

**NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL STORM**  
*a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Nov. 6, 2016*  
**Based on I Kings 21:1-20, and I Kings 22:2-17**

The sermon this morning is the continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Navigating the Storm—How to Journey in Faith through Troubling Times.” We have considered during this series a number of Biblical stories about people on ships in stormy seas, but we have also noted that the image of the storm is itself a prime image for troubling times. Today, as we approach Election day, we are in very stormy political times, which might continue to be stormy even after the election happens; so our focus this morning is on “Navigating the Political Storm.” Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

I never suggest to people what candidate they ought to vote for in an election, not only because doing so would endanger our church’s tax-exempt status, but even more because it would be presumptuous to try to say who God thinks we should vote for. The reality is that people of faith can come to different opinions about which way is the good way to vote.

The strange thing about this presidential election is that a majority of people in America feel that there is no really good way to vote. We are like King Jehoshaphat, who, when presented with 400 lying and unscrupulous prophets, said, “Is there not some other prophet somewhere?” For Jehoshaphat, there was another prophet, the faithful Micaiah, son of Imlah, who spoke the truth of God. But for us, there are no other presidential candidates other than the ones we’ve got.

Following the second presidential debate, there was a fascination, over internet channels, with Ken Bone, the guy in the red sweater, who asked one of the questions at Washington University in St. Louis. I think the reason was because in the midst of the viciousness and the tawdriness of the presidential campaign, this guy was a picture of niceness and decency. Someone suggested Ken Bone for president.

But we have to choose between the ones on the ballot. So what are Christians to do when we are confronted by flawed leaders? We can find some very good guidance in the Bible, because the leaders of Israel were often seriously flawed. One of the worst was King Ahab, who was featured in both of the Scripture stories that we heard this morning. In the first account, we heard how Ahab coveted the property of Naboth, but Naboth refused to sell. Ahab at least had a sense that he could not just seize the property—that would be blatantly unjust—so he sulked. His wife, Jezebel, who was not an Israelite and had no faith in God, did not have the same sort of moral reservations. She simply had Naboth unjustly accused of a crime and put to death, then announced to Ahab that the field was his for his taking. Ahab went ahead to take it, but as he arrived at the field, he was confronted by the prophet Elijah, who pronounced judgment on him. Ahab was actually somewhat penitent after that, with the result that God’s judgment was delayed.

In the second story, which took place a few years later, Ahab, king of Israel, wanted to attack a Syrian town, and asked Jehoshaphat, king of the neighboring kingdom of Judah, to join him in the battle. Jehoshaphat said that they should first inquire of the Lord. Jehoshaphat was a good king, recognizing that the first step in making any decision is to

look to God. So Ahab sent for his court prophets—400 of them. They all cheered him on. But Jehoshaphat was not impressed with these 400 yes men. He wanted a prophet who would actually tell the truth. Such a prophet was Micaiah, who after initially mimicking the false prophets with sarcasm, pronounced that the battle was not God's will and that if Ahab went to battle he would be killed. "Israel," he said, "would be like sheep without a shepherd." (I Kings 22:17) Ahab ignored Micaiah, went ahead with his invasion, and was killed in the battle.

The Biblical prophets give us a very good model for how we can relate to political authorities today when we likewise have leaders who are flawed. From the prophets we can discern four key principles:

The foundational principle is to look first and above all to God. One of the most age-old human tendencies is that people decide first what they want to do and then want to claim that God is on their side. This of course is exactly what Ahab did when he decided he wanted to seize a neighboring city and then got his prophets to back his plan. Too often today we hear the name of God invoked in political campaigns even when there is little sign that the politician has actually been paying any attention to God. The Biblical prophets insist on looking first and authentically to God when we make our choices rather than expecting God to bless choices already made.

The second principle exemplified in the prophets is to keep a critical distance from the rulers. The false prophets of Ahab eagerly jumped on his bandwagon, and we see a lot of folks today who too easily suspend critical and ethical thinking to jump on one bandwagon or another. The true prophets such as Elijah and Micaiah did not run with the crowd. They exemplify what it means to keep an objective distance from all ruling powers so as to maintain a critical and truthful eye.

The third principle we see in the prophets is to pursue God's values. Ahab clearly had little interest in doing what was right in the eyes of God; he just wanted to enhance his own wealth and his own power. Queen Jezebel was even worse—willing to brutally misuse power to exploit the weak. Elijah and Micaiah in contrast stood firm for God's justice; and if you read the books of the Biblical prophets, you find that the prophets as a whole were constant champions of God's values—they spoke out for the poor and the outsiders, they called for a compassionate and just society that would uphold all people, and they condemned every form of greed and exploitation. Today, when so many politicians are driven by narrow self-interest, we as the church are called to be that prophetic voice that will speak out for the values of God.

Yet as the prophets upheld God's values and viewed the great wrongs and corruption of their time, they often ended up speaking a grim word. We saw that in the Scripture stories of this morning. When Elijah confronted Ahab at Naboth's field, it was a dark scene. Scholars believe that the earliest form of this story stopped at the point where our reading stopped—in the stark encounter where Ahab says to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy," and Elijah says, "I have found you." (I Kings 21:20) The clear message is that evil will not escape the ultimate judgment of God. You know that Elijah was just going to blast Ahab with a word of judgment; and indeed by the time the story was written down in the Bible, it was expanded to include Elijah's full condemnation. Likewise when Micaiah confronted Ahab, he issued a harsh word of judgment, proclaiming that if Ahab went

against God's will, he would perish. Today, as Christians look at our troubled political landscape, many have a grim foreboding about what may lie ahead. Is there any hope to be found in all this?

There's a Baptist church on Graham Road that has a sign out front that currently reads, "Jesus is coming—hopefully before the election." That sign expresses both the desperation that many people feel right now about the election, but also our real hope—not that Jesus is going to return tomorrow and spare us the election, but that there is a Righteous Ruler in heaven who transcends our flawed political landscape and in whom we can find genuine and lasting hope. Whenever the prophets spoke even a very harsh word of judgment about their time, they did so within a larger message of hope—they were saying that evil will not have the last word, but there is a Ruler on high, and God is at work for good.

So the final principle exemplified in the prophets within stormy political times is that we find true hope by trusting in the King who is above all kings. Earthly rulers have always been flawed, but we need not despair, because our destiny is in the hands of God, and we can look to God to guide us through every political as well as every personal storm.

Many people right now are concerned not only about the very imperfect choices that we have in the national election, but also about the sharp division that seems to exist between the political camps in our country. But if we keep these Biblical prophetic principles in mind—if we look above all to God, if we keep a critical distance even from the candidate for whom we expect to vote, if we seek God's values and trust in the Lord—then we have a basis for coming together even if we have different political opinions. This in fact is how we can have a congregation that includes Democrats and Republicans and I expect also some Greens and Libertarians and independents—because we transcend our political differences as we unite together around greater spiritual values.

Along this line, our church is joining together with other churches in our community to sponsor an event this coming Friday called, "Moving Forward Together." Organized by the Kent Interfaith Alliance, of which our church is a part, this event will focus on bringing people together in the aftermath of a tempestuous election season. Our statehouse representative and senator will be there, and it will be held right across the street at the UCC church. It is one step in moving beyond political wrangling to seek to come together around God's purposes.

The good news is that no matter who is president or who controls Congress, the one who truly governs the affairs of the universe is Christ. So we have hope, and as we join together in faith we can share in how the Lord will be at work for good through us.