

Reference point: "With malice toward none; with charity for all"

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

My brother was the first to call. We chatted about Barry Bonds: What justice is there in his going four for 27 in the 1991 play-offs as a Pittsburgh Pirate (our favorite team as young fans), and then, as a San Francisco Giant, hitting 73 home runs, four of them in his last six times at bat? Suddenly my brother let me have it. "Are you sure it was the Second Inaugural?" he asked. It was one of those stunning moments when something becomes instantly clear. "It was the Annual Message to Congress," I replied.

"You said it was the Second Inaugural in the Christian Century. You're in trouble." He was referring to my citation of Abraham Lincoln's words in our October 10 issue: "As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves and then we shall save our country."

I love those words so much I have them memorized. And therein lies my problem. I didn't double-check the reference. I know better. After nearly four decades of preaching I have learned over and over again never to use a quotation without knowing who said it, and where and when. Never illustrate with a historical vignette without being absolutely sure that you have it right. Someone out there in the pews knows, and will stop you after the service to tell you about it. It is a humiliating moment.

Now I have done it in print. Dad, who kept a shelf of Lincoln's books and passed his love and interest along to my brother and me, would be ashamed. I'm hearing from all the Lincoln lovers, admirers and scholars out there. I apologize, and promise to be more careful.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural was delivered on March 4, 1865. The Civil War would end with Lee's surrender on April 9, and Lincoln would be dead six days later. On March 4 he was looking ahead past the terrible conflict to a time of healing.

In one of the shortest inaugural speeches in our history, he extended compassion and understanding to the states and citizens of the Confederacy and reflected on the anomaly of religion during the war. "Both read the same Bible," he said, "and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other . . . The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully."

The closing paragraph feels timely to me:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.
(March 4, 1865)