

## Hope that “Better Angels” Prevail

In his first inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln closed with an appeal for the continuation of the Union. The country stood on the brink of civil war. Lincoln argued passionately against secession. He held out hope that support for the Union would revive when “the mystic chords of memory” shared by citizens North and South were touched “by the better angels of our nature.”

Tragically, the better angels did not prevail. Far too often in human history, the worst angels of our nature seem to have the upper hand.

I was raised in a Christian community in which it was a matter of some debate whether human beings are basically good or basically sinful. Though I believe human beings are basically good, I am not optimistic about the human race. Human beings are basically good much like gnats, rats, and rattlesnakes are basically good. We are all living creatures who relish the goods and pleasures of existence. Unfortunately, the good of one often conflicts with the good of another. Moreover, we humans are frequently mistaken in our perceptions of the good. Self-centeredly and shortsightedly, we often pursue goals and take actions that seriously harm both others and ourselves. (Yes, some individuals also commit acts of enormous cruelty. But that does not mean they are totally depraved. However perverse, most have their reasons, I suspect.) One may hope that some day the better angels will prevail.

All this said, the presence of destructive or evil forces and powers runs very deep in our life together. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and he was right in many ways. It is extraordinarily difficult to conform our collective life to standards of morality and virtue. Moreover, our highest social creations require great numbers of capable, dedicated, well-intended people working together. But a relative handful of people with sinister designs can wreak havoc for all.

People today appear hungry for a message of hope. We must understand, however, that it will take extraordinary determination to turn back the darkness brought on in recent years by fear-mongering, flagrant human rights abuses, disregard of the Constitution, and all manner of political subterfuge. Almost two years after his inauguration, Lincoln soberly told the Congress, “The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise -- with the occasion. . . . We must disenthral ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

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