leave here and to go over there (wherever “there” might be), even to give up on faith itself and just quietly slip away. “I tried that church thing once”, you might say, “but, man, its so hard.” Yes it is; yes, it is. I remember standing up at this last General Assembly and just getting plowed under every time. The juggernaut was rolling and it was rolling over me, every time. I think I lost every vote. I have the cleat marks on my face to prove it. Not about “winning” or losing; about being faithful. What a privilege it was to make my stand for the truth as I believe it to be. What an honor to stand up and say, this is what the Bible and the Confessions say. What a profound joy it was to get pushed down one more time, again and again, and to stand up again and again and point to the One, my Lord and Savior, Jesus, who persevered for me...and God help me, that I want to persevere for HIM. Knock me down a thousand times and I will get back up 1,001 times just for the extreme honor that it is to point to my Lord and Savior and to testify to what HE has done for me. Beloved, whatever your perspective, don't run away. Stand. Be steadfast, immovable. Persevere in life and in faith...for then it is in the Lord our labor is not in vain...And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*

Note: I am grateful to the book, “Lincoln at Gettysburg” by Gary Wills for the insights into the writing of the Gettysburg address mentioned in this sermon.