

How to Find a Good Leader
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How to Find a Good Leader. That is the title of today's message that I borrowed from *The Wall Street Journal*. It appeared last weekend before the recent election in a column by Peggy Noonan. (*The Wall Street Journal*, "How to Find a Good Leader", November 3-4, 2018, A13) My guess is that many of us were thinking about how to find a good leader this past week as we headed to the polls to vote. Maybe we think we elected some good leaders, or maybe not. But, how does one know? What makes a good leader? What is a good leader supposed to do -- or *not* do?

In her column, Noonan wrote about talking with the author of a recent book called *Presidents at War* (Michael Beschloss). The author focused on the qualities of those leaders who have taken this nation to war. "Towering empathy" for those Americans who fight and endure wars was one of the leadership qualities he held up -- quality particularly appropriate on this Veterans Day. In writing about President Abraham Lincoln -- arguably one of the greatest leaders in our nation's history, the author says this: "Lincoln demanded that a new military cemetery be located where he could often see it, so that he would be painfully confronted with the terrible results of the decisions he was making." *Towering empathy.*

This morning I want to invite us to look at how to find a good leader from God's perspective. The best place to begin to discern that is in scripture. Our two passages are Psalm 146 and 1 Timothy 2:1-3:

Praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD, my soul.
I will praise the LORD all my life;
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes,
in human beings, who cannot save.
When their spirit departs, they return to the ground;
on that very day their plans come to nothing.
Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God.
He is the Maker of heaven and earth,
the sea, and everything in them—
he remains faithful forever.
He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the foreigner

and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The LORD reigns forever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD. (Psalm 146, NIV)

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people — for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, . . .” (1 Timothy 2:1-3, NIV)

Before we jump into these two scriptures and the qualities that make a good leader, particularly a political leader who serves in government, I want to give us an overview of what the Bible says about our relationship with those who lead or govern us. Now, I know some of us may want to jump right to “the good stuff” – but, like anything, it is important to know and understand the basics or the background first. Maybe it would be like wanting to learn to play the guitar and telling the teacher, in your very first lesson, that you wanted to *start* by learning to play the solo from “Stairway to Heaven” -- without first learning basic things like how to tune the guitar, hold the guitar pick, and the scales you will need to play. So, hang in there with me as I give us a brief overview of what God tells us, through scripture, about how we should view those who lead our nations.

First of all, it begins with God and what we call *the sovereignty of God*. This is a particularly important theme for those of us who are Presbyterians or Reformed Christians. The sovereignty of God means that there is only one God, not many gods. And this God is somehow in charge and “reigns” or rules over all of creation. You can see that the word “sovereignty” actually has the word “reign” embedded in it. Now, this does not mean that God “controls” or predetermines everything. Rather, it means that God not only created the world, but that God continues to be involved in the events of the world in order to complete God’s ultimate plan for all of creation. Deists, like Thomas Jefferson, believe that God created the world, but then left it alone. Theists, which describes most Christians, believe that God not only created this world, but God continues to be involved in the events and outcomes of the world.

Since we as Christians believe that God reigns over this world, we then look to God for what a good leader or ruler or king should look like. What we will find is that *God cares about order, justice, and peace* -- so that human beings and society can thrive. Paul’s letter points to this when he tells us that we should pray for “kings and all of those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our savior.” (1 Timothy 2:2-3a, NIV) So, God desires that we live in peace and quiet with one another.

If we turn to our Old Testament and the Biblical account of the people of God, we begin with Joseph and his family going down to Egypt when there was famine. After staying there for many, many years, the family grows into a small nation who live as slaves under Pharaoh – the Egyptian ruler. God wants to set God’s people free from slavery, so Moses leads them out in the Exodus, which becomes *the* formative event in the Old Testament.

As the freed slaves head to the land promised them by God, they continue to grow beyond what Moses is able to lead, so a system of judges is formed to delegate the leadership roles. But eventually, the people want a king like all of the surrounding nations, and God seems to reluctantly let them have what they want. However, as with any king, there are good ones and bad ones – and even the good ones, like King David, have some serious personal faults.

Over the years, God sent prophets to call the kings and the people back to follow the life-giving way of God – even when they are conquered by foreign kings and find themselves in exile. Suffice it to say, the Old Testament people of God have an “up and down” relationship with the kings who rule over them.

If we move forward in history to the time of Jesus, we find that Rome has conquered that part of the world. Caesar Augustus is now king. Some of the conquered nations, like Israel, are still allowed to have their own King like Herod -- but he was effectively a puppet king who did whatever Rome asked, while making sure Rome got its taxes. There was peace – the *Pax Romana* -- but it was an enforced peace controlled by Caesar and Rome.

There is one story from the gospels in which some of the Jewish leaders, and those who may have leaned toward Jewish nationalism and King Herod, attempt to trap Jesus by asking him whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. (Mark 12:13-17, NIV) Jesus calls them on their attempt to trap him. Jesus knows that if he says “no” (which is what some would like him to say against Roman occupation), then he is in trouble with the Romans. If he says “yes” -- then he seems to be in league with the Romans and the Jewish crowds might turn on him. So, Jesus asks for a Roman coin and follows up by asking whose picture and inscription are on the coin. They respond by saying “Caesar’s.” Jesus then says, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” He turns it all back on them. Through the years, many have wondered if this was simply an okay to pay taxes, or perhaps Jesus was actually saying that ultimately everything belongs to the sovereign God.

We need to remember that very soon, Jesus will be crucified by the local Roman authority, Pontius Pilate, primarily because of the claim that Jesus was a king – “The King of the Jews.” A sign would be placed on the top of the cross on which Jesus was crucified which said “King of the Jews.” Rome did not tolerate any kings other than Caesar and crucifixion was their way of publicly saying, “This is what happens to anyone who claims to be a king.” Only Caesar is king – actually the term they might use is this: “Caesar is Lord” – which caused great problems for Christians who would say after the resurrection of Jesus that “Jesus is Lord.”

If we look at how Paul views kings and those in authority, we have already seen that Paul tells the followers of Jesus that they should pray for kings and those in authority in order to preserve the peace. Over in his letter to the church at Rome, Paul writes the normal relationship that Christians should have with good government is to obey the law and support those who have been given the legitimate authority to lead. (Romans 13:1-7, NIV) That is the norm. Clearly Paul expects Christians to be good citizens whenever possible and not troublemakers.

But what about when the government is corrupt, like Hitler and Nazi Germany? What does a Christian do then? While I believe it is often complex and difficult when something like that

occurs, there are those like the German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who argued that Hitler had lost his moral authority to lead and should be resisted and stopped. And Bonhoeffer paid with his own life after trying to stop Hitler. It is not the norm, but I think there are extreme times when Christians have some very difficult moral decisions to make.

Paul, himself a Roman citizen, was imprisoned numerous times and eventually appealed to Caesar in Rome to hear his case. Scripture never tells us if that encounter ever happened, but New Testament scholar N.T. Wright suggests that Paul intentionally wanted a face-to-face encounter with Caesar. (*Paul: A Biography*, N.T. Wright, 2018: 393) Paul wanted this in order to tell Caesar (Nero) that there was a new king sent by God to set things right in this world, and his name was not Caesar – his name was Jesus – the Messiah, the Christ.

Finally, in *Revelation*, the last book of our Bible, it paints a picture of the end of time when a new heaven and a new earth are brought together by God, and things will finally be the way God intended it to be with perfect peace and justice. The ruler then will be Jesus who is called the “King of Kings” and the “Lord of Lords.” (Revelation 19:16, NIV)

However, we are not there yet. Our leaders are not the “King of Kings” and the “Lord of Lords.” They are very human, sometimes very flawed, men and women. And we are asked to choose whom we believe to be the best choice to lead us. So, how do we do that? What should we keep in mind in making our choices? What qualities do we look for in those who lead? This is where Psalm 146 gives us some much-needed guidance.

The Psalm first begins with giving praise to God. In a sense it reaffirms that God is sovereign – God reigns and reigns well. But after praising God, the Psalmist, who may have been King David, says this: “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing.” (Psalm 146: 3-4, NIV) “Princes” is code for any king or other ruler. “Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save.” In other words, human leaders may be able to do some things, but they cannot save us. Only God can do that. Yet, how often do we look for the next candidate or elected leader to “save” us from whatever? *Only God saves* – so there is a limit to what human rulers can do.

A few years back, author Colette Dowling wrote a book called *The Cinderella Complex* (1982). Dowling took the fairy tale story of Cinderella, the young girl who is finally rescued by the prince who sweeps her away from the problems of her life to live “happily ever after.” Dowling used this as a metaphor for a tendency in some women to live their lives always looking for a “prince” who will ride in and rescue them. Her perspective is that this attitude limits the independence of women and keeps them from taking responsibility for their own lives.

Now, I am not going to debate the merits of her idea today, but I do wonder if this is something that goes beyond women. My guess is that many of us men and women live our lives looking for a “prince” or someone who will ride into our lives and save us from our problems. And particularly in election season, there is the tendency for us to look for an earthly political “prince” (male or female) to do the same thing. We think that if we just elect the right person, then he or she will make everything okay. Psalm 146 sounds very up-to-date when it reminds us

that *we should not put our ultimate trust in earthly princes because eventually they will let us down, and there are limits to what they can and cannot do.* They cannot save us – only God can do that!

The Psalmist moves on to describe what God as the good ruler or king does for God's people. Listen to it one more time:

He upholds the cause of the oppressed
and gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets prisoners free,
the LORD gives sight to the blind,
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the foreigner
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
The LORD reigns forever, (Psalm 146:7-10a, NIV)

If we want to know what we should be looking for in a good leader, then we need to look to God. Those are the qualities we should look for in a good leader.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul tells them to *pray for our leaders*. We need to do that every day, whether we like them or not -- maybe *more so* if we do not like them! But, what do we pray for? Wisdom. Courage. Strength. Discernment. Empathy. Humility. Integrity. Compassion. The list could go on, but I would also invite us to pray that our leaders would do those very things we have just read about in Psalm 146 – those qualities demonstrated by God that show us what a good leader should do.

We are not yet into Advent and Christmas season, but I was amazed to see the Christmas ads on TV appear the next day after Halloween. (And yes, we are starting to order Christmas trees around here.) But when we do enter into Advent and Christmas season, we will be talking about Jesus Christ whom the Old Testament prophet Isaiah calls “The Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6, NIV) The picture Isaiah paints for us echoes the words of this Psalm, when it tells of one who will come to reign one day and be the kind of prince or king we are all looking for. This is not some fairy tale or wishful dream – *this is a promise of the real thing* – the true prince who is Jesus the Son of God. We may be looking for someone to rescue or save us and make things right, but I think that is only because deep down inside we know that we all need that. Our whole world needs that! Our search for earthly princes is merely an echo of the *real* search for the *true* prince – the Prince of Peace sent by God to save the world.

We read that list of the ways that God helps us and we may find some of our needs listed there:

- Sometimes we feel oppressed for trying to do the right thing.
- Sometimes we feel imprisoned by the circumstances of our lives.
- Sometimes we feel “bowed down” as if the weight of the whole world were on our shoulders and we need someone to lift us up.

- Sometimes we feel like strangers or aliens who are just passing through and no one gives us the time of day.
- Sometimes we feel like an orphan or a “motherless child,” or we feel like we are all alone in the world.
- Sometimes it seems like only those who do what is wrong get ahead and good guys do, indeed, finish last. We all know something of those struggles.

But God sends the true Prince of Peace into our world to fill us where we are empty, and to stand with us in the gaps when we need someone to be there with us. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, can do that. And when that happens, what a time of blessedness and joy and praise that can be! Just like the beginning and ending words of this Psalm, we will find ourselves saying, “Praise the Lord!” Now, maybe being *Presbyterians*, we won’t literally throw our hands up in the air like other Christians might. Maybe we will just say it quietly to ourselves, but when it happens, we will find ourselves saying it – praise the Lord!

I want to close today with a prayer by Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian pastor and writer. It is a prayer that I believe gives voice to the needs we all feel, waiting for the Prince of Peace to come anew into our lives and into our world.

Thou Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, be born again into our world. Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou long-expected one, with healing in thy wings. Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou blessed one, with healing in thy wings. Savior, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face, not knowing fully who he is or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee even though he has forgotten thy name. Come quickly. Amen. (Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, quoted in “Reflections,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 44, no. 14.)