

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 30, 2016**

## **WHAT'S A CHRISTIAN TO DO?**

### **Psalm 146:1-10**

You've probably already figured out why I chose this psalm as the Scripture text for my sermon today. Election Day is just nine days away. Finally. In a little more than a week, the longest presidential campaign in the history of our country will itself be history, and we will know who is to be the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America. That is, unless we have a repeat of the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, the outcome of which was not settled until several weeks after Election Day.

This pulpit is normally a politics-free zone. I realize the prospect of a sermon dealing with the presidential election may make you squirm in your pew. I promise that this will not be a partisan political message. The only "endorsement" I will make is the one made by the writer of Psalm 146, who urges us not to put our trust in princes or presidents or political parties or whoever is in power, but to put our trust and hope in the Lord our God.

I also realize that some of you may take issue with something I say this morning. Or you may get upset about something I don't say. Nevertheless, I hope you will allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this message. I hope you will forget anything that is not from the Lord, and that you will take to heart all that is from God and is in agreement with His Word.

For Christians, and for America as a whole, this election confronts us with a dilemma, in that the major political parties have given us two of the most universally disliked and morally-challenged candidates in American history. Not that we expect presidential candidates to be practically perfect in every way (like May Poppins), but both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump have glaring flaws. Something like two-thirds of Americans have a strongly negative view of one or the other, and more than half of all likely voters disapprove of both candidates (*World Magazine*, October 29, 2016, p.3).

Maybe you've heard this joke about Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump: If the two of them are stranded together at sea on a lifeboat, who survives? The answer: America does! (Ha!)

In a normal election year, I'd like to think that both nominees would be considered by their respective parties morally qualified to serve as President. And yet, here we are. Despite the obvious shortcomings and questionable character of both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump, no 3<sup>rd</sup> party candidate has really been able to gain any traction, with the exception of Evan McMullin, who has a chance to impact the electoral map by winning his home state of Utah.

Christians in America are right to be deeply concerned about the future of our country, not to mention the present. Like most Americans, we're concerned about the economy. We're concerned about taxes and how our tax revenues are used. We're concerned about the national debt, which now exceeds \$19 trillion and is growing by the minute. We're concerned about terrorism and national security in a world filled with dangers. We're concerned about

America's standing in the world. We're concerned about our foreign policy, as it relates to Syria, Iran, Russia, China, and terrorist groups like ISIS. We're concerned about immigration. We want a policy that is both just and compassionate. We're concerned about the Supreme Court and what kind of justices will be appointed to it. We're concerned about religious liberty and the increasing hostility to traditional Christian beliefs and positions on social issues. We're concerned about immorality that seems to become more normalized by the day. We're concerned about the character and trustworthiness of our leaders.

There is plenty to be concerned about. It is an understatement to say that not all is well with America. And there is a temptation, in such a time as this, to give in to fear. I know I'm tempted. We fear: What if \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) wins? If \_\_\_\_\_ wins, it will be the end of America as we know it. It will be the end of morality in government. It will be the end of religious freedom. It may even be the end of the world.

Hillary Clinton jokingly fed into this kind of fear a few weeks ago when she told a *New York Times* reporter: "I'm the last thing standing between you and the Apocalypse." In other words, if Donald Trump is elected president, the end of the world is at hand. She may or may not really believe that, but I have no doubt that some people do. Just as some people believe that if Hillary Clinton wins, it will hasten the end of the world.

So, in such a time as this, when faced with a choice between two undesirable, unsavory candidates, each with his or her own set of deplorable qualities, what's a Christian to do? Many Christians believe the right thing to do is to evaluate the candidates and their platform – the things they say they believe and the things they say they will do if elected – and then to hold one's nose and vote for the "lesser of two evils."

There are plenty of good reasons to not vote for Donald Trump. And there are plenty of good reasons to not vote for Hillary Clinton. Many Christians understandably believe, given the political realities in America, that to not vote for *him* is to vote for *her*. And vice versa. For many Americans, not just Christians, the overwhelming desire to not elect one is the driving force behind the decision to vote for the other.

Questions of character, and incontrovertible evidence of character deficiency in both Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump, make it difficult, if not impossible, for Christians to embrace either candidate with zeal. Of course, this will not be the first time we have elected a president of questionable character. And we've had some really lousy presidents. Those who adopt the "lesser of two evils" position recognize that, undesirable as the ballot choices are, our nation has survived ungodly (and lousy) presidents in the past and will do so again, God willing. *If God is willing.*

On the other hand, some Christians believe this is a case in which we should not settle for the "lesser of two evils." Russell Moore (of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Life Commission) points out that all elections, in a sense, force us to choose between "the lesser of evils," since, as the Bible tells us: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Every candidate for every office is tainted by sin. Just as we are. Even so,

says Moore, if faced with a choice between one candidate with poor character and another with what he calls “wicked public stances,” Christians should not settle for either.

Says Moore: “When Christians face two clearly immoral options, we cannot rationalize a vote for immorality or injustice, just because we deem the alternative to be worse.”

The implications, in such a case, is that Christians should either abstain from voting for any presidential candidate, or vote for another candidate, whether 3<sup>rd</sup> party or write-in.

So, what’s a Christian to do? Which is it: Choose the “lesser of two evils” or vote for neither? This is a matter in which we are dealing with a *non-essential* of the faith. It is not one of the *Essentials of Our Faith* in which we must all be in agreement.

Which team are you rooting for to win baseball’s World Series? Those lovable losers, the Chicago Cubs, haven’t won the World Series since 1908. Until this year, they hadn’t even made it to the World Series since 1945. The Cleveland Indians, as of this morning, are just one win away from winning their first World Series since 1948. As passionately as some people feel about it, especially in Chicago and Cleveland, who you want to win the Series is one of those areas in which we have liberty in Christ. It is a non-essential. We don’t all have to agree with each other.

Just as with the World Series, we don’t all have to have the same political views or vote the same way. We are free, each of us, to cast our vote as God leads us. What we should do, each of us, is to seek the mind and heart of God in prayer before we vote. We should consider both our witness for Christ and the best outcome for our nation. And, please hear me on this: We must be loving and gracious to one another (and others) when we come to different conclusions about the decisions we make in the voting booth. Grace is what is needed, not criticism. Not anger. Not judgment. And we must never allow political differences to weaken or destroy the unity that is ours in Christ.

Politics can become an idol. And Christians are not immune to this kind of idolatry. Do you remember what was going on in the camp of Israel when Moses came down from the mountain after meeting with God and receiving the law that was to govern the life of Israel? He discovered that his brother Aaron, at the urging of the people, had made an idol of gold in the shape of a calf for them to worship (Exodus 32). We would never do something like that, right? But there is a danger that exists today – the danger of trying to mold our faith into the shape of another kind of animal, such as a donkey or an elephant (the symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively). To marry our faith to one political party or another is a form of idolatry. As is the belief that if only the candidate I favor is elected, all of our social, economic, and political problems will disappear and the kingdom of heaven will come to earth.

What’s a Christian to do in such a time as this? Psalm 146 gives us wise counsel. First of all, the unnamed psalm writer says, we are to “praise the Lord!” (146:1). Do you know how to say “praise the Lord” in Hebrew? It is *Hallelu Yah*. *Hallelu Yah* is Hebrew for “praise the Lord.” Like psalms 147-150, Psalm 146 begins *and* ends with praise to the Lord. There is never a

time when it is not time to praise the Lord. In fact, the psalm does not call for just a lifetime of praise (146:1-2). It calls for an eternity of praise (146:10), since “the Lord reigns forever.” His praise is to continue not only as long as you and I live in this life, but throughout eternity.

In verses 3 and 4, the psalmist tells us what not to do: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men (or women) who cannot save” (verse 3). Who are the people in whom we tend to put our trust? We look to politicians. We look to journalists or news commentators. We look to the rich and powerful, to teachers or doctors or financial advisors or experts of other kinds. Maybe we even look to pastors or other spiritual leaders. The problem is that all of these, and all of us, are fallen and fallible. Mere mortals, even the most powerful and virtuous, cannot fix what is wrong in us and with society.

But there is a blessing in this psalm, not for those who put their trust in any person or political party, but, as we see in verse 5, for those “whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord (their) God.”

What’s a Christian to do in such a time as this? Here is the answer. *Trust God* to be your help and your hope, for that is what He is. He is the hope and help of those who are needy. Put your trust in Him. Daily. Hourly. Moment by moment.

Notice what the psalm writer tells us about God. He reminds us, first of all, that God is the Creator of everything there is (6a). He made it all. He sustains it all. He governs it all. He watches over it all.

What about God’s character? Look at verse 6b: He is and “remains faithful forever.” Unlike a lot of politicians, when God gives you His word on something, He will do it. When He makes a promise, He will keep it. He always does what He says. He tells the truth. He is totally trustworthy. You can trust Him with your life.

Want to know what God is like? Look at what he does (verses 7-9):

He defends those who are mistreated or oppressed (7a).

He is committed to getting justice for those who are wronged.

He feeds the hungry (7b).

He sets prisoners free (7c).

He sets people free not only from physical prisons but from the dominion of the devil, from the enslaving power of sin and addiction.

He gives sight to the blind (8a), both physical and spiritual.

He lifts up the fallen (8b).

He cares for those who are burdened with the cares, stresses, and distresses of this life. You may “cast all your cares on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5-7).

He loves those who are rightly-related to Him (8c).

He cares for aliens and strangers, for widows and orphans (9a).

He watches out for the least and the last and the lost.

And He takes His stand against those who are wicked, who support, promote, and do what is wicked in his sight (9b).

Does this description sound like anyone you know? It does to me. It parallels beautifully the prophetic words of Isaiah 61 that Jesus applies to Himself in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because He has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the prisoners  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.  
(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus perfectly fulfills not only the prophecy of Isaiah 61 but also the description of God in Psalm 146. Regardless of who wins the White House on November 8, you can be sure of this: Blessed are those whose help and hope are found in Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is one more thing, and then I’m done. Do you know what is going to happen on November 9? Regardless of any still-to-come October or November surprises, regardless of the election outcome, when November 9 dawns, God will still be sovereign. He will still be in charge. He will still be working out His redemptive purposes for His incomparable glory. Jesus will still be Lord, and no one will ever take His place. Our job is to trust Him with the whole of our lives without wavering and without fear, to trust Him with heart and soul and mind and strength, and to live out our faith. To live it out faithfully as kingdom people whose citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). With a lifetime of praise that anticipates an eternity of praise to Him.

Max Lucado tells this story about traveling in the interior of Brazil with a long-time missionary pilot, who flew a circuit of remote towns in a small, rickety plane that threatened to come undone at the slightest gust of wind. Wilbur and Orville had a sturdier aircraft, he said.

Max could not get comfortable in the plane. He kept thinking the plane was going to crash in some Brazilian jungle, and he would be gobbled up by piranhas or swallowed by an anaconda.

He kept shifting around, looking down, and gripping his seat, as if it would do any good. Finally, the pilot had had enough of his squirming. He looked at Max and shouted over the airplane noise: “We won’t face anything I can’t handle. You might as well trust me to fly the plane.”

Maybe that’s what God is saying to us, to nervous American Christians, in such a time as this: “You won’t face anything I can’t handle. You might as well trust me to get you through it.”

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.