

Plotting Politicians

Psalms for the Summer – Psalm 2

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Pastor Vern Christopherson

We're in the middle of election season in our country. We've already had the Republican National Convention, and this coming week we have the Democratic National Convention. During such gatherings, hour after hour of speeches seem designed to excite the faithful and shame the opposition. Even turning on our televisions at such times is not for the faint of heart, especially when we're electing a new president.

If you're already backing a candidate, or even if you're not, it might be tempting to plug your ears, change the channel, and dismiss the whole system as deeply flawed, or worse, as corrupt. In our last two presidential elections, an enterprising real estate agent in Rochester put up a large billboard on Highway 52. In the center were the words: "Leaving the U.S.? We'll sell your house." We get a chuckle out of it, but let's be honest, that's not that far removed from how we feel sometimes.

Today's reading from Psalm 2 might have something to tell us about living through a messy election season. Ancient Israel didn't have democratic elections, of course. They had kings. Psalm 2 is a royal psalm. It was intended for the coronation of a new king. From the sounds of it, though, the process of getting a new king might have been every bit as messy as trying to elect a new president. So, let's see what lessons about leadership can glean as the psalm unfolds.

A first lesson: ***The task of uniting people is incredibly hard.*** Down through the centuries, a number of nations were subject to Israel's ruling authority. When a new king came to power, much of that rule was called into question. Politicians began plotting. There were cries of revolt. According to the *Psalms/Now* paraphrase, about the only thing these plotting politicians could agree on was rebelling against the new king. In so many words they were saying, "Let's cut the ties and set ourselves free!"

No doubt, the hard work of uniting differing peoples has been around for a long time, including the beginning of our own nation. You remember some of the challenges in our history books: How do various Christian groups begin to get along – Puritans, Quakers, Mennonites, Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists,

Anglicans, and more? What about slaves brought in on ships from Africa? What do we do about Native Americans and especially their children? How do we respond to Jewish synagogues that are being formed? It was one challenge after another.

Shortly after he was elected, George Washington wrote a letter to the Touro Synagogue, the first Jewish congregation in this fledgling nation. He said, “Happily, the government of these United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction and to persecution no assistance, requires only that those who live under its protections should conduct themselves as good citizens, giving it and all its causes their support.”

Clearly, uniting divergent people is incredibly hard. Whoever gets elected to the Oval Office this November will need to put significant energy into casting a vision that brings our country together, and hopefully begins to heal the divisions that are so apparent in this and every campaign.

A second lesson in leadership: A leader must act in ways befitting the authority of the office. The king of ancient Israel was looked upon as the adopted son of God. It was a title that conveyed authority and stressed the importance of caring for God’s people. In Psalm 72, another royal psalm, the king was to look after the poor, the homeless, and those in great need such as widows and orphans.

Needless to say, our presidents are not referred to as God’s “sons” and “daughters.” And that’s a good thing. Can you imagine how awkward that would feel? To be worthy of esteem, however, our leaders need to strive for Christ-like compassion, self-discipline, and humility. They should be wise and intelligent. They should be patient and savvy. And above all, they must remember their place: that no matter how popular they may seem, no matter how loud the cheering crowds, our elected leaders exist to serve and not to save.

In his commentary on Psalm 82, Martin Luther imagined a country being ruled by one who could make his whole kingdom into a hospital – a place of healing and refuge and support – where the poor are lifted up and others are kept from falling down.

Government can’t solve all our social problems, of course. Luther was clear that the civil state played a different role than the kingdom of God. But in this

regard, we might ask some questions: Are our leaders doing what they can to take care of children, senior, and those who too easily fall through the cracks? Are they working to create a culture where law enforcement is both effective and supported? Do they seek to understand the causes of the tensions that so readily divide us? And will they try to build bridges that pull our communities together, or will they build walls that keep us apart?

A third lesson in leadership: ***It's a dangerous thing to believe you are the savior.*** Ultimately, many of Israel's kings, who'd been named as God's son, proved to be all-too-human. There were a few exceptions – David played the role of a shepherd in caring for the flock, Solomon built the temple, Josiah brought much-needed reform. But most of the kings fell far short. They cared mostly for themselves, they started wars, and they turned away from God.

When the kings lost their way, God sent prophets to call them back. From the sheer volume of prophet writings – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekial, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and others – we can see how often Israel's rulers failed to live up to God's standards. At times, these prophets directly called the kings to account. At other times, they spoke to the people, urging them to abandon the wayward paths of their kings and return to God. *Remember, they said, God is your ultimate King. Worship him. Remember: God hears the cries of the hungry and the oppressed. Take care of the poor. Remember: you are a chosen people, set apart from the nations. Follow God's commandments.*

Even as the king claimed his role as God's son, he did not rule in a vacuum. He was called to listen to the cries of his people, to heed the words of the prophets, and to respond to the voice of the divine.

In contrast, in our system today we might hope that our leaders feel called to listen, but do they? Speechwriters, power brokers, and campaign managers are all part of today's political machinery. Yet, for politicians to be truly effective, I think, they must hear voices other than their own, and voices other than those who tell them only what they want to hear. Ruling *by the people* and *for the people* means listening to the people.

Friends, we are the people being served by our elected leaders. Our responsibility is to participate in the governing process, messy though it may be. It might not seem like it, but the work of government is holy work. Paul says in Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God." Caring for God's people is of utmost

importance. If you don't like what you're hearing, perhaps the answer is not simply to plug your ears, or change the channel, or assume that all politicians who don't think like you are bad.

No, *we the people* are meant to hold our elected leaders accountable. We must call for – indeed, insist upon – leaders who are worthy of the role; who cast vision and inspire hope; who promise to lift up those on the bottom and to protect the liberties of all. And it means we should pray for those leaders regularly as they go about the challenging, complicated, and often thankless job of leading our nation.

So, people, use your voice – but do so with thoughtful respect and care. Do not feel the need to win every argument. Spend just as much time asking questions and listening, as you do in spouting opinions. If we don't want leaders who cast blame, call names, and invoke shame, then we should not fall into these traps ourselves when we engage in civil discourse.

Friends, it may seem like our world needs a savior now more than ever. If Psalm 2 tells us anything, it's that this refrain is nothing new. Perhaps, amidst the helplessness of the process and the imperfections of the candidates, we need to hear again the last line of the psalm. From *Psalms/Now*: “Only those who rest in God's will are really secure.”

God promises to work in and through our governing process. God works through the candidates involved. And God works through you and me as we listen, and seek to understand, and pray for our leaders, and vote.

But more than that, God reminds us that no matter who ends up in the Oval Office, we are first and foremost citizens of God's realm. We already have a Messiah, the Chosen One, God's very own Son, who has come to save us. And our ultimate hope comes not from our government, but from the One who lived and died so that we might be citizens with the saints. Thanks be to God. Amen.