

## A PRE-ELECTION WORD

II Kings 20:12-19

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 2, 2008, the Sunday before the election of a U.S. President; Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia*

### Focus Text

*At that time King Merodach-baladan son of Baladan of Babylon sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. Hezekiah welcomed them; he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armoury, all that was found in his storehouses; there was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.*

*Then the prophet Isaiah came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, ‘What did these men say? From where did they come to you?’*

*Hezekiah answered, ‘They have come from a far country, from Babylon.’*

*He said, ‘What have they seen in your house?’*

*Hezekiah answered, ‘They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.’*

*Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, ‘Hear the word of the LORD: Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.’*

*Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good.’*

*For he thought, ‘Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?’*

Hezekiah is one of thirty-nine kings who ruled Israel or Judah during the Divided Monarchy, a period that lasted from 930 to 538 and is covered in the Old Testament books of Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles.

If anyone can name the other 38 kings, I will personally give you Redskins tickets for tomorrow night’s game, though I have no idea where I will secure them.

Of Hezekiah, the narrator says:

He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel;  
...there was no one like him  
among all the kings of Judah after him,  
or among those who were before him....

Yet despite his good and faithful leadership, at the end of Hezekiah’s twenty-nine-year reign, he gave in to a temptation that besets most leaders: cynicism.

After defeating the Assyrians,<sup>1</sup> Hezekiah enters into a military alliance with the Babylonians, another of Judah’s enemies.

The prophet Isaiah gets wind of this alliance and confronts Hezekiah for “selling out” and not trusting the Lord.

Hezekiah accepts Isaiah’s criticism and says to the aging<sup>2</sup> prophet: “The word of the Lord...you have spoken is good.”

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<sup>1</sup> II Kings 19:1-37.

But in a revealing and frank piece of writing, the Biblical narrator then tells us:

- Hezekiah thought: “Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?”
- “As long as I am safe and secure, who cares?”

These are among the most cynical and self-serving thoughts recorded in scripture, particularly since they belong to someone who is otherwise praised as a terrific leader. “Why not, if there is peace and security in my days?”

## I.

Hezekiah’s thoughts, and the writer’s willingness to share them, provide a word to our nation two days before an election, “a pre-election word.”

To those elected to public office, these thoughts serve as a clarion call, a religious summons, indeed a “word from the Lord,” for leaders of our nation to take the long view, to see the big picture, to strive to make decisions that provide not just “peace and security in *our* days,” but that serve generations to come.

Hezekiah’s thoughts call all leaders – political and otherwise – to do something that is increasingly hard to do in our society: look not simply to the immediate future, but to the long-term as well.

To everyone who will be elected this Tuesday:

- Members of the House of Representatives
- Members of the United States Senate
- The President and Vice-President of our country

these unspoken thoughts of Hezekiah say: “Do not govern by that which promises only immediate results; rather, look to the days ahead as well.”

Such words will be hard for leaders of our nation to hear:

- We have an ailing economy which is producing immediate worries and immediate hardship.
- We lead a global effort against terrorism – state-supported, state-tolerated, state-less – that has us in the fifth year of one war and the seventh of another.
- We may be entering the darkest economic period of our history since the 1930s with many of us having experienced nothing but an unlimited expansion of prosperity our entire adult lives and therefore facing such times with little or no preparation.

With these immediate, daunting concerns, the President and Members of Congress must resist with all their moral and political will the temptation to do things that provide only short term gain but fail to address longer term issues. They must have the courage to recognize and act on the reality that sometimes a short-term solution may even do more harm than good long-term.

The fact that the Biblical narrator includes these cynical, self-serving thoughts of an otherwise model king serves as a call to those we elect not to be satisfied with results that *seem* to bring solutions to our days, but to lead with the future fully in mind.

“Why not, if there is peace and security in my days?” was an inadequate governing philosophy for Hezekiah and it is inadequate for us as well.

## II.

Second, once we elect a new President and new members of Congress, as citizens we simply must give our leaders the time and space to craft long-term solutions; then we must unite and support those solutions for the common good.

The lack of long-term thinking that has gripped our culture for so long is as much the responsibility of us as citizens as it is of our leaders. In so many aspects of our lives, we are unwilling to give leaders of any stripe the time they need to make long-term changes.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah had served as a prophet under Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and now Hezekiah, a span that could be as long as 96 years, though was probably less.

- Shareholders demand increasing dividends each quarter, leading management teams and boards of directors to maximize profits in the short term while often neglecting long-term investments.
- People with children in school often demand immediate change for the sake of their children – an understandable action given the limited number of years a child is in any one school; but sometimes it is better for the common good if the parents will view their efforts as being part of long-term change that may in fact be more fully realized when their neighbor’s children walk through the doors of the their children’s school a few years later.
- Sports fans demand that owners sign free agents and produce immediate playoff-bound teams, rarely giving teams a chance to build from the ground up.
- In church, members sometimes grow restless with the slow pace of change, so that leaders of congregations – clergy and lay – often craft short-term solutions that bring temporary peace but no lasting change.
- Voters complain about pork barrel projects, but usually want reform to come to someone else’s project, someone else’s representative, someone else’s senator, someone else’s district, someone else’s state.

By including Hezekiah’s thoughts, the narrator asks us as citizens:

- Is it possible that we who choose our leaders have become too much like Hezekiah?
- Is it possible that our desire to have only our most immediate needs met has led us to elect people who reflect our own short-term thinking?
- Is it possible that the problems we perceive in our government reflect a hesitance on our part to face present reality and look to the future together?

“Why not,” we all think, “if there will be peace and security in our days?”

### III.

In a different time and place, I might use a pre-election sermon to urge people to vote. I cannot imagine anyone in this room needs that urging this election. But this sermon is geared not so much at Tuesday, as at Wednesday and beyond.

- As a nation, we need to act as much out of concern for 2020 as for 2010, for 2040 as for 2009.
- After you have stood in line for however long it takes and voted on Tuesday, I hope that, starting Wednesday morning, you will be even more a part of the long-term renewal of our nation, and of its place in the world, than you currently are, which I believe already is considerable.
- And I hope part of your involvement will be through continued prayer for our nation and for its leaders.

### IV.

Earlier this week, one of the several people in our congregation who work as congressional staff sent me a prayer, written by Father Daniel Coughlin, Chaplain of the House of Representatives. It is entitled “Prayer for the Election 2008.”<sup>3</sup> I have met Father Dan a few times, and I respect him as one of the quiet, wise religious leaders of our community and nation. I plan to close our service with his prayer today.

Before printing the prayer for this service, out of habit, I ran “Spell Check.” To my surprise, a correction came up: Father Dan had shown the words “election day” in lower case; “Spell Check” capitalized them. Indeed “Election Day” is an official day on our national calendar and therefore must be capitalized.

Now as a minister, I was relieved to see that even the Chaplain of House of Representatives makes an occasional grammatical mistake. But then it occurred to me that Father Dan’s prayer may have been expressing something deeper than rules of capitalization.

- Maybe the lower case “election day” reminds us that what is most important this week is the way those we elect *on* “Election Day” will lead *after* “Election Day.”
- Maybe what is most important this week is the time, space, and support we give those elected on Tuesday to govern *toward* the future, with the long-term in mind.
- Maybe what is most important is the way we join them in our continuing quest to become “a more perfect union.”

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://chaplain.house.gov/>.

**Prayer for the Election 2008**  
**Father Daniel P. Coughlin**  
**Chaplain, U. S. House of Representatives**  
**October 27, 2008**

Almighty and ever-living God, bound in faithful love to Your people, be attentive to our deepest needs; for as a nation we place all our trust in You.

Since election day approaches, we pray for all those who have placed their name before the people; to seal their commitment of public service for the common good. Purify the intentions of those who deserve the public trust. Transform self interest into compassion for Your people, as You make them harbingers of our future.

Empower each voter with Your Spirit; so that as the free people of Your creation they may recognize truth and personal integrity in those they choose. May the representative government they place in service mirror their own commitment to search out the ways of peace with others and establish an economic stability where justice will flourish for all.

May a new era of patriotism dawn upon the United States; a patriotism strong enough to carry us through difficult times and flexible enough to embrace authentic creativity. Drawing upon the resources of university and business, may the legal and social development of Your people help all citizens realize their full potential in Your sight. For Your wisdom is revealed to us and in us both now and forever. Amen.