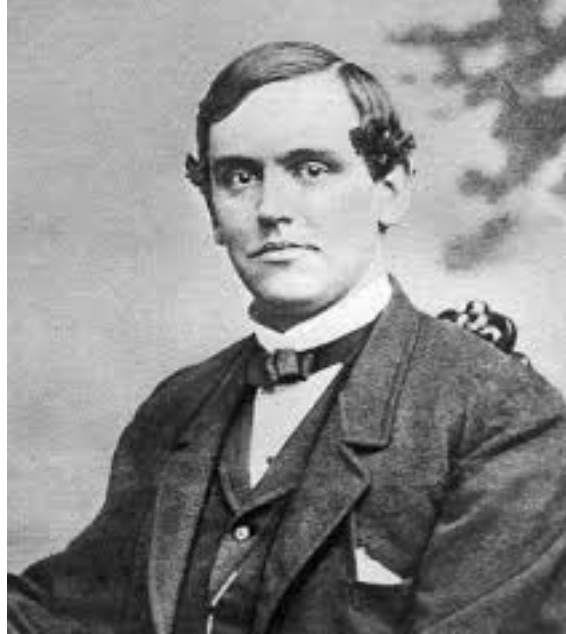


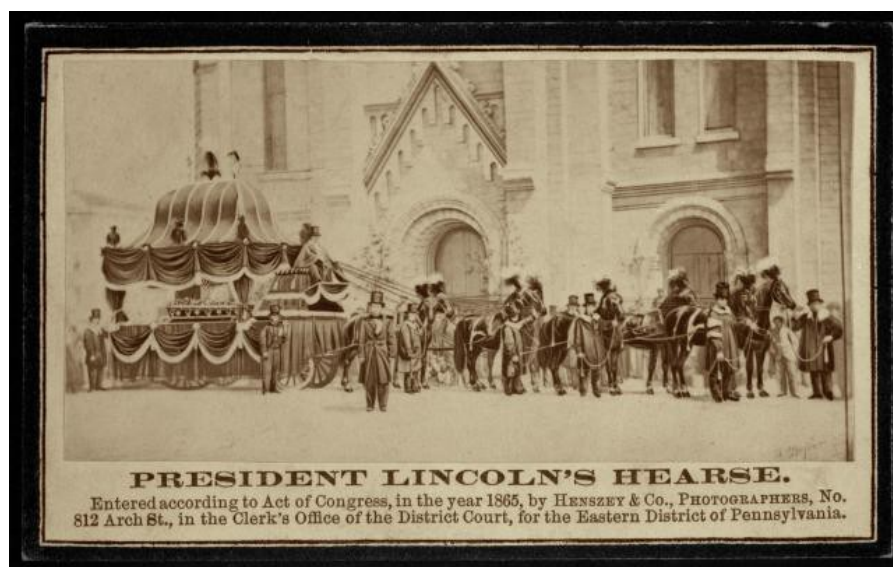
EPISODE SIX:

**Phillips Brooks and "The Life and Death of Abraham Lincoln"
23 April 1865**



Phillips Brooks, age 22

I remember how startled I was, to discover as a graduate student that the assassination of Abraham Lincoln happened on Good Friday. How had I previously missed such an important fact? It meant that for Easter Sunday that year, the nation was in deep shock and mourning. What a challenge for its preachers, not just on that day, but in the weeks to come!





The following Saturday (April 22, 1865) Lincoln's funeral train stopped in Philadelphia, where his body lay in state in Independence Hall. Among the speakers at the occasion was Phillips Brooks, then the young rector of Holy Trinity Church, Rittenhouse Square. The next day, at Sunday services, he delivered a sermon based on his remarks, entitled "The Life and Death of Abraham Lincoln." It is one of the great homiletical works (sermons) of American history.

A Boston native, Brooks had developed a reputation as an ardent abolitionist, speaking publicly from the pulpit and at other public gatherings against the evils of slavery. On that Second Sunday of Easter, as he sought to console a grieving congregation and city, he responded by placing Lincoln's death within the context of that evil itself. He began by commenting on what he termed Lincoln's "destiny of character," that is, how Lincoln "lived as he did, and died as he did, because he was what he was." Brooks summarized that character as being grounded in "clearness or truth," a deep moral commitment to honesty in all things.

Brooks went further, however, saying that it was this commitment to truth that led Lincoln to name unambiguously the evil of slavery—and it was for that clarity of moral vision that he was ultimately killed:

Solemnly, in the sight of God, I charge this murder where it belongs, on Slavery. I dare not stand here in [God's] sight, and before Him or you speak doubtful and double-meaning words of vague repentance, as if we had killed our President. We have sins enough, but we have not done this sin, save as by weak concessions and timid compromises we have let the spirit of Slavery grow strong and ripe for such a deed. Is there the man alive who thinks that Abraham Lincoln was shot just for himself...? It was not he, but what he stood for. It was Law and Liberty, it was Government and Freedom, against which the hate gathered and the treacherous shot was fired.

Brooks has always been one of my personal heroes because of the breadth of his spirit and vision. (In fact, I once published an article about him, called "The Breadth of Orthodoxy.") He went on to become rector of Trinity Church, Copley Square in Boston, where he collaborated with the renowned architect, H. H. Richardson, to create one of the masterpieces of American sacred architecture. There he became famous for crossing ecclesiastical boundaries, reaching out from behind the walls of the Episcopal Church to embrace church leaders of many varieties in one of the first true expressions of ecumenism. When he was elected

bishop of Massachusetts, many voices in the church opposed his ordination, precisely because of this generosity of heart and mind.

On the Sunday after 9/11, I too faced the challenge of preaching a sermon of consolation to a frightened and disoriented congregation, much like the congregation in Philadelphia in April of 1865. I went back to Brooks' sermon on Lincoln for inspiration, and found there the encouragement to place the terrorist attack in a larger context, as Brooks did with the president's assassination. I remember asking the question, "What could cause a group of people to hate us so much, that they would choose to do such a thing to us?" Asking such hard and introspective questions, however uneasy they make us feel, is perhaps what great crises should cause us to do—and answering them is a part of making sense of the crises' meaning for us.



Brooks in 1891, the year he was elected bishop, and two years before his death.