

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, November 4, 2012**

DON'T MISPLACE YOUR FAITH

Psalm 146:1-10

Well, brothers and sisters, this Tuesday, the Lord willing and the chads don't hang, our long national nightmare will be over. This election campaign, which has been going on since the last time the Redskins won the Superbowl, has brought out the worst in Americans – anger, deceit, backbiting, hatefulness. It's even affected the youngest among us. This election has even reduced four-year-olds to tears. I can only imagine the effect it must be having on their mothers.

All jokes aside, there's no question that this election is important. In one way or another, they all are. I've been hearing the line: "This is the most important election of our generation," for at least 30 years. It seems like they all are. Now that being the case, I would urge you, if you haven't already, to vote on Tuesday. Do so prayerfully. Do so thoughtfully. Do so seriously. But do not do so without remembering where our ultimate allegiance lies. It isn't with Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. It isn't with the Republican party or the Democratic party. It isn't with the Federal Government or with the State of Virginia. Our ultimate allegiance is to the God who rules over all.

In the last several days, I've read statements from people saying that if Barack Obama is reelected it's the end of America. And I've heard statements saying that so-and-so is *terrified* that Mitt Romney might be elected President. And I think to myself: "How sad. How sad to live in a state in which who occupies the White House has that kind of effect on your life." Now that's not to say that who occupies the White House isn't important and won't have an effect on your life. But I don't know about you, but regardless of what the result is on Tuesday night it is not going to disturb my sleep. I'm not going to lie awake wondering whether I can go on in the morning or whether I have to move to Australia to get away from it all. And there's a reason for that. The reason – well, many reasons – are offered to us in Psalm 146, so I'd ask you to turn to that and to realize that this is a psalm that begins not with warning, but with praise. It begins with the praise of the Lord of all.

The psalmist begins by saying: "Praise the Lord, O my soul, I will praise the Lord all my life. I will sing praise to my God as long as I live." Consider what the psalmist must have faced in the course of his life. This will sound familiar. He might well have faced the death of his parents. He might have faced the death of a spouse or even of children. He might have faced illness or natural disaster. He might at some point in the course of his life lost his livelihood. He might have suffered terribly from doubt or depression. And yet, despite having to deal with problems that are the same that we all have to deal with, his response is: "I will praise the Lord." There are no conditions on this. He will praise God regardless of his circumstances. Much as, for instance, did Job, even as he argued with God, even as he wondered where God was in the midst of all of his troubles,

troubles that most of us can only dream of. Still, he would praise God, and so would the psalmist.

And so will we. Our temptation is to bemoan the state of the world, or to bemoan the state of our nation, or to bemoan the state of our lives and to lose sight of what is most important. So it's crucial that the psalmist begins with praise because it shows that his priorities are straight. It shows the people of God where their priorities are to lie. They are not to lie with the ups and downs of politicians. They are not even to lie with the ups and downs of our own lives, as difficult as it is sometimes to set those aside. Our priorities are to lie first of all with Him. Now he knows that we all have the temptation to offer our praises and to put our trust where it does not belong, and so he goes on in verses 3 and 4 once again to make an unconditional statement: Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men who when their mortal spirit departs and they are put into the ground their plans come to nothing. We are not to put our trust in princes who cannot save. We don't have princes anymore. We have presidents. We have governors. We have senators and representatives. Not that any of you put your trust in the latter at all.

Today, rather than speaking of the prince or the king, which is the way that the psalmist and others in that day would have personified their governments, we might speak of the state, not of Virginia but of the government in general. The plans of princes, he says, no matter how good they are, turn to dust when they die. It doesn't mean that they don't continue possibly to have an influence but it means that over time all of the plans that government makes and all the things that it does that seem so important tend to fade. Today people have a tendency – and I think Americans are more guilty of this than most – to think of the state as eternal. America can never die. America will never cease to be. America can never dissolve from within. America can never suffer any of the fates of those great powers that have gone before us, just as the Soviet Union was eternal, and the British Empire before it, and the Roman Empire way before it. I have no doubt that there were Romans, just as there were Britons and just as there were Russians who thought this is the state of things and this is what it shall ever be. Yes, there may be differences, changes at the margin, but admit it, did any of you who were alive and aware of what was going on in the world in 1980 foresee that a bare eleven years later the Soviet Union would simply cease to exist? I know I wouldn't have. I really doubt that anyone foresaw that, even those who most urgently wanted to see that happen didn't actually think that it would.

The fact is, there are lots of ways that states can die – conquests, economic collapse, moral dissolution, ethnic division. It takes at least two hands for me to count the number of nation-states that I learned by heart when I was in high school and studying geography and government that are no longer there. Do any of you still refer to Czechoslovakia? There is no Czechoslovakia. Any of you ever refer to Yugoslavia? Well, there's no Yugoslavia anymore. Do you refer to Burma? I bet you do occasionally, if the subject ever comes up. The country is still there, but it goes by a different name now – Myanmar. I remember quite clearly when I was in high school there was a country called the Central African Republic. While I was in college the dictator of that nation had a fit of egomania and proclaimed himself Emperor and it became the Central African Empire.

A few years after that he was overthrown and it became the Central African Republic again. And that's the way it is with states.

Now America is not going to be changing its name willy-nilly and it's not going to be disappearing in a puddle overnight. I doubt very seriously that at the stroke of a pen it will simply cease to be as the Soviet Union did at Mikhail Gorbachev's signature, but the truth of the matter is that there is no nation that is eternal, and to say that does not indicate that we love our country any less than we do. It is simply to recognize reality. That's the way history works. Now none of that is to say fatalistically that nothing we do matters. You don't need to vote, it doesn't make any difference. You don't need to be involved in politics, it's all corrupting anyway. You don't need to be informed about what's going on in the world because after all, none of that is of eternal significance. I don't want to be heard saying that. That's not at all what I'm saying. What I am saying is that it is not of *ultimate* significance. And the psalmist makes that very clear when he says that when their spirits depart, when they die, they return to the ground and on that very day their plans come to nothing. On that day, everything that seemed so important fades and other things step to the fore. All of us will be in that same situation one of these days. And when we are in that situation I hope and pray that we have not been tempted as so many people in our country are to think that what Washington does or what Richmond does or who occupies the oval office or who has a seat in the Senate is what really is important in this life. It's not *unimportant*. But it's not ultimate. And when we go to the voting booth on Tuesday our mindset should be that we're not electing a god or a king, even. We're electing a servant of the people. And that's a good thing. We're blessed to be able to do that. But we're not erecting an idol, no one to bow down to, no one to take orders from without giving it a second thought, no one to obey unthinkingly.

Well, the psalmist points us in a very different direction. He says instead that rather than looking to the state, rather than looking to the prince or to the human powers that be, we are to look to the Lord for our help. In verse 5, he says, "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God." It's important for us to hear that. The beneficence of the state is as nothing compared to the grace of our God. The provision that Health and Human Services or any other government department can make for us pales in comparison to what we have already been given by the God of the universe. After all, there's no government agency that can create life, right? There's no government agency that can bring people together and make matches for life. I have heard that there's a bill in Congress to create such an agency, but I don't actually give it much chance. There's no government agency that can bring children into our lives. Oh, yes, there are government agencies that can help us eliminate children from our lives, but none who can bring them in. That's the work of God. That's the help that we have from Him. And our hope is in Him as well.

I'm not going to wake up on Wednesday morning, regardless of who's elected and think, "Ah, the sun has come out. The world looks better. Everything has a different hue to it and now everything's going to be okay." Have you ever been tempted to do that after a politician that you really, really like and were enthusiastic about was elected and took office? You thought, "Now things are really going to happen. Things are going to be

wonderful. Everything is going to turn around.” And then four years later, what are you saying about him or her? You’re probably saying, “Throw the bums out!” The reason is that no politician can meet our expectations. If we want to see Paradise recreated we’re going to have to wait for the kingdom of God to come in its fullness. It’s not going to come on Tuesday, unless Jesus takes pity on us and comes instead.

The psalmist tells us that this is where our hope is. Our hope is in the God who holds our lives in the palm of His hand and who has ultimate control over them. He then goes on to list a lengthy list of why it is that we are to place our trust in Him, what it is that the Lord does that encourages us to do that. In verses 6-8 and in verse 9 he says that this is the One who made us. “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them, the Lord who remains faithful forever. He is the one who stands by His creation.”

Do you all remember a promise that was made – not by a politician, which means it hasn’t been broken – by God in Genesis. It was made to Noah. Remember what that promise was? The sign of that promise is the rainbow and it’s the sign that He would never again pour out His wrath in such a way as to destroy the world. He’s stood by that promise. He always will stand by that promise. He stands by what He has created, and that includes His people. In verse 7, he says He upholds the cause of the oppressed. He takes the cause of the oppressed – those who are oppressed either by sin or by human powers – and He takes up their cause. Have you ever wondered why it is that faith seems to grow in the face of tyranny? Why it is, for instance, that in the midst of the persecution that the church has suffered in China for decades, the church is now stronger and larger than ever? The church is bursting at the seams with people wanting to serve the Lord, even in the face of government opposition. Have you ever wondered why in the face of the poverty that has afflicted the continent of Africa for so long, seemingly all of our lives, why it is that the church is growing and the number of Christians, people giving their lives to God, why the number of those people has been growing by leaps and bounds in the midst of that poverty for decades now, more so than anywhere else in the world? It’s because God takes up the cause of the oppressed. He provides for those in need. The second part of verse 7 says He gives food to the hungry, He makes provision. Human sin can get in the way of that because He works through human agencies to do that. He doesn’t anymore normally rain down manna from heaven, so He works through human agencies and when those human agencies are faithful to Him, needs are met.

In the final part of verse 7 he says He sets the prisoners free. He delivers us from the yoke of sin because we have all been prisoners at one time or another, even if we’ve never spent a night in jail. He frees us from the yoke of sin that oppresses more than any state ever could. It says in the first part of verse 8 that the Lord gives sight to the blind. He heals our diseases, both physical and spiritual. He does not guarantee us permanent physical life in this body unhindered by anything, but He does bring us healing, if not in this life, then in the next. In the second part of verse 8 he says that the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. He takes our burdens on Himself. Have you ever been weighed down by a burden? Have you ever seen someone who was just eaten up with worry over a job or over a wayward child? So often you’ll see a person like that and they look as

though they have a hundred-pound weight on their back that they're carrying around. So when the psalmist says that the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, he's saying He takes that weight from us and enables us to stand up straight.

He says in verse 9 that He watches over the alien. He ensures justice even for those who are not His people. He watches over and sustains the fatherless and the widow. He takes special care for those for whom the world cares nothing and, yes, in America the government does help people like the fatherless and the widow. And as anyone who has ever dealt with the social welfare system knows, that help can only go so far. It may provide for their physical or financial needs. But it can't provide for their spiritual or emotional or relational needs. That's where God, especially working through His people, comes in. He takes up the cause of the oppressed, the sick, the poor, the outcast, the unloved, and He overcomes the evil that the world inflicts and He does so in a way that the state can only dream of being able to do. Everything that the psalmist says here is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. It says in Luke 4:18-19: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Doesn't that sound like what the psalmist was just talking about? In Jesus Christ, God has acted in a way that princes and kings of this world can never act. He has acted to change the equation. It is no longer the case that our suffering is ameliorated, the world has made it a little bit better. Everything has now changed. And it has changed because of His intervention, because of what He has done in Christ.

Now, why does He do this for His people? In the last portion of verse 8, he says simply, "The Lord loves the righteous." He does this because He loves His people. He loves them enough to give His own Son for them.

Let me ask you a question. Does Barack Obama love you? Does Mitt Romney love you? Do George Allen or Tim Kaine or Gerry Connelly or Pat Murray or any of the people who are running for public office whose names are going to be in front of you on Tuesday love you? Brothers and sisters, they don't even know you. I'm not saying they are bad people, but there are over 320,000,000 of us. They can't know us all. Which means they can't love us. Only God, in Jesus Christ, can love us, because He's capable of knowing all of us.

Well, the psalmist offers all of this by way of making clear that if we have a choice – and we do – between placing our trust in the state and placing our trust in the One who rules over the state and over all states, he knows where his loyalty is going to lie. And so he concludes this psalm by declaring that God reigns over all. He reigns forever. Your God, O Zion, for all generations, because it is only He who has the real power. Presidents, governors, senators – they think they have power, and they have some, but all that they have has been given to them by God, as Jesus told Pilate. And it can and it will be taken from them in an instant. The power of our God, that power is not only for today, and not only for tomorrow and not only for Tuesday and not only for a four-year term. That power is forever. Praise the Lord for it.