

DISCOURSE

THE DAY AFTER THE

RECEPTION OF THE TIDINGS

OF THE ASSASSINATION OF

PRESIDENT LINCOLN,

PREACHED IN THE

South Congregational Church,

CONCORD, N. H., APRIL 16, 1865.

BY THE PASTOR,

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DISCOURSE.

JOHN 11: 53.

“Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death.”

It is no new thing for the good to be hated, and to be martyred. Eighteen hundred years ago a Divine One walked the earth; yet *he* had bitter enemies, who foully plotted against his life; nor did their malice subside till their fiendish machinations were successful; with a traitor's aid they compassed his death one Friday afternoon in April, or the month most nearly corresponding to it in the Jewish Calendar. That day has been remembered. A large part of the Christian world annually commemorate it with enjoined fastings and penitential sorrow. Day before yesterday was its anniversary; the day once made dark with the crucifixion. It is by a strange permission of Providence that henceforth the American mind will associate with Good Friday and its dying Lord, the death of our honored President. Providence has permitted the singular coincidence, sad and sacred. Nor was it any dishonor to thee, President Lincoln, to have fallen by the hand of such an assassin—the victim of such malice. The friendship of such men would have been a dishonor—men in whose hearts was still rampant the demon of secession and rebellion. This is not the

first case where hatred, and wrong, and violence, have been an eternal honor to him who has experienced them. Thine assassination by Secessia's hand is the very crown of thy patriotism and worth!

And murder, murder just like this, horrible as hell could conceive, which has stunned the nation this day, which will shock the world, we had, perhaps, full reason to expect. When, four years ago this last fall, the votes of the nation declared to the South that they could no longer rule the country, that their power had departed, then were formed plots to seize upon the government by violence, and prevent the rightful occupant from ever reaching the Presidential Chair. "Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death." We well remember how, only through the adroit management of friendly railroad officials, the President reached Washington at all. We could not believe it till the fact was forced upon us, that there was a definite, well-laid plan to assassinate him on the way; and that leading southern men were both cognizant of the plot and accessory to it. We know, however, that for a long time guards were felt to be necessary about the Presidential mansion. We know how that, from time to time, discoveries were made of new plots, requiring new precautions. We remember how, when for health's sake the President had retired to the "Soldiers' Retreat" as a summer residence, it was found requisite for his safety that he should be daily accompanied in and out from Washington with a mounted escort. The threats of the dangers of assassination thus have always hung about him.

Or is it surprising that the black heart and bloody

hand of the genius of slavery and rebellion should have been equal to an act like this ; the pitiless heart, the savage hand, long familiar with lacerating the naked bodies of bondmen and bondwomen, tearing husbands and wives asunder, parents and children ;—that black heart which could nourish treason such as this rebellion has brought forth, how natural a nest for such a project of assassination ! That matricidal hand lifted against the mother-country of us all—how slight a thing for it to wield the assassin's weapons ! And when, by the recent victories, it had at last become evident to the blindest southern pride and hate that the miserable cause of the Confederacy was meeting its miserable end, then, stung to madness in its disappointed rage, this act is most naturally committed : like the devils of the bottomless pit, ruined themselves, their only remaining care to ruin as much with them as possible. I know of no parallel out of hell. The nearest to it in human history is the act of Herod, who, when he knew that he must die, incarcerated the most eminent citizens of the realm, with strict orders for their assassination at the moment of his death, that there might be some mourning in the land. Oh that it had been the will of heaven in like manner to have frustrated this infernalism as it did that !

Yes, we had reason enough to infer this act, but it had been deferred so long we fondly hoped that safety was secured. Alas ! how terribly were we mistaken ! Oh, my country, my country ! How have I, in these late years, mourned for thee in thy prostration in the dust !—at the humiliating spectacle thou has made for the derision of the nations—who have scoffed at

thy struggles and thy sorrows — who have mocked at thy departing greatness and glories, as they hoped ; who have looked upon thy gigantic efforts against thy foe, thy wounds and thy blood, as the degenerate thousands of the ancient amphitheater stretched their eager necks, and with fiendish satisfaction gloated over the struggling gladiators of the arena,

“ Butchered to make a Roman holiday ! ”

And now, when at last I saw thee, my noble country, emerging from thy humiliation and disgrace, and springing to thine old position of influence and renown, and more,— Oh, to see thee present this most humbling sight of all before the world, of having nourished such a monster, capable of such an act, and of having such a deed committed upon thy soil ! for, excepting *the* murder of the ages, the crucifixion itself, human history seems not to have furnished its parallel.

But, my hearers, are there any words to be uttered this hour, beside those of bitter lamentation for the act and execration of it ? Can I to-day perform my usual duty of uttering God’s lessons to you, as suggested by the volume of his word or the book of his providence ? Sufficient time has not yet elapsed to enable us to recover from the appalling, bewildering effects of the tidings. We can not yet look upon the matter with a clear and steady eye. Still, I feel there are some things I can even now say.

And, first : I feel that we are more than ever in God’s hands ; that he is most directly and conspicuously dealing with us. Think of our feelings the

past two weeks till yesterday. There were no bounds to our joy — we could not express it! And how that joy brought the nation in gratitude to God; the nation never so acknowledged him in any joy. Every speech that was made did it; men did it one with another; men who seldom spoke his name felt then they must speak of him; where men gathered in the business mart, and on the exchange, doxologies must be sung, and prayer and the devout offering of thanksgiving be made. I am so glad God was thus acknowledged; not indeed as he ought to have been, but yet as he never was before, it gives us such ground for trusting that this terrible thing is something other than a divine rebuke. And now our sorrow is as great as was then our joy. The very greatness of these extremes in the permissions of God's providence, are a proof that he is as signally with us. It is not in wrath, it is not in divine desertion that we are experiencing this. The magnitude of the previous mercy shows this. That was in one sense a gracious preparation for this; and we have still all our late successes and victories to lean upon to strengthen and support us.

It is possible that without great and increasing elation, there may have been some danger that we should come to lose our sense of dependence — come to feel as though all our troubles were past, no more dangers to fear, and so soon become God-forgetting and self-sufficient. I do not know; perhaps God saw this was about to be — and he anew humbled us, and taught us, right in the midst of our highest joy, that without his preservation, every cup of our hopes and satisfactions will be dashed.

Long ago I learned to feel that the more striking the events in our personal experience, the more evidently God is dealing with us as individuals. I do not know why I should have any less strong convictions when applying the rule to national events.

II. But I see more clearly the hand and the mercy of God in not allowing this event to occur until it did. Had the first intentions of assassination, and the first attempts four years ago been successful, it is difficult to say how dire might have been the results. Anarchy, very likely, would have sprung upon us at once. Our institutions, our circumstances, certainly then could not have borne such a trial, so critical a test as they can now ; or if the event had occurred at any time subsequently until the present. And think what an interposition of the divine goodness we ought to call it, and most in the loyal States will call it, that the President was not taken away before completing the great acts of his administration, especially the two which have most signalized it, the bringing an end to slavery and to the rebellion.

III. Another thought which presents itself is, that perhaps this last act was needed to complete the infamy of the rebellion and secession, and of that nefarious system of human servitude out of which secession and rebellion grew. Such an act as this is the legitimate offspring of those monsters, and nothing else. It is the very hard-hearted pitilessness and savagery of slavery which can thus wrest the life of the devoted husband from directly beneath the eyes of the loving wife, and tear the life of the fond father directly from

the embraces of dear children ; slavery can educate to such bloody heartlessness. It was the hand of rebellion and secession that first recklessly and ruthlessly snatched war's flaming brand and waved it challengingly and defiantly in the eyes of this government and this nation ; and it is the same hand of revolting and appalling recklessness and crime which has now seized the assassin's weapons, and, after with one of them murdering the defenseless man, the husband, the father, the President, waved the other with that tragic style and devil's heroism which have characterized the actors in the rebellion all along. Perhaps this last consummating act was needed to open fully the eyes of foreign nations sympathizing with secession to the true animus of the rebellion. I doubt if we hear any more commendations of it, or apologies for it ; it will at last have succeeded in awakening the detestation and abhorrence of the civilized world, as it long ago should have done.

And I am not sure but that we too needed this further deed of horror to be done, that we might be preserved from all false leniency toward that trio of abominations, slavery, secession, and rebellion ; that we might at once proceed with unsparing and speedy hand to root out every vestige of them. I have of late feared much lest their downfall should not be stamped with sufficient ignominy for the best instruction and safeguard of coming generations. There is little fear now, however.

At the outset of this rebellion I, in this house, laid the charge and crime of it at the door of slavery ! Little did I think, that in its closing hours such a final illustration of its general character and leadings would

be furnished. But this foul, fell act comes from the same influences which could lead, ten years ago, to that brutal, murderous beating of the Massachusetts senator, defenseless in his legislative seat; which four years ago could fiendishly fling the horrors of civil war into this land of happiness and peace; which afterward could wretchedly imitate that miserable villain of two hundred and sixty years ago, Guy Faux, and mine the Libby Prison to destroy, at a single explosion, our prisoners, if Capt. Dahlgren should seek to liberate them, and then, subsequently, without shame, justify the act; and which could deliberately starve so many thousands of our poor captive soldiers, if to death they did not care, out of all possible future serviceableness to their country they meant, if not to death; this last work of horrid assassination is but the latest. God grant it the final flowering of the same hellish plant!

IV. And not only may this foul deed have been needed to put the last possible brand of infamy upon the rebellion and its primal cause, but it also may have been desirable as the final, highest test of the strength of our institutions and form of government. The rebellion and its subjugation have been a fearful but most triumphant test; this is a further, in the view of some it would be even a severer. In other lands the assassination of the chief ruler has perhaps usually been the precursor of anarchy and revolution. Wisely was it that not four hours were suffered to elapse before our Vice-President was sworn into the office of President. As foreign nations see us pass through the ordeal of the termination of one Presi-

dent's career by violence, and the immediate introduction to the office of his successor, without commotion, and the continuance of each department and office of the government without any infringement upon the usual order and routine, it may be regarded as under God the last, highest test of the sufficiency of our Republican form of institutions for any and all emergencies.

V. Again, it may be observed, that very possibly the work of President Lincoln was now done, so far as he could complete it. Very possibly another could better take it up and carry it on. He has done a great work — a marvelous work ; history will record it as of unsurpassed magnitude and honor. He could not have added to his fame. The remaining work is now that of reconstruction, and the meting out the best measure of blended clemency and justice to those who have been traitors and rebels. Very possibly a southern loyal man may know better their true spirit and deserts, and decide upon the better course of treatment with respect to them. To us, indeed, it seems as though Mr. Lincoln could carry on the remaining work better than any other ; yet it may be otherwise. To us, it seems, at the least, a fearful experiment to turn from the always discreet, self-poised, temperate and sober man, to put the highest authority of this government into the hands of a man who has so recently and unutterably disgraced himself and us through him. But if the imposing upon him this great burden of responsibility shall have the same effect the similar imposing of a similarly weighty responsibility is said to have had upon the great

Lieutenant-General of our armies, he has abundant talents, knowledge and experience for the position. God keep him and bless him. God bless President Johnson! My own conviction is that he will better complete what Mr. Lincoln has so incomparably thus far carried on, than even our lamented late President himself, if spared, would.

VI. Yet again, it may be observed, that this fearful event will have a mighty and happy tendency to unite our people. It is not going to have the effect of throwing us into anarchy, or of confusing any of the operations of our government, or retarding at all the progress of our triumphant quelling of the rebellion, as perhaps the perpetrator of this crime and his associates imagined. It will be a new and signal illustration of the folly of revenge. This act will utterly destroy what little remaining sympathy there was in any quarter for the falling cause of the confederacy. It will establish an ineradicable aversion toward it in the breasts of all right-minded men, of all patriots, of all lovers of law and order, of all friends of their fellow-men, of all desiring the welfare of mankind. He had *centered* upon him those animosities every where felt toward those who stood by our government; those animosities, to a great extent, will be buried with him; — while even where, to any extent, they may partially or temporarily remain, his sad and wicked end will greatly soften and ameliorate them. Diversities of political views and feelings can be no longer violently cherished over such a grave; we shall all together deprecate the deed, and the causes which led to it. There are none of us, I think, who

will go forward to our work and duties as citizens of this Republic any the worse for going on more soberly and sadly. This event falls most exactly in the line of God's dealing with us ever since the commencement of our difficulties, by never letting us long rest in our dependence on any individual. He has signally disappointed us in this respect, by death and otherwise, and utterly defeated all our tendencies to the adulation of any one. It seems to be his great purpose thus, as in other ways, that, under him, our people must look to themselves for the accomplishing what they need and desire. It is a great effort of his providence to elevate and strengthen the individual sense of duty and obligation among all the people. It is a republicanizing and democratizing of the people on a plane of elevation and importance in advance of every thing thus far in our national experience and character.

But most imperfectly can our poor discernment now interpret the lessons of this event. Let us at least "humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt us in due time" from the dust of our present abasement and sorrow. Let us together give our united, undying enmity to those great causes and evils which have culminated in this final crime. Let us give ourselves anew to the love and service of our country, on whose altar such sacrifices have been laid. Let us in the presence of such a death realize anew the old-urged truth that no position gives immunity from the grave, and that every life hastens speedily to render its account to God.

And now rest thee, thou man beloved by more hearts and more beloved than any man in this nation before, and by none more than the dusky race, who will ever hail thee as their deliverer from bondage; thou man—mercifully raised up by heaven for the fearful crisis of our times—singularly endowed, doubtless, with the qualities most needed for the peculiar and arduous position to which thou wast called—by turns doubted of by every class and party, but in the end centering upon thyself more regard and confidence by far than any other;—thou kindly-hearted man, incapable of malice or ill-will long retained, thy very genialness and humor, a gift sustaining thee, perhaps, when others would have sunk beneath depression and care;—thou man of the people—thou perfect representative of the character and the admirableness of our institutions, which can elevate the humblest and the poorest to the loftiest position among us, and fit worthily and well to fill it; thou wouldst not thyself have regretted that thy blood should mingle with that of the myriad patriot heroes, the victims of the spirit and deed of this rebellion—one affluent more of that mighty tide of blood ransoming our land;—how much better thy dead and mutilated form to the living form of the now fugitive head of the rebellion;—thou diest, a nation bending over thee in sorrow and in love;—he lives, a nation's execrations following him for evermore!—rest thee, worn and weary with the cares of State in most unprecedented burden, our need and our perils imposed on thee—well and bravely hast thou borne the burden, untiringly, uncomplainingly; and now thou hast laid it off; not too soon for thee, we pray it may not

be too soon for us! — the last, greatest murder of the rebellion, the last, greatest sacrifice for us; — the hatred of our enemies toward us laid on thee — their venom concentrated upon thee — their malice, by the most detestable of crimes, wreaking a coveted, cowardly vengeance; — bearing so much, suffering so much, and at last thus murdered, simply because thou wert *our* President, sustaining, directing, defending, delivering *our* government; — rest thee now from thy great and weary work! history will give thee a high and spotless fame; it will record thee as one of the most amiable and unexceptionable of men, as one of the truest and noblest of patriots, as one of the wisest and ablest of Presidents; — rest thee in the Republic's undying honor, reverence, gratitude and love — and may a Redeemer's advocacy and blood crown thy soul with celestial glory, immortal happiness, and everlasting life!