

**Sermon preached by Dr. David Fischler at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE KING, OUR SAVIOR

Jeremiah 23:1-6

I'm not sure if I will be preaching again before the election, so this is my chance to get my two cents in. So after a great deal of thought and prayer and consideration, I have for you my advice regarding the election and it is encapsulated in this: Beachfront property in Costa Rica is now at an all-time low. And I will be more than happy to discuss it with you after the worship service, for a very small commission. If, on the other hand, you can't leave the country on short notice I suggest gold or freeze-dried food.

Truth of the matter is, I'm not going to talk about the election this morning. For one thing, partisan politics is not in my job description. For another, I'd rather stay focused on Scripture than on the news. And for a third, I don't know of any president, senator, congressman, governor, state legislator, or justice whom we can call "Savior." I do, on the other hand, know of a King that fits that description. We don't talk much about kings these days in a world where many nations are democracies and others are sadly ruled by tyrants. The idea of kingship is essentially dead, except for figureheads like Queen Elizabeth or any of the other crowned heads of Europe or in exotic places like Nepal or Swaziland. But that doesn't mean that kingship no longer has any meaning to us, because we all know what a king is. And we all have a fairly good sense of how he should rule. And that idea is based ultimately on the kingship of the Lord over His people.

We see something of what that's about in Jeremiah chapter 23, in which we get both the good and the bad. First the bad: The people of Judah and of Israel, the northern kingdom, had been betrayed by their leadership, by those who had been set over the people as shepherds, as rulers, as people who were to look out for their benefit, who were to rule not in terms of their own self-interest nor in terms of their own benefit but for the benefit of the people. Jeremiah writes: "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture." Destroying and scattering. The kings, and for that matter the priests as well, had been more interested in their personal wealth and their self-aggrandizement than in leading their people in justice and in truth. The previous chapter, Jeremiah 22, verses 13-17 give us a picture of this. There Jeremiah writes: "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor." He's talking about slave labor. He's talking about kings of Israel and Judah using their own people as slaves. "He says, 'I will build myself a great palace with spacious upper rooms.' So he makes large windows in it, panels it with cedar and decorates it in red. 'Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?' declares the LORD. "But your eyes and your heart are set only on dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on oppressions and extortion."

That's a description of a king by the name of Shallum who was the son of one of the two most righteous kings that Judah ever had the good fortune and the blessing of God to know. One was Hezekiah and the other was Josiah. Josiah was Shallum's father and son did not do like father, as Jeremiah 22 plainly notes. God, operating with justice and based on right and wrong, based on a conception of rulership that is often lacking in our own day, makes clear that those who do such things will be judged and punished. Jeremiah 23, verse 2: "Therefore, this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: 'Because you have scattered my flock and have driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,' declares the LORD."

Those who ruled over the people of Judah and before them the people of Israel, paid the price for their mis-rule, for their injustice, for taking advantage of their people, for enslaving them and treating them as things rather than as children of God. Jeremiah 22:16 maybe gives us the key to why this is: "Is that not what it means to know me?" The problem that the rulers of Judah and Israel had was not simply that they sinned. We all sin. We're no different from them in that regard. And they're no different from us. The problem isn't simply sin, but the problem is a particular kind of sin, one that's not generally characteristic of the people of God. The refusal to know Him and to know His ways. If you're going to walk in the ways of God you have to know what those ways are, and these are rulers who said, "We don't need to know that. We can do perfectly fine on our own."

You may remember that Josiah, in an episode that's described in 2 Kings, was faced with something that to us is incomprehensible. He was faced with the rediscovery of the law of God, the law that had been lost for centuries, resulting, among other things, in the failure of the Israelites to observe the Passover. A book of the law was discovered in the Temple, no doubt in a dusty corner that few, if any, had gone into in recent decades, if not centuries. The book that they found is usually thought to be the Book of Deuteronomy. And in that they rediscovered that they had left the law of the Lord behind years before and that as a result they had been walking not according to His ways, but according to ways that they themselves had sought, discovered, made up. And those ways had been more often than not predicated on self-interest.

Josiah took that book of the law and he ordered that the Passover be reinstated and that the people be exposed to the law and find out once again what it was to be a true Israelite. But even within a short time after his demise in battle the people once again slid back from that and forgot the law again, even to the extent that the people remembered the law and the rulers quite conveniently did not.

Those people would be saved, as it turns out, from the fate to which their leaders would have consigned them. The leadership of Israel was horrendous, both in the way that it mismanaged the country and mistreated the people and the way that it mismanaged their foreign relations. The result, first, was that Assyria had conquered the northern kingdom and had scattered the ten tribes of the northern part of the country. Then later on, after the time in which Jeremiah writes this particular chapter, the Babylonians come along and complete the work of the Assyrians by destroying the southern kingdom of Judah. And this was all a consequence of the people simply drifting into sin by simply following their leaders' paths. They didn't rise

up against their leadership. They didn't say, "We're no longer a people of God here, but a people of the world." They simply went along.

Well, God had mercy on His people and He promised them restoration, as a kind of fulfillment of a promise that He had given in the past. You'll remember this promise. It's in 2 Chronicles, chapter 7, verse 14 where He says: "If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." Those people had not been condemned in perpetuity. Yes, they had been misled and yes, they had followed unfaithfully. But there was forgiveness for them, and there was restoration. And when that happened, when that restoration happened, things would not be as they had been before. In verses 3-4 we get the promise: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them." Whether that was Assyria or whether it would be Babylonia, for that matter, we can easily picture other nations – Egypt, Persia, Greece – that later or earlier had scattered the people of Israel. "I will bring them back to their pasture, to the land of Israel, where they will be fruitful and increase in number." Which is another way of saying that they will live in peace and prosperity. "I will place shepherds over them who will tend them and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing." All of those whom God would save will be saved, because it is His will that is sovereign in the matter of salvation.

And it is His will that is sovereign in the matter of leadership of His people and so He pledges that He will put over them shepherds who will actually tend the flock, who won't exploit it, who won't use it for their own purposes, who won't seek whatever gain they can out of that leadership. Instead those shepherds will look at those sheep and they will say, "These are the charges under my care. I take care of them for the Lord's sake."

Well, the shepherds are not simply politicians. We're not just talking about swapping out one set of kings for another. We're not talking simply about replacing one president that we don't like with someone we can vote for. We're talking about a change in leadership that in fact is of such a qualitative difference that we're not even talking about the same category anymore. Yes, we still will call them king, but we're not talking about the same kind of king. Look at verse 5: " 'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is right and just in the land. This is the name by which He will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.'"

So what are we told about this king? Not that he's a Democrat or a Republican. Not that he is of the House of Hapsburg or Hohenzollern. Not that he is a prince being elevated. Not that he's going to come to power by a coup or conquest. We're told that He will be a righteous Branch of the House of David. Even at this point, four hundred years after the rule of David, David had been idealized as the best king that Israel had ever had, a man who typified what a ruler of the people of God should be like.

Now we all know that David was a very flawed character, in fact. We have a tendency to look back on the people that we think highly of and idealize them. Americans will do that with George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or FDR. Fact of the matter is, we can find

flaws in them. We can find bad decisions that they made. We can find sins that they committed without too much difficulty. Because that's the way of human leaders and politicians. No matter how much we might idealize them, and I don't know about you, but I'm old enough to remember when George Washington's name was actually mentioned in elementary school in history and I remember him being held up as if he were some kind of Greek god or something. "George Washington, the infallible father of our country!" Well, George Washington was a man. But the Person who is spoken of here as being a righteous Branch of the House of David, while He would be a descendant of David and a member of a house that had been promised perpetual rulership over Israel, He is referred to specifically as a righteous Branch and we might read in parentheses "Unlike those who have followed David over the last 400 years." This would be a Man who would walk with God and this would be a Man whose ways would be in accordance with God's ways, who, we are told, would rule wisely. That's not a matter of prudence or sound political judgment. That's wisdom that is in accord with what God has declared to be true and false and right and wrong. We're told that He is a King who will do what is just and what is right. And my, don't we long for leaders these days who will do exactly that. We're told that He will be called the Lord Our Righteousness. In another translation we're told that He will be called The Lord Our Righteous Savior, a formal title that points to, if it doesn't make explicit, the identification of this King with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He will be called the Lord Our Righteous Savior. Think about that. Have we ever used that term for any politician, for any president, no matter how good they were? Have we ever used that term in anything other than a hyperbolic sense? Some people might say, I'm sure I've heard it said before and you have too, that Abraham Lincoln saved the United States. He was the savior of the United States of America because he led the struggle to keep our country, even as he abolished slavery. Well, that's hyperbole. And my suspicion is that if you would have suggested that title to Abraham Lincoln he would have said, "Not me. That was God's doing." He believed that strongly in God's providence. But the One who is going to rule over Israel, we are told, is not just your average politician. He is the Lord Our Righteous Savior. And in fact, of course, we know how the story ends and so we know Who that Righteous King is. Jesus Christ is that Righteous King. We're told explicitly in the Gospels that He was of the House and lineage of David. His wisdom is on display repeatedly in His parables and in His sermons, in which He doesn't simply repeat the law, as was the practice of the rabbis of His day. Nor does He seek to tweak it in such a way as to make it easier or harder. Instead He goes into the true nature of relationship with God, a relationship that is based on faith and love and founded in the grace of God rather than simply upon obedience, which is the fruit of that relationship rather than its foundation or cause.

That all flows from the wisdom that Jesus exhibits in the Gospels. He's a true King. He's not simply an elected official who has to do what the people want in order to remain in favor. He's not even a typical human king who has to be constantly on the lookout for possible usurpers and other opponents. You see that picture over and over again in the Old Testament history where the kings of Israel and Judah constantly have to watch their backs, lest someone steal their throne. Instead, this is a King who demands and receives total and unconditional loyalty from His subjects. None among His subjects would give the slightest thought to trying to usurp His place because we're all very well aware that we can't take His place.

We're not God incarnate. We're not the second Person of the Trinity. We don't sit at the right hand of the Father. We have not had all things given into our hands. We're subjects, and as subjects we can only give Him our unconditional loyalty. This is a King who declares in the Gospel of John that "I and the Father are one." And at that point He makes Himself, or declares Himself, the Lord Our Righteous Savior. Not just a great teacher, not just a prophet, not just a healer or an exorcist, not just a man with followers. But the One who has come into the world to "gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture." Not to the land of Israel, but to the Kingdom of God. We are the people of that pasture. Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, black, white, yellow, red. We are the people of that pasture and it is because of our King, the Good Shepherd, the Righteous Savior, that we have been brought to that place.

So what does this tell us about the election? It has a great deal to say about the election. It has a great deal to say about the election of God's people to be His children. How's that for a quick switch? It is about the election of God's people, being ruled by His King and being ruled righteously. Jeremiah 23 points forward to the King who would call upon all people, regardless of their background, to be subject to Him, and in the process restored to loving, gracious relationship with His Father. In the process this passage also directs our attention away – and I hope that's pretty obvious at this point – from earthly kings who would claim to be our saviors.

Now I use that word "election" in another sense. By all means vote, come November 8. But recognize what you're voting for. You're not voting for the savior of the world. You're not even voting for the savior of America. You're voting for a politician to do a job. Let's leave the Savior business to the One who can actually claim the title.

One final thing that Jeremiah 23 has to say, and that is that that King calls us into that relationship not by conquering territory and not by enslaving us as a subject people. He calls us into that relationship by faith. He calls us in our baptism. He calls us in our hearing of the Word. He calls us in our fellowship in the body of Christ. Through these and many other means He calls to us and says, "The citizenship in this Kingdom does not have to be worked for." But at the same time it's not something that you can be born into through natural childbirth. The citizenship in this Kingdom must be grasped by faith. And when it is, you become not merely a subject of the King, you become a child of the King. The offer for childhood, even with citizenship, goes out to each of us today. Will we lay hold of it? That's the question for each of us.