

## **Nation-Building, #3**

### **From Precedent to President: A King's Prayer**

You're still listening (or reading!) -- thank you! This is Day 3 of our exercise in "nation-building", guided by the Bible's teachings about leaders, government, and citizenship. I'm David Rowe, Co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, and this episode is titled "From Precedent to President: A King's Prayer". It's based on King Solomon's prayer as he was about to be the King of Israel.

On Tuesday, November 4th, 2024, the USA elected a new president, although it was hard to tell from where I was. I was up in Northampton, Massachusetts working on what I smilingly call "My Last Will and Testament" for our church. That may end up more like Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony". It never bodes well when the author is bored with the topic, the title, and the content. Anyway, the Wi-Fi was down at my hotel election night, so I went to bed early. By 6:00 AM I was writing in a local coffee house so quiet that I wasn't sure how to read the crowd. I may have been the last American to know who won!

Our new president, Donald Trump, was sworn in on January 20th. He quickly put in place his team and agenda that has left much of America and the world gasping for air and playing catch up. I doubt that any of us have seen anything like it in our lifetimes.

My lifetime is from just after World War II until today. In presidential cycles, that is from "We like Ike" to "Make America Great Again". My politically aware lifeline began with my father always insisting that he must vote after my mother in order to cancel out her reliably Democrat/FDR admiring vote. Then it was the Kennedy/Nixon debates that elevated politics into "must see TV". As time went on there were the Goldwater scare tactics of nuclear Armageddon by him and against him. Then The Civil Rights era elections, and those consumed by the Vietnam War. There were political stars that shone brightly, or briefly, or dimly. Can't miss candidates missed. Long shots emerged. Pedestals proved unsteady. The cynics among us wondered if elections even mattered. "They're all the same," people complained. Until they weren't.

Most presidencies had a common mix of failures and successes, as each administration weathered unexpected crises: assassinations, recessions, 9/11, COVID, Putin; balanced by resilient economies, medical advances, new technologies. Most ambitions fall short. Dire warnings lose their edge. Until they don't.

No matter who is in power, or what party, we are governed – by a government and leaders who are empowered by elections. We contribute to government by our taxes, votes, civic engagement, approval or opposition. For the most part, America moves,

every four or eight years, a little to the right, a little to the left. Every election season results in people who rejoice and those who are alarmed. As America lurches from one side to the other, somebody's shoe is always on the other foot about every hot topic of the day. Seasons change. That's what makes them seasons.

Consider the other big January event, the NFL Super Bowl. The ex-Superbowl Champs, the Kansas City Chiefs, are picking up the pieces of a failed season, demoralized, questioning the road ahead. The new Superbowl Champs, the Philadelphia Eagles, are rejoicing in the afterglow of stunning success, fully determined to build on it. It is ever thus.

And often only lasts a season.

A big part of our civic duty is to weather every season. The blessing of being 78 is to finally realize that the Bible is right: "there's nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That's the famous verse, but a few others around it are even clearer:

“Generations come and go,  
but the earth remains forever.

The sun rises and the sun sets,  
and hurries back to where it rises.

The wind blows to the south  
and turns to the north;  
round and round it goes,  
ever returning on its course.

What has been will be again,  
what has been done will be done again,  
THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN.” (Ecclesiastes 1:3-9)

In my lifetime every half decade or so has adamantly believed that its best is the best ever; And/or its worst is the worst ever. What we do know is that now is the present we've lived to see. It is ours for the taking, or the whining, or the affirming, or the correcting, the applauding, the enduring... and the praying.

I've spent my Christian life as a Congregationalist and Baptist, both part of the “Free Church” tradition. In Protestantism being “Free Church” means that we conduct our own affairs, we are in charge of ourselves, no one and no structure have dominion over us. We carry on to the best of our ability. One result of that freedom is the Sunday morning pastoral prayer that I pray spontaneously, counting on God's inspiration to guide me.

However, I have always admired that spectrum of Christianity – like Catholics and Anglicans – that have prayer books, and specifically proscribed prayers. One result is that in every Catholic Church every worshipper ends up praying for the current president, good, bad, or indifferent. It is literally a fill-in-the-blank sentence in the morning prayer. That means that on Sunday, January 19<sup>th</sup>, millions of Americans nationwide prayed for President Joe Biden by name. And on Sunday, January 26<sup>th</sup>, those exact same Christians in those exact same churches prayed for President Donald Trump. I like that. As the Ecclesiastes scripture reminds us, seasons change, the need for prayer doesn't. Whoever has that Oval Office, sitting behind the famous Resolute Desk, has the power to make my day, and yours; or ruin my day, and yours. So keep praying.

On average, I pray 45 times a week, which doesn't seem like much now that I write it down, given the wide array of prayer concerns affecting our church family. But I do pray long and hard, and often; And often for people in positions of authority over us, for people whose decisions directly impact our well-being.

That includes the doctor who is doing surgery on a church member tomorrow; the radiology staff reading test results; the infusion center and medical staff overseeing treatment. It has included GE in the frenzy of its final years, our police and fire departments in times of crisis, local and national. School boards, first selectmen, corporate executives, state and local leaders. And yes, the President of the United States, and even our most obvious adversaries and alliances, by name.

My prayers for this unlikely bunch are much the same, modeled after King Solomon. Solomon was a young man when he became King of Israel, following the death of his father, David. The young king knew immediately that he was in over his head, a humility hard to find in world leaders today. Nowadays I wonder if people would elect or follow anyone who expressed humility, or reservations about their own adequacy; or wondering aloud if they were up to the task, looking for guidance and help? The late Jimmy Carter is forever remembered, mockingly, for wearing a sweater on national TV, imploring the nation to help tackle the late 1970s energy crisis by lowering home and office thermostats, and wearing a warm sweater to make up for it. “It made him – and us – look weak,” was the near universal critique. And Americans never want to look weak or admit weakness.

Contrary to that, when God offered to help Solomon, the king responded: “O Lord my God, thou hast made thy servant king... but I am but a little child: I don't even know how to come or go... Give me, therefore, an understanding heart with which to judge my people that I may discern between good and bad... And God was pleased, and said, “Behold I have given you a wise and understanding heart” (1 Kings 3:7-12).

That's what I've prayed for Trump, Biden, Obama, both Bushes, going back to at least Nixon. I wanted each of them to do well. To do well they needed to choose well. To choose well they needed to be humble enough to ask for God's guidance and human guidance. Since the day President Trump was re-elected that has been my daily prayer for him. Don't lead from the chin, lead from the knees, is my thought. The ancient Greeks had a philosopher who declared, "a wise man knows what he doesn't know." That is the beginning of wisdom. The Book of Proverbs, much of it written by or quoted from King Solomon, proclaims that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Fear, in the Biblical sense, is often translated as "awe". Something or someone is awesome, or awe inspiring. Often it is nature, or a human accomplishment. To stand in awe of God, to have oneself in humble perspective toward the rest of the universe, that is the beginning of wisdom.

That is Solomon's advice, and not just for a King. Whoever seeks leadership, or has it – a team captain, a nation's president, our local First Selectman, your company's leadership team, a volunteer coach or scout leader – if you lead, start with God. Humbly, and openly, start with God. Once again and as you'll hear in an upcoming episode, the wisdom from the Book of Proverbs is spot on: "The fear of the Lord", better understood as "awe", but sticking with the old version, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; and knowledge of the Holy, is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10).

That is "starting on the right foot." Then, sure, bring in all the experts and advisors and consultants and opinion polls – but start with the humility and openness of Solomon.

Let's wrap this up with a sports analogy. After a lifetime of playing, coaching, and observing sports, it is clear that the best athletes pay attention to their setup. Depending on the sport you will want to square your shoulders, align your hands, bend your knees, open up your stance, straighten your back, eyes straight ahead. We even talk about "getting off on the right foot".

Clearly, it seems wisest to start with God, and build out from there. As a young adult, whenever I was faced with a financial crisis I would immediately fret, sweat, probably curse, and then plot to rob a bank or beg for money. Eventually (days, weeks, even months later), I would turn to God. Things always worked out.

It took a good ten years for me to finally wake up and decide to start first with God. Guided by God, I could then plot. And skip over the fret, sweat, and cursing.

As Americans we can argue about how public a government leader should be about their reliance on faith, or their trust in God. As citizens we want good results. As a pastor I care about the path to good results, and the foundation they are built on. Thanks for listening, or reading. Don't hesitate to be in touch.