



Westminster  
Presbyterian Church  
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

**How to Vote**  
**Zechariah 7:1-14; James 2:16-18**

You will notice on the front of your bulletin this morning a text from James, but before I get to this lesson, I am going to read from the prophet Zechariah 7:1-14. To understand these verses, you have to know they were written to the people living in Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity.

I hope you remember that seventy years before these words were written, the Babylonians invaded Judah and its capital Jerusalem. The Babylonians left little in their wake. Their most noted target for destruction was the glorious Temple of God that was built by King Solomon and stood in Jerusalem for 400 years.

In the years following the destruction of the Temple, the Jews continued many of their religious practices. They continued to read and learn from the law. They kept the feast days. They also held regular fasts to mourn the destruction of the Temple.

When Zechariah wrote, the Babylonians were long gone. They were defeated by the Medes who allowed the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives and to rebuild the Temple. Of course, it is a different generation of Jews that returned to Jerusalem. Those who returned were the children of those who went into exile. They had never seen Solomon's temple, and they wondered if they should continue the practices taught them by their parents, which included a fast in mourning for the destruction of that old Temple.

Hear now the word of God:

**In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev. The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melek, together with their men, to entreat the LORD BY asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"**

**Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: “Ask all the people of the land and the priests, ‘when you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?’”**

**And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: “This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.’**

**“But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and covered their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry.**

**“‘When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the LORD Almighty. ‘I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land they left behind them was so desolate that no one traveled through it. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.’”**

There is the temptation to make our faith easy. It is easy to make faith all ritual with no substance. That is what happened in the time of Zechariah. You may have heard it in reading. Sharezer and Regem-Melek traveled to Jerusalem to ask the prophet, “Why on earth are we still fasting over the loss of our temple? It has been seventy years since the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem, destroying the protective walls of the city and burning our temple. That was a long time ago, and God has allowed us back into our homeland and we are rebuilding our city, and we are rebuilding the Temple. So, Zechariah, should we still fast for the old temple? I mean, we almost have a new one built.”

Like a politician, Zechariah skirted the question by asking questions. “I wonder why in the first place you were fasting for the old temple? Was it for God’s sake that you fasted? Are you actually sorry for the loss of this symbol

of God's presence – the temple? Or are you fasting out of self-pity? Are you simply lamenting the fact that things are not as they used to be? The old days are gone and we are going to have to make some adjustments.”

Zechariah was in fact asking, “Do you know why God allowed the temple to be destroyed in the first place? Do you know? Do you have the least idea, because if you don't know why the Temple was destroyed, what hope do you have that this new temple will not come to the same end as the old one? Maybe it is the question we might ask ourselves, do you know why your life is in the shape it is in? If you don't, then don't plan on things getting better. Do you know why our nation is having the problems we are having? If we don't know why, or if we are ignoring the tough issues, how can we expect things to get straightened out?

Do you know why God allowed the temple to be destroyed? It was taken because the law courts in Israel did not render true judgments. The courts favored the wealthy and allowed them exploit the poor. It was a system where those who could hire outstanding lawyers could get away with almost anything, or sue most anybody. That is what Zechariah said.

He also said the temple that was the representation of God's presence was taken away from you, because you were not showing God's kindness to those who needed your help, your understanding, and your presence. The temple – the representation of God's presence -- was taken away because the poor and the weak were taken advantage of; they were oppressed by those with means. The temple was taken away because your desire was evil, which penetrated the society like a deadly disease. That is what Zechariah said to those who lived in his day. And do you think, at least in a small way, that Zechariah's message can be as relevant today as it was 2500 years ago?

According to Zechariah, things will not be right in our lives and in our nation until justice abounds.

Do you understand who it was that Zechariah was writing to? He was writing to religious people who knew the liturgy, they knew the prayers, they even fasted, yet God was not pleased. God was not pleased, because piety cannot not take the place of righteous living.

Zechariah said, **“Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.”**

The truth of the matter is, we are all tempted to be more concerned about ourselves than those things that are important to God. Isn't it easier to enjoy the liturgy of the church, the music, the traditions, the programs and forget that these things are only the skeleton of our faith? Liturgy, music, traditions, programs are important, but they are meaningless if we are not living righteously.

Our faith is based on the call of God to live for Jesus Christ, to do something significant in the name of Jesus Christ, and I wonder if we have become a nation where in our church life and in our politics we are more interested in what others can do for us, rather than what we can do for others.

I recently read one of those profound sentences, but I cannot remember where I read it. I have looked, but I cannot find it. I don't want to take credit for this piece of wisdom, and I apologize to whoever wrote this for stealing their quote. Maybe I was just dreaming. I do not remember the exact words, but this is the jest of it: "A democracy is on the road to decline once the people begin to vote selfishly."

Maybe this is behind the thought of God when Zechariah spoke his word to **"Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other."** A democracy is on the road to decline once people begin to neglect justice and kindness and vote selfishly.

I wonder if this is true. On November 8, are we on the road to losing our freedom if we vote selfishly? It makes sense to me. I do know there are going to be people voting because they believe a certain candidate will secure for them more entitlements. "Vote for **Jim** and the government will provide me with health care and help me pay my mortgage." That is certainly selfish voting.

There are those who are voting because they believe that a certain candidate will lower their taxes. "I mean, I only make two million dollars a year, and with times like they are, it is just hard to get by."

There are those who are voting because they believe a certain candidate will protect them. Democracy is in trouble when all we can ask of it is to give, give, and give some more. "A democracy is on the road to decline once the people begin to vote selfishly."

I wonder if John Kennedy would have been elected president if during his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention he used that famous line, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but, ask what you can do for your country." That line came after he was elected. Do you think for a moment that Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump or those running for the Congress would be elected if they asked Americans to make real sacrifices for the sake of others? What I hear are promises. What I hear is what is wrong with the opponent. What I hear is what a certain administration will do for me.

Maybe our government and we as individuals should listen to Zechariah, **"Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other."**

Dear friends, I am far from being the disciple of Jesus Christ that I desire to be. But there is one thing which I believe I can say: "Jesus is my treasure." The Lord knows how much I love my family. He knows how much I enjoy the comforts of my house. He knows that one day I hope to retire and do a little traveling. He knows how much I love this church. He also knows that if all this were taken away, I would still have Jesus Christ and God knows that would be enough.

Now that was easy to say. I only hope that I have the faith to know whether or not it is true. If Jesus is my treasure my priorities are to be the priorities of the Kingdom of God. And to make the Kingdom of God my priority will take sacrifice. Like living in this wonderful nation, our citizenship as Americans or as Christians in God's Kingdom requires that we work for the principles of that which we are committed to; and it will take sacrifices on our part. Liberty, freedom and providing a setting where all people can pursue happiness does not come easy, and above all it will take faith.

Speaking of faith, the Scripture text that I started with to write this sermon comes from James 2:16-18. Here is the text from James as printed on the front of your bulletin, **"If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.'"**

**Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.”**

We find great comfort from the writings of the Apostle Paul who proclaims that we are saved by grace through faith alone. What James is saying is that faith is not faith unless it causes you to do something.

We are saved by faith alone, but faith by definition is not simple belief; it also incorporates trust. If you have faith you will do something because you trust. I have faith that the chair behind me will hold me up. Therefore, I don't just tell you it will hold me up, but I will exercise my faith by actually sitting in the chair.

The same is true about Jesus Christ. To have faith in Jesus does not mean that I will stand up here and tell you I have faith in Jesus, but I will actually trust Jesus to hold me up. I will trust Jesus to save me. And I will trust Jesus with my obedience. And the proof of trusting Jesus comes when I make him my treasure, and if Jesus is my treasure, I will then make those things which are important to him important to me.

To have faith in Jesus is to trust enough to love. To have faith in Jesus is to trust enough to seek justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. To have faith in Jesus is to put my life on the line in order to follow him. To have faith in Jesus is so much more than what we do on Sunday morning, but it has implications for all life, even our political life.

I know, I know, we want to separate the church from the state, and I agree wholeheartedly, but as an individual I cannot separate Jesus from my political life, for my political life is part of my life, and to be a Christian is to make Jesus Lord over one's whole life.

It is for this reason that I would encourage Christians to become active in a political party. Campaign for those candidates and issues which you feel best reflect the standards of the Kingdom of God. And both parties, but I guess today we have at least four parties, and they all have good points and they have bad points. Thus, in this election, I am pretty sure that when the chips fall where they may, this election will not usher in the Kingdom.

Most all political parties are partly right and partly wrong, and for political reasons there are often times when they do not think through the implications of what they are doing. Thus political parties need Christians

involved within their system, Christians who will move them toward party platforms which reflect what is best for all the people in our nation and the people of the world.

When it comes to voting, it is always hard. I mean, those who are seeking the values of the Kingdom of God must do their homework, spend time in prayer, and seek God's will. Have you ever thought seeking of God's will as a guide to the way you will vote? What a novel idea.

The title of this sermon is "How to Vote." I was careful not to write a sermon titled, "Who to Vote For." I simply want to tell you how to vote, and the only instruction this preacher can give is that your vote be cast in such a way that does not reflect what is best for you, but what you understand is best for everyone.

It matters not to me whether you vote Democratic, Republican or Independent, what matters is that you are convinced that your vote will put candidates into office that will work for all people and not simply for your individual best interest. The good news is that all we need is Jesus; all we need is to keep him and his kingdom as the treasure in our hearts.

But with all those issues out there, the economy, unemployment, ISIS, terrorism, global warming, health insurance, education, racial tensions, what is taught in schools, immigration, poverty, energy, taxes, homeland security, technology, women's issues, it makes my head swim. But no matter the outcome of the election, there is good news; we are in God's hands.

This is our hope. No matter what the future holds, no matter who is elected, no matter what happens we are in God's hands. It is because we are in God's hands that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, not even an election. It is for this reason we can continue in the fight for mandate given by Almighty God through his prophet Zechariah, **"Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other."** How will your vote reflect this mandate?

My friends, the Kingdom of God is eternal, and it is there where our citizenship lies. Now, as Christians, let us stand up for the principles of God's Kingdom and to God be all the glory, both now and forevermore. Amen.