

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

February 18, 2007

**On the Edge of Glory**

2 Corinthians 3:18

One of the darkest days of the Civil War for Abraham Lincoln came in September of 1862. Union troops were defeated by Confederate forces led by Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee at the Second Battle of Bull Run. This was a defeat which crushed the hopes of Lincoln and his cabinet that the rebellion could be quickly put down. The death toll was already huge and it would certainly grow much worse. It was now clear that the struggle would be long and unbelievably bloody. A member of Lincoln's cabinet wrote in his diary that the president was in terrible anguish and at the point of hanging himself (Ronald C. White, *Christian Century*, March 8, 2005, page 11).

This defeat marked a turning point in Lincoln's view of the war. There is also evidence that this moment was a turning point for Lincoln's theological pilgrimage. Lincoln had long been a skeptic in matters of religion. He had reacted strongly against the revivalism of his childhood. His wife was a member of First Presbyterian Church in Springfield. She persuaded her husband to rent a pew, but he remained aloof in his attitude toward the church and attended only occasionally. Lincoln's church attendance pattern improved after he had been in Washington struggling with an intractable national crisis. At the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church he listened to sermons by Phineas Gurley which expounded John Calvin's theological emphasis on the providence of God. After the horrendous defeat at the Second Battle of Bull Run Lincoln began to think very seriously about the mystery of God's activity in the world.

We find the disciples, Peter, James, and John making a similar spiritual journey in the ninth chapter of Luke's gospel. These were the three disciples who accompanied Jesus on an excursion to the top of a mountain. The subject on this day was death. When the disciples made the climb with Jesus their ears were still ringing from Jesus' shocking prediction of his death. This was a prediction which went against the grain of what they expected of a messiah. It did not fit with their understanding of who Jesus was or the contribution they expected him to make to Israelite society.

Their sense of confusion was not relieved by what happened after they arrived at the summit. Jesus was in prayer. Suddenly his appearance began to change. Then two figures became visible at Jesus' side. One was Moses who represented the law. The other was Elijah who represented the prophets. But the strangest thing of all is that these figures were talking to Jesus about his death. They were speaking of the terrible things

which will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. It was as if the prediction of Jesus' death was being endorsed by the chief representatives of their religious tradition. And then came the cloud which descended upon them like a heavy mist. This was the most frightening part because they understood all too well the meaning of the cloud. The cloud represented the mysterious presence of God.

When the disciples descended from the mountain that day their way of seeing had been changed. They were forced to come to grips with a truth that they did not want to face. Jesus was traveling the way to the cross. Somehow that suffering must be understood as an expression of God's purpose for the world.

Paul wrestled with the same issue in third chapter of his second letter to the Corinthian church. There Paul remembers Moses coming down from the mountain carrying the covenant written on tablets. There is something about Moses which makes the people deeply afraid. The book of Exodus describes Moses at this moment as having the glory of God reflected in his face. Out of deference to the people's fear, Moses begins to wear a veil to hide his face.

Paul argues that the purpose of Moses' veil was not just to hide his face. It was also intended to conceal Moses' message. The people were happier with Moses' face veiled because they were not ready to come to terms with the painful truth about their relationship with God. They lived on the edge of God's glory and did not want to be confronted by its implications for their lives. But for Paul, Jesus came to remove the veil. He came to challenge us to come to terms with what God is doing in our world. The purpose of the transfiguration was to change the disciples into people who are capable of following Jesus on the way to the cross.

An anguished Abraham Lincoln made this kind of journey after the Second Battle of Bull Run. He sat down to put his thoughts on paper. Listening to Presbyterian sermons had given him a vocabulary for reflecting on God's activity in the world. In notes found after his death and later named, *Meditation on the Divine Will*, Lincoln wrote:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union, without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

People on both sides of the conflict were clinging to the veil that enabled them to claim that God was on their side. Lincoln found the spiritual insight to confront the truth beyond the veil. He came to see that God was not on the Union side. Neither was God ready for the suffering of the war to end. Lincoln recognized that God was acting in quiet power to achieve a purpose which was different from the purpose of either side. Two and a half years later in his second inaugural address, Lincoln was more specific in identifying God's purpose for the war. There he stated that the war was God's judgment against both sides for having perpetuated the offence of slavery. Slavery was the demon that had poisoned the American experiment.

The veil is removed for Peter, James, and John as they come down from the mountain. In the valley below Jesus is approached by a desperate father whose son is in the clutches of evil. A demon has taken control of the boy's life causing him to fall to the ground in convulsions. When Jesus ministers to this boy evil is defeated. In that moment the disciples know that they no longer live on the edge of glory. They have moved beyond the veil. Their world is being transformed by the quiet power of God.