

“Do Not Despair”

Romans 12:9-21 • Jeremiah 29:4-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Election day is FINALLY this Tuesday. And unless there's some extraordinary situation like 2000, things should really calm down in our country in just a few days. This morning I want to talk about what's happening in our country because of this election. No, I'm not going to tell you how you should vote. What I want to talk about is how this whole election is making some people feel.

Both sides in this campaign have made the claim that to elect their opponent will cause the end of everything you value. They claim that things will never be the same. Ironically they then tell us how they're going to change things. Then there's the non-stop accusations levied against each other and the ugly, hateful commercials and speeches. More and more people are getting fed up with the entire campaign. People are worried for the future of the country, and they're worried for their families, and they're worried about all sorts of other things. Maybe you are, too. Some of you have told me how upset you are by this election. In fact, the word I have heard used a number of times recently is *despair*.

Despair is defined as “the complete loss or absence of hope.” Some people are in despair because they don't like any of the candidates or there's one candidate that they absolutely DON'T want to get elected. It's not just the election. There seems to be more violence lately in our country and around the world. Even right here in Corpus Christ. After a while the bad news just gets you down and for some people it leads to despair. The absence of hope. Hopelessness.

Let me tell you, if you consider yourself a Christian, if you are a follower of Jesus, that's a problem. Christians should absolutely be involved in our government, including voting, but we should never be in despair about it. Despair is the absence of hope but the Christian faith is all about hope. The Apostle Peter wrote in 1 Peter 3, “Blessed be the God and Father of

our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” Through Jesus you have a living hope that doesn't depend on you. It depends on God who makes the promise and who is faithful to keep His promise.

It occurred to me that I don't remember anyone having these feelings of despair last year during the Canadian national election. In fact, some of you may not have even been aware that Canada was having elections last fall. Well I propose that your reaction to Canada's election may be able to offer you a way to understand the biblical response to this year's election. You see, the reason you weren't concerned last year is because you are not a citizen of Canada. So it doesn't seem like the outcome affects you.

Now while we are citizens of the United States, the Bible tells us over and over again that we have a dual citizenship. For followers of Jesus, your primary citizenship is in heaven. And that citizenship was costly. In Galatians 2:20 we find the secret to replacing despair with hope. Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” You and I need to become Galatians 2:20 Christians. We need to recognize that when we came to Christ our old life was crucified. Jesus gives us new life, a life we live for him. That's what baptism represents. We die to our old, sinful nature and are raised again with Christ's nature.

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He is the ultimate authority and he's the only one you should put your trust in. In case you haven't figured it out yet, there are no perfect politicians. It is a big

mistake to put your trust, your happiness, in any politician. And no matter who wins on Tuesday, Jesus is still the king on the throne. He's still in charge. It's his will that we pray would be done.

That doesn't mean things can't get worse for us. They certainly can. What is important is how we respond. In our reading from Jeremiah we're reminded that God's people were taken into exile in Babylon when Jerusalem was conquered around 597 BC. They would end up staying there for 70 years. When you look at the way our culture has changed in the last 10 years or so, you could make the argument that in many ways we are now being carried into exile. For the past 1700 years Christianity has been the dominant force in Western culture. That's changing rapidly. In recent surveys 25% of people listed their religious affiliation as "none." Half of the people in Corpus Christi do not attend any worship service during the week. Many people now consider rights to sexual expression to be more important than religious freedom.

The response of many Christians, many of us included, has been to try to circle the wagons. We tend to withdraw from the culture and hang around with people who think and believe like we do. The other way people respond is to fight against the culture, whether in court or in the area of ideas. But there's a third way, and it's pretty clear it's the way God wants us to respond. When the Israelites were taken into captivity, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah. He didn't tell them to withdraw and try to live isolated from the Babylonians. And he didn't tell them to fight against them. He said, "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Get married, have children." But God doesn't stop there. He says, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

As Christians who are finding ourselves in a kind of exile in our own land, God is reminding us that we are not to withdraw and abandon

our culture, as if we could do that. We are not to go on the offensive and try to make others believe what we believe. God is telling us to begin by praying for our culture. We are to honestly and earnestly work for the good of our community. That means being involved in the political process.

We find the same thing in our reading from Romans. The church in Rome in the first century was certainly not the dominant force in their culture. In fact they were really outsiders. Because they didn't worship the Roman mythological gods, Christians in Rome were considered atheists. They were persecuted and many of them martyred. But in spite of all that, Paul gives them instructions for interacting with one another and with the hostile culture. "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." In other words, Paul is reminding them that the most powerful way to influence their culture is by living in committed Christian community.

Then he tells them how to interact with their unbelieving neighbors. He says, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." A more accurate translation would be something like, "partner together for the needs of the church members and to love strangers." There's the secret. Love people in the church and people out of the church. Find ways to meet their needs. What about those who don't like you? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all."

As this election comes to a close, let me encourage you to be those kinds of people. There are lots of opportunities to insult people. Social media allows you to insult and argue

from your phone from anywhere at anytime. How about this? DON'T. Instead, find ways to bless people who may disagree with you. No matter who is elected, I suspect we will continue to see our culture move away from its Christian roots and look more and more like first century Rome. And that gives us the

opportunity to live like the first century church, which grew by personal relationships and the work of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to do what Jesus told us to do, "go and make disciples."

Amen.