

**Sermon immediately following Assassination of
President John Fitzgerald Kennedy
November 22, 1963**

(delivered at New Salem Methodist Church, Statesville, NC by Donald W. Haynes)

In the fall of 1963, as John F. Kennedy closed his third year as president of the United States, he essentially began his campaign for re-election by planning a trip with his wife, Jacqueline, to Texas and Florida, two states he considered essential for his election to a second term. Shortly after noon on November 22, as his motorcade passed by a "grassy knoll" in downtown Dallas, he was assassinated. I was twenty-eight years old and pastor of New Salem Methodist Church near Statesville, North Carolina. On that infamous day, a friend of mine and I finished nine holes of golf and decided to quit because the weather was so cold. When we entered the club house, men were watching a television screen and we learned of the tragedy. I immediately spread the word by a chain of phone calls that we would have a memorial service on November 24. The service was editorialized in the newspaper the following. Earlier that day, Lee Harvey Oswald had been shot by Jack Ruby. On November 25, the editor published this entire sermon.

My mother saved that edition of the Statesville Record and Landmark, and I found it in her old trunk on January 16, 2024. Since it survived these sixty years, I am keying it into a computer for my children, grandchildren, and friends. The church was packed as we felt compelled to worship in the face of tragedy. I should like to re-phrase some of the content, but I must "to my own self be true" and print it in the original verbiage.

The assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy will place itself high upon the list of history's events marked, "Tragedy." The dastard deed is done, the cruel crime is committed, the heinous holocaust is history. We re-intone tonight the solemn words spoken by the bedside of the assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865: "*Now he belongs to the ages.*" The death of President Kennedy can be attributed to neither accident nor nature, but rather to an ugly expression of mental distortion and spiritual hatred at their infamous worst.

It is appropriate in this sad hour to express both patriotism and respect for the life which President Kennedy lived among us. Dramatically and heroically, he served his country in war; expertly and brilliantly he contributed to the world of literature; actively and vigorously he led the nation in highest stead as Chief Executive. Some of his tracks are impressed indelibly upon the sands of time and the pages of history. Civilization's course was altered and the path of human destiny was changed because this man lived. In the mourning of his death, we inevitably pay tribute to his deeds.

Though he was stopped brutally in the mid-stream of life, the pages of his days were filled. The accomplishments of his career were uniquely many, and the fame of his person stood at its zenith. History will doubtless mark "great" beside his name and posterity will praise him as a champion of human rights and a promulgate of international peace.

What we say here will neither add a cubit nor subtract a meter to the stature which marked his life. But this does not render in vain a hoped-for reference to one tenet of the Christian faith. Historical proof and eternal truth shine with certainty through St. Paul's assurance written to the Christians at Corinth: "*Labors done in the Lord are not in vain*" and will not go without recompense or reward. As sad, as insane, as this moment is, we can be sure that President Kennedy neither lived nor died in vain. Carl Sandburg has noted concerning the similar fate of Abraham Lincoln, "Human freedom is often paid for with agony."

From his death of agony will doubtless rise an America more sobered and more matured. The time is past due when we see that with our rights and freedom go a personal and individual responsibility and obligation. Let the shock and horror of the irresponsible acts of assassins' bullets bring each of us to a new appraisal of every citizen's role in a people's democracy. Once Benjamin Franklin

said, "*A man is not completely born until he is dead.*" Perhaps the contribution that this president made to American life and thought will be born to fuller measure in his dying.

Adding to the calamity and catastrophe of this sad time, evil has again bred evil in the assassination of the assassin, justice has been miscarried in our democracy that was founded upon the principle of humane treatment and fair trial for every the least desirable persons. Death and evil no hang over our land like an albatross. Our national image could well be at a low ebb; our friends weep with us and our foes point their mocking fingers. These assassins are a cruel symbol of heinous acts; they are somber reminder of the harvest of harbored hatred and evil planning.

But we must look not only in retrospect. Our thoughts turn rightly from the president in death to his wife and children today and his successors in the future. We pass to Mrs. Kennedy the immortal words from the pen of another president which he wrote to a mother who had lost her sons in war: "*I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost. May the solemn pride be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.*" (Lincoln)

This hour would not complete its purpose without remembering that in the greatness of our country, government goes on with dignity and continuity. Time and reality never allow us the luxury of standing halted in history. We now have a new president. To paraphrase the words of our British forebears, "*The president is dead; long live the president.*" In the fourteen months of this unfinished term, fate has cast upon the shoulders of another mortal man a monumental task.

Lyndon Johnson enters the White House with greater governmental experience than any predecessor, but the demand is also greater. Ironically, he is the first president from the former Confederate states since another Mr. Johnson assumed the mantle of the assassinated Lincoln. The tune of our time is sadly similar to the tune of that time. It will place extraordinary scrutiny upon our new president because of his Southern heritage. Connect this to the domestic and foreign conflicts of our modern world and the bizarre turn of today's events, and we can see in part the burden that President Lyndon Baines Johnson assumes. Let us undergird him with prayerful Christian concern and patriotic national loyalty. Amen.