

Chill Pill
Political Chill Pill
September 30, 2012

PRELUDE – Jesus Saves

**Worship Songs – Jesus Saves / Be Unto
Your Name / Even If I Fall**

Video – “End of the World”

**Feature – “It’s the End of the World as We
Know It” (REM)**

Good morning everyone!

Unless you’re living under a rock, I’m sure you’ve been hearing over and over that this year’s presidential election is absolutely, positively, beyond-a-shadow-of-a-doubt THE most important, THE most significant, earth-shattering,

destiny-shaping decision EVER.

Of course, that's what they said about the election in 2008 and in 2004 and, quite frankly, as far back as I can remember. So, obviously, at some level a lot of what we're experiencing is the typical media- and party-driven hype (as illustrated in the video we just saw).

But on another level, it's also true: *what we collectively decide as a nation on November 6th will have a destiny-shaping effect ...* which is exactly what elections are supposed to do in a nation where government is "of the people, by the people, and for the people" ... which means that we, as citizens of that nation, are charged with a great collective responsibility. It's

hugely important in a system like ours that we be informed on the issues and the platforms and the candidates and, then, make wise use of our voting privilege. So, in that respect, what we do in November *is* a pretty big deal.

Furthermore, from a theological and biblical point of view, because God's fundamental purpose for every human being is that we be good stewards of whatever situation and resources are at our disposal (and we talked about this two weeks ago – how a lot of people spend a lot of time trying to figure out God's purpose for their lives and it's really pretty simple. God's intentions for us are found in the very first pages of the Bible – to take responsibility for a little piece of this world where we are in

control and help that little piece grow and thrive) ...

Because God's fundamental purpose for every human being is that we be good stewards over whatever situation and resources we have ... and part of our situation and resources *includes the right*, as citizens of the United States of America, to have a say in our representative democracy ... what we do in November is also a pretty big deal *from God's point of view*, as well.

On top of all that, it's a big deal because of the undeniable reality that, even though our nation's government was founded on Judeo-Christian values and principles, in almost every possible way it continues to drift further and

further from those principles and that foundation.

Two very recent examples illustrate my point, the first being the Democratic Party Convention removing the term "God-given" from the wording of its platform. I'm sure you heard about it. But what was even more astounding to me was the "vote" to put the term back in. Check out the video.

Video – Dems “Reinstate” God (1:40)

When I saw this, all I could think was "wow ... wow ... wow." I couldn't believe that so many people were against putting "God-given" into the platform, and also the thing about Jerusalem. It shocked me.

But the second example of drift – and this one angered me – comes from what Republicans did with the now infamous “you didn’t build that” quote from President Obama. I’m sure you’ve heard about this, too. The President was giving a speech to a group of firefighters in Virginia ... and, well, let’s watch – and pay particular attention to what the Romney campaign does with it.

Video – Twisting “You Didn’t Build That” (1:15)

It’s sad enough that, as the reporter said, “facts don’t matter at this point in a campaign”; sad enough that the supposed “party of traditional values,”

the "Christian party," believes it's OK to intentionally deceive voters by egregiously taking a person's words out of context ...

... but what's even worse than that is the proud insistence that you and I are self-made men and women ... an insistence which not only is unbiblical and un-Christian but would have also sounded very strange to the founders of our country who were quick to recognize that *they didn't build any of this* and that they were the fortunate recipients of Divine Providence.

Benjamin Franklin (who wasn't even a Christian) stated exactly that in a speech to the Continental Convention:

“We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings [the Bible], that ‘except the Lord build the House they labor in vain who build it.’ I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring Aid, we shall succeed in this political Building no better than the Builders of Babel.” (The Works of Benjamin Franklin, by John Bigelow, p. 377).

Franklin’s sentiments, which are echoed over and over in the writings and speeches of his contemporaries, seem very out of place these days ... and it’s a sign that we’ve drifted.

That’s part of the reason why there is an email going around these days (one

of those "if you agree with this, send it to a million people" emails) - maybe you saw this ...

It begins ...

"This is the scariest election we as Christians have ever faced, and from the looks of the polls, the Christians aren't voting Christian values. We all need to be on our knees."

It continues ...

"Do you believe we can take God at His word? Call upon His name, then stand back and watch His wonders unfold. This scripture gives us, as Christians, ownership of this land

and the ability to call upon God to heal it.

... and then goes on to quote 2 Chronicles 7:14. "If my people, which are called by my Name shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

The email closes by imploring readers to take one minute at 9:00pm Eastern Time every evening to pray for our country ... which is always a good idea (though the premise is a bit misinformed because the 2nd Chronicles scripture was not a promise to America but to Israel and it does not

“give Christians ownership of this land.”)

Anyway ...

- With all the hype from the media and politicians
- The obligation to my country to be a good citizen
- The responsibility to be a good steward before God
- The spiritual drift of the two major parties
- And well-meaning Christians emailing me how scary it will be if “they” win ...

I'm feeling a little stressed out! I don't know about you guys. The message on

all fronts seems to be "Get this election wrong and it's the end of the world as we know it!!!"

And, quite frankly, that message isn't coming from just "out there" somewhere. More than a few family, friends and members of this congregation have expressed it as well. For a lot us, the upcoming election is a very real concern. A lot of us believe that this is, as the email put it, "the scariest election we have ever faced."

A Christian Perspective

So, this morning I want to talk to you about that fear, that stress and that pressure, and I want to do so from a

distinctly Christian perspective. What I mean by that is that I want to put aside the hype and the partisanship. And I even want to put aside the responsibility of citizenship and the stewardship angle (as important as those are) and talk about how faith in Christ can shape our view of politics and, hopefully, provide something of a chill-pill to those of us who are worried and stressed.

However, before I get into that I want to make some things clear because, I'm nervous about this message and I know some of you are nervous about this message, "oh, what is he going to say? Is it going to get really political?" And, I'm not, but I also want to make clear some other things that I am *not*

intending to communicate in this message.

1. I am not saying that Christians shouldn't be involved in politics or in government or in the military.

2. I am not saying Christians shouldn't be concerned about issues of health care, the economy, the environment, the military and many other issues which fall into the realm of government.

3. I am not saying that Christians shouldn't have strong opinions about the role and scope of government.

4. I am not saying that Christians

shouldn't be concerned with how Republican, Democratic or Libertarian policies might personally affect them and their families.

I am saying that if you get so worked up about these things that you become angry, or you become overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness and despair, or you actually fear for our country if "that guy" (whichever guy that is) gets elected, you may need to step back as a Christian and think about what's happening inside of you.

As author and theologian Peter Enns puts it:

If you fear for your way of life; that if

the wrong person gets elected all is lost, and you simply don't have any hope for your future or the future of your children, you have accepted a "rival eschatology."

Now, that's a big 10-cent theological term but Enns goes on to explain what he means. He writes:

All political [systems] are utopian – communist, socialist, fascist, monarchic, and democratic – all of them. They all make promises to be the ones who will deliver the goods. They all promise that without them you are lost. They all claim to be the true light, a city on a hill, that which will bring you and all humanity true peace and

security.

That is what “eschatology” means. It doesn’t mean “end of the world” in some video game apocalyptic scenario. Eschatology means: “We have brought you to where things are as they should be. You are at the place where you can now—finally—have reason to hope. Trust in us. Fear not.” Eschatology defines the pinnacle of true humanity, where wrongs are righted, all is at peace, and the human drama comes to its fullest expression.

[Therefore] when we fear, or rage, or are depressed about politics, it means we have invested

something of ourselves into an eschatology – into a promise that “all will be well, provided you come with us.”

[But] Christians can't go there because *Christianity itself is an eschatology.*ⁱ

In other words, Christianity itself claims that “the goods” – where all wrongs are righted and all is at peace – are delivered through Christ and *His* Kingdom – and not through success in getting the right person or system in power.

Specifically, Christianity claims ...

- that Jesus' provision for us is the

reason we can have hope.

- It claims that His victory over sin and death is the reason we should “let not your hearts be troubled.”
- It claims that His love for us is the reason we should “fear not.”

As Jesus once explained:

“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ (And if Jesus was speaking today, I think he

might add – “or who will be elected President in November?”) *For all the pagans* (all the people who do not know this loving, caring God, they worry and stress over all these things) *run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.*

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Matthew 6:25-33 (NIV)

This, I think, is – or can be – a political chill-pill: “Put God’s Kingdom first in your life – not the political kingdoms of this world – put God’s Kingdom first and you will not be consumed by fear

and worry regardless of what happens out there.”

Political Agnosticism

What I like about this advice is that not only did Jesus recommend it to you and me, He followed it himself, especially as it related to politics. Jesus was, to use a term I discovered during the last presidential election, “politically agnostic.” (In fact, we even made up some “politically agnostic.com” signs! If you’re interested, we have some out in the Welcome Center.)

So what does it mean to be politically agnostic?

Well, you know what a *religious* agnostic is, right? It's someone who doesn't *disbelieve* in God – they're not going to argue that God doesn't exist – they're just not convinced that He really does or that it really matters. And because of their agnostic position, they'll show up when the family does the religious functions like weddings and baptisms and Christmas and Easter services. And, if they go to church, they might even sing, they might bow their head in prayer, but in the end it's just not that big of a deal in their everyday life.

To say it another way, they participate from time to time in the functions of "religion" but *their heart and their hope isn't in it.*

And in the same way you can be an agnostic towards God, you can also be an agnostic politically. You can listen, maybe even debate with others, you can vote – but, ultimately, your heart and your hope are somewhere else other than in a political system or an agenda or a candidate. That’s how it was for Jesus – and it displayed itself in two very practical ways.

1. Jesus didn’t get overly-hyped about the political issues and disputes of His day.

And he could have because there was a lot going on when Jesus came into the world – very politically turbulent times not unlike our own.

The Gospels tell us that one time the religious authorities, who were very concerned about how religion and politics fit together, ...

They sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."

By the way, that's called sucking up before you deliver the "gotcha" question.

Which, for them, was ...

"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

You can almost hear them saying, "You've gotta' vote, Jesus. Vote for God or vote for Caesar. Either/or. Pick one or the other. Democrat or Republican. Obama or Romney. Choose now, Jesus. Gotcha."

But Mark says that ...

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy.

And their hypocrisy was that these two groups – the Pharisees and the

Herodians – while seeming to be so united in their concern about discovering the “godly path” on this issue actually despised each other!

The Pharisees were very religious and hated the Roman government interference in their lives and freedom while the Herodians had no use for religion (beyond a causal affirmation of faith, you know, making sure God is in the party platform) but felt that compromise with Rome was the way to survival as a nation. They hated each other, but they were united in trying to trap Jesus.

So, Jesus said:

"Why are you trying to

trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."

They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then Jesus said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him. Mark 12:13-17 (NIV)

In other words, "If you live in Caesar's world and you benefit from Caesar's rule (and they all did) then shut up and pay up" – which, of course, offended those fundamentalist conservative

Pharisees. At the same exact time, however, Jesus was also saying "Just because you have to pay up to Caesar doesn't mean it's OK to be distracted from or neglect God's kingdom" – which, of course, offended those godless liberal Herodians.

And they were amazed at this answer because Jesus was smart and had outwitted their trap. I'm amazed, too, but more at how Jesus had a way of living *above* the world at the same time as living *in* the world. He had a way of putting God's kingdom first and yet, accepting the powers that be. And because of that, he didn't get sucked into the hype.

The second way in which Jesus was

politically agnostic is that ...

2. He didn't see political power as necessary to accomplishing His mission.

He didn't go round trying to get the powers that be to make it easier for him to accomplish God's purposes in His life. In fact, Jesus *never directly engaged in the political system* even though he was repeatedly urged to do so.

For instance, once, when Jesus fed the 5,000 men (plus women and children) in a miraculous way, the Bible says that the crowd realized that Jesus had to be from God. John writes ...

When the people saw him

do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, "Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!"

And guess what happened next?

When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself. John 6:14-15 (NLT)

It's kind of interesting, he does this miracle, he's the prophet and now they're going to make him king. Why? That's because the Jewish community in that day and time was not only tired of the constant occupation by oppressive Roman forces, but they were also sensing God's imminent redemption

through a powerfully anointed servant of God, a Messiah. The common expectation for this Messiah was that he would be a conquering king like David who would come in glorious power, destroy the evil Roman Empire, and restore the Jewish people to their rightful place in the world.

So, when they saw the kinds of things Jesus was doing, it made sense to say, "Oh my goodness, this is it! *He's the One*. Let's make him King and overthrow the Romans." But Jesus would have nothing to do with it. So He just wandered off and got lost in the mountains for a little while.

Another example: at the end of his life when Jesus is dragged before the

Roman governor Pontius Pilate, the charge is that Jesus said that He was a King. But in the Roman Empire, there could be “no King but Caesar.” In fact, that was the pledge of allegiance required of all conquered peoples (like the Jewish state to which Jesus belonged) and for those who refused, the penalty was death.

So Pilate flat out asks Jesus, “Are you a King?”

Jesus says “yes” and then He adds:

“My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my

Kingdom is not of this world.” John 18:36 (NLT)

And just to be clear, notice that Jesus said “of this world” not “in this world.”

He wasn't telling Pilate about some Kingdom somewhere off in spiritual never-never land in the sweet bye-and-bye. He was describing the *nature* of his Kingdom – that it was here and now but that it didn't work like the kingdoms of this world do – kingdoms of this world are based on power over their subjects and their enemies. But His kingdom did not require that kind of power to be effective and so, Jesus – and his true followers – refused it.

Personal Engagement

Of course, at this point, you might be thinking, “yeah, well, that sounds nice – but all of this seems so passive. All you’ve told us at this point is what Jesus didn’t do. Is that our goal, too? To just sit back and let things happen? Just watch as the liberals let our country spend itself into oblivion with money we don’t have? Watch as the conservatives allow the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer? Watch while the libertarians encourage the next generation to turn into a bunch of pot-smoking dunderheads? I mean, is that what we’re supposed to do?”

No, not at all. That is not the example of Jesus.

**While Jesus may have been
“agnostic” politically, He was highly-
engaged personally.**

Even a cursory reading of the gospels reveals that Jesus was greatly concerned about the problems of his day. He was greatly concerned about the welfare of the people in every respect – physically, emotionally and spiritually. And he didn't sit around wringing his hands.

Instead, Matthew tells us ...

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and

sickness.

And this part gets me when I read it,

*When he saw the crowds,
he had compassion on
them, because they were
harassed and helpless,
(they were stressed out!)
like sheep without a
shepherd. Matthew
9:35-37 (NIV)*

Whenever I read that passage, I'm always overwhelmed by the love of God that cares for even the smallest issue that distresses and discourages us. God looks at you and me and the people of our nation and He sees so many of us feeling harassed and helpless, sometimes because of the injustice of "the system" and sometimes

because of our own sin and foolishness. But no matter what the reason, He looks at us and has compassion on us. He cares. That's why Jesus went around touching, teaching, proclaiming and healing.

And Matthew tells us that as Jesus observed the situation of the people ...

*He said to his disciples,
"The harvest is plentiful
but the workers are few.
Ask the Lord of the
harvest, therefore, to ...*

*... overthrow the Romans so that
God's work can continue without
interference."*

No, that's not what he said. You're

smarter than that, right?

He said ...

"Ask the Lord of the harvest to bring our country back to its spiritual roots so we can experience His blessing once again."

No, that's not what he said.

"Ask the Lord of the harvest to change the hearts and minds of all the people so that the right person gets elected president in November."

That's not what he said either.

What Jesus said was ...

"Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:35-38 (NIV)

"Ask the Lord of the harvest to raise up men and women of God who, regardless of their political persuasions, regardless of their political heritage, and sometimes even in spite of their own political self-interest – ask the Lord to raise up men and women who are *highly-engaged personally* in touching people's lives physically, emotionally and spiritually with the good news that the Kingdom of God is near and it is now because *it is this which brings compassion* to those

who are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd – regardless of who is or is not in power.”

You see, God has ordained his people to change the world – not governments.

Now, government *is* important. In fact, the collective witness of the Bible is that God has ordained government for the purposes of maintaining order and carrying out justice. It’s true.

And I realize that justice is a biblical value and therefore, the Kingdom needs to influence the government, even to *prophetically speak against* the government when necessary. Check out the prophets of the Old Testament for evidence.

But the point remains. In the “Big Picture” of what God is doing in this world, it’s his people gathered together in little communities all over the world (called “churches”) who are called to be the agents of change. It’s our job, folks, not the government’s.

For instance, let’s talk about poverty. Do you know what the number one cause of poverty is in the United States today? It’s children born to unwed mothers. In 2007, for the first time in our history, more children were born to unwed mothers than into a family with a mother and a father.ⁱⁱ And research has shown that the trajectory of those children (and women), economically and in every way, is vastly different from

other children born to a two-parent family. There's an economic tidal wave coming in this country and it's not because of greed on Wall Street or reckless government spending. It's going to happen because of this.

And the way most people think about this problem – including Christians – is “who's going to pay for this problem? What's the government going to do about taking care of all those women and children?”

But why is that a government problem? Why couldn't individual Christians and churches do something about that? Why couldn't we?

I'll tell you why – at least, part of the

reason why – and these are the words of one of my favorite pastors Greg Boyd. He writes:ⁱⁱⁱ

If the average American Christian didn't spend 97% of their income on themselves, we Christians could handle that problem and many other things. [Churches would be fully-funded and able to do radical ministry]. And this would be done to the glory of God rather than to the credit of Uncle Sam.

Sadly, instead of confessing our greed and our ungodly divisiveness and sacrificially pooling our resources to serve the poor, we expect government to solve society's problems. And we

do this while positioning ourselves as people who are smarter at spending public funds and solving tough issues than politicians, and more righteous in caring about the needy. We assume our highest calling is to be the high priests of Caesar's court, telling it how God allegedly wants it to spend its money.

But as citizens of the Kingdom, our job isn't to tell Caesar what to do — as though we were wiser or cared more. *Our job is to just do it.* We should start by confessing that, for the most part, we aren't currently getting the job done.

Wow. Tough words but sometimes the

truth hurts.

Conclusion

So, let's take a minute to get on the solution side and end this on a more positive note.

What are some practical ways we can engage personally and become change agents for God's Kingdom? A couple of thoughts that apply to this particular season in which we find ourselves with all the political stuff going on.

How about ...

1. Rather than getting all worked up

and fighting “for” or “against” a certain way that government helps the poor, what if we all started thinking of ourselves as being Jesus to people who are poor. Extend help to someone who’s losing their home to foreclosure, or just lost a job. One way we do it here at North Heartland is through our crisis care fund. You can donate to it on the City, and the money that goes in there goes directly to people in our congregation who are in need, and there are people in this congregation in need. There are many ways to love, serve, and sacrifice on behalf of someone in trouble in today’s economy.

2. Rather than exerting ourselves and getting all worked up and fighting "for" or "against" a certain definition of marriage or civil unions, how about we think about how we could be Jesus to our gay co-workers and neighbors. How about we think of how we could love them, serve them, sacrifice for them and befriend them even if we don't agree with them. That's what Jesus did all the time. You don't have to agree with someone's position to love them.

3. Rather than investing all our energies in a fight "for" or "against" abortion, what if we thought about how we could be Jesus to women who have

unwanted pregnancies. How could we love, serve, and help them expand their options for their own sake and for the sake of their child.

4. Rather than be consumed by the debate “for” or “against” involvement in other countries all over the world (which, oh my gosh, makes my head want to explode sometimes!), how about we think about how to be Jesus to people who hate us. Even if we believe it’s necessary to protect ourselves, and I personally do, let’s remember the command we’ve received from Jesus to love and to pray for our enemies.

There are so many people all around

us that we can “be Jesus” to! Each neighbor, co-worker, customer, employer, each person we meet is another gracious opportunity God gives us to obey the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is what the kingdom is, and that’s what it means to be a worker in the harvest.^{iv}

And ... what’s amazing is that when you and I set our hearts and minds and resources in this direction of loving, serving and sacrificing for the people around us, guess what? *We’re seeking the Kingdom of God.* We’re acting as citizens of that Kingdom. We’re putting it first and when that happens, as Jesus said, God promises he’ll take care of the rest. And we can have peace regardless of who is in power.

So, what I want to tell you this morning is to go vote your conscience on Nov 6th. I'm planning on that. Feel free to try to convince others to your political persuasion if you think that's worth it. (I won't do that because churches aren't allowed to endorse candidates).

But more importantly, if you are a follower of Jesus, set your heart towards personally engaging with people and personally representing the only Kingdom out of all of this that's going to last – the Kingdom of Heaven. And take your chill pill.

Let's pray.

God, thank you for the wisdom of your scripture. Thank you that when we get so muddled with the issues that seem to demand so much attention, and they're complex, it matters. These things matter. They're going to shape destiny. But God, regardless of that destiny, your destiny trumps all those. God, I pray that as we walk out of here this morning, we walk out of here first and foremost as Christians, as followers of Jesus, as citizens of that Kingdom, not as citizens of the United States, as wonderful, as blessed as we are to be here.

God, I pray that that vision would help us to think differently about how we interact with people, how

we express ourselves and our political opinions. God, I pray that it would bring us a sense of peace that you are watching over us, that you have our backs, even if things don't go the way we want them to go politically or economically or however.

God, we want to trust you. We want to experience what it is to be workers in the harvest. God, I pray that you would do great things through the people who are sitting in this room this morning as representatives of your kingdom. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

Feature – “Peace” (Knapp)

Endnotes

ⁱ See www.patheos.com/blogs/peterenns/2012/09/dear-christian-if-the-thought-of-either-romney-or-obama-getting-elected-makes-you-fearful-angry-or-depressed-you-have-what-we-call-a-theological-problem/

Other helpful links:

<http://reknew.org/2008/01/why-do-you-have-such-a-pessimistic-view-of-government/>

<http://reknew.org/2012/08/shouldnt-preachers-rally-christians-to-fight-political-injustice-2/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.kansascity.com/115/story/785681.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ reknew.org/2012/08/shouldnt-preachers-rally-christians-to-fight-political-injustice-2/

^{iv} <http://whchurch.org/sermons-media/sermon/the-kingdom-is-here-and-now>