

Reclaiming our
FAITH
hearing God through
the prophets

COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH FALL 2026 SERMON SERIES

Leadership Matters

A SERMON ON ISAIAH 11:1-9

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

Sunday September 27, 2027

Reclaiming Our Faith: Leadership Matters | Isaiah 11:1-9 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear,
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid;
the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

When I was a kid, like most kids, I was taught to respect leaders. I was taught that leaders were good people: presidents and politicians, preachers and priests, principals and police officers, even professional athletes.

At some point the notion that all leaders are good is a bubble that bursts for everyone.

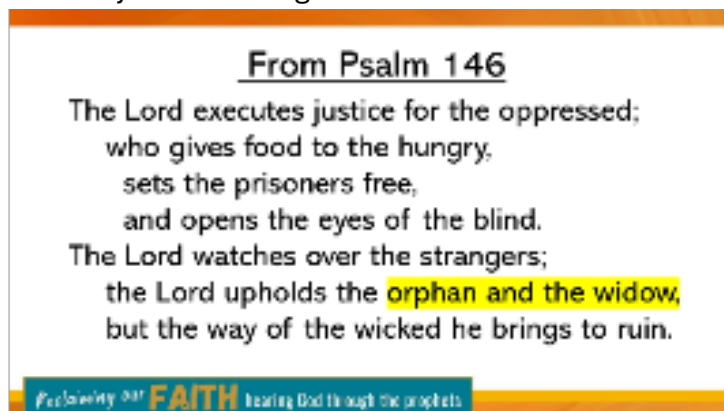
For me it was when I was about nine years old, when the Watergate scandal became public in the early 1970s. I still can see the huge font in the newspaper: NIXON RESIGNS. Most historians mark the resignation of Richard Nixon as a significant shift toward public distrust of politicians and more broadly of leaders and institutions.

The decrease in trust in leadership continued in my life, with a middle school principal who, let's just say, did some very inappropriate things, which would in today's world would land in him jail.

The bursting bubble of leaders who disappoint us continued for all of us alive in the 80s and 90s, as we learned of clergy abuse, along with a variety of public figures who disappointed us: OJ Simpson, Bill Clinton, Oliver North, Michael Milken, and more. And from the beating of Rodney King to the murder of George Floyd, we've been disavowed of the notion that police are always the good guys.

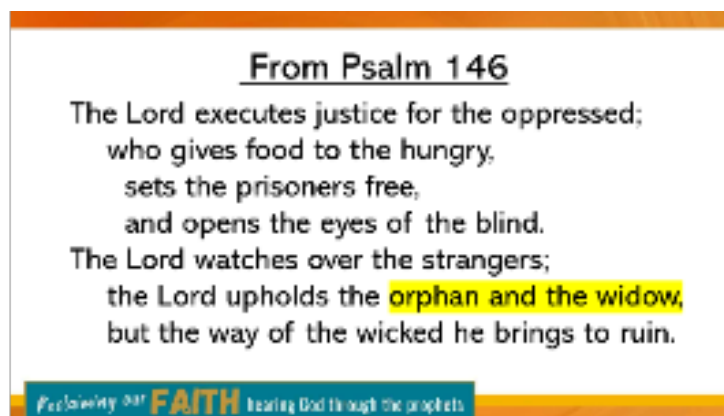
Let me be clear: I'm NOT saying that all politicians or preachers or police are bad. But clearly, they are not all perfect.

Apparently, there is a long history of imperfect leaders. The Bible has an abundance of material on leaders who disappoint their followers—acting selfishly, ignoring God's clear calls for justice and righteousness.



In the history of Israel, there were judges before there were kings. God had said that God was the king and that the people didn't need a human king. But the people clamored for a king because they wanted to be like the nations.

Eventually, God gets exasperated, and in 1 Samuel 8, tells Samuel essentially: Fine, let the people have a king. But warn them what the king will do.



Psalm 146 reminds us: “do not put your trust in princes”
Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

The psalm goes on to detail how the Lord God does all the things that the princes and leaders are supposed to do, with focus on the widows and orphans—the Bible's catchall phrase for the most vulnerable among us.



There were about 40 kings of Israel and Judah in the Bible. And according to the Bible itself, most of them were not good.

This chart classifies them as glorious, great, good, mid, bad, terrible, abysmal, and irrelevant, going from blue to red. As you can see, the vast majority are “mid” or worse.

There is a common refrain in that part of the Bible: King so-and-so did evil in the sight on the Lord.

And this chart is more generous than most lists, which only have 5-8 good kings.

The Law of Moses, the foundation of our faith, provides clear limitations on the power of the king. In Deuteronomy 17, there are very specific provisions that the king should not acquire too much wealth, power, or women.

¹⁶ Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, ‘You must never return that way again.’ ¹⁷ And he must not acquire many wives for himself or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

The text goes on to say that the king must learn to fear the Lord and not think too much of himself. This was the law of Israel—a recognition that leaders needed guardrails because some leaders become corrupt.

The Bible recognizes that leadership matters, and it recognizes that leader can too easily become corrupt. So there are abundant warnings and safeguards.

The Presbyterian Church also recognizes that leadership matters and that individual leaders can too often become corrupt, so we have shared leadership and an abundance of checks and balances in our church structure.

In other words, I don’t have the final say on much of anything around here. Power is shared with key leaders and lots of committees. Sometimes I wish I could just say no more discussion, no more committees, this is what we’re going to do. But that’s rare. I’m grateful for our system.

And the United States Constitution take this reality of the danger of leaders into account as well, not vesting total power in any one individual. We have checks and balances in our political system.

As I wrote in our weekly CONNECTIONS email, King George III was surprised at the emerging political system in the United States, which didn't have a king or centralized power. He apparently referred to the American Revolution as "a Presbyterian rebellion."



We are focused on religious and political leadership today as part of our seven-week series called Reclaiming Our Faith: Hearing God Through the Prophets.

And we're doing this series, because we live in a time when some church leaders have distorted the faith and some politicians have tried to co-opt Christian faith for their own agendas, which leads to biblical justifications for warfare, draconian cuts to food and health programs, and efforts to impose a rigid form of Christianity in schools and culture.



Christian nationalism is "a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy."

--Christians Against Christian Nationalism

Collectively this movement is known as Christian Nationalism—which seeks merge Christianity and American identities, but ends up distorting both.

#ReclaimingOurFAITH hearing God through the prophets

We're listening to God through the prophets to reclaim our faith and find ways to respond to this challenging situation.

The prophets were not shy about denouncing unjust or corrupt religious and political leaders. When leaders disappointed, the prophets let them know. Ezekiel proclaims:

To the shepherds—thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.

--Ezekiel 34:2-4

The prophet Micah also speaks out:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice and pervert all equity,
¹⁰who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong!
¹¹Its rulers give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the Lord and say,
“Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.”

--Micah 3:9-11

Our small group curriculum is focusing on the prophets, and this coming week we’re reflecting on leaders, specifically Isaiah noting that God was calling leaders to seek justice and equity between the powerful and the powerless—the widows and orphans and foreigners.

Our reading for today from Isaiah 11 reflects that yearning for a new king, a good king.

This new king will be wise and understanding, with special concern for the poor and the oppressed, the widows and the orphans.

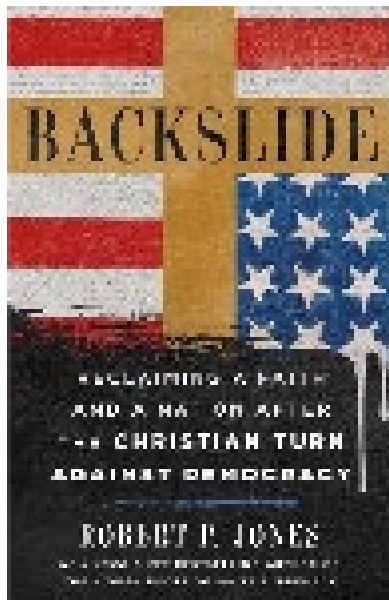
This Isaiah 11 reading may be familiar to you, as we often read part of it at Christmas. Christians have understood this text to be referring to Jesus, who proclaimed good news for the poor, and who was called a king and stood in opposition to King Herod. Jesus was a leader, calling people to follow him, by turning from selfishness and foolishness and purposeless living, to discover new meaning and purpose in loving neighbors, caring for the “widows and orphans”, and seeking first God’s kingdom, above any human kingdom.

Jesus calls us to follow him, and, as I shared last week, one of the best ways to counter Christian Nationalism is to renew our focus on the life and teachings of Jesus.

And when we renew our focus on the teachings and actions of Jesus, it's clear that God is concerned with the lost, the least, and the last—with the so called “widows and orphans”—and that God is calling us to live in a new way.

We are called to follow Jesus.

More broadly, in this challenging time, we need to be intentional about whom or what we follow.



That includes social media. We all complain about the junk on Facebook, and we complain about what the algorithms “give” us. But a lot of people don’t realize that you can pick up to 30 “favorites” on Facebook. You choose these people or organizations or groups as your favorite, and then you’ll see their posts more often.

We need to follow wisdom and kindness and decency and hopefulness.

We need good leadership in our religion and we need good leadership in our politics. When we don’t have good leadership, we need to follow the example of the prophets and speak up.

I want to close with a story from *BACKSLIDE: Reclaiming a Faith and a Nation After the Christian Turn Against Democracy*, by Robert Jones, is a compelling reflection on current events, through the lens of his journey of faith and his work as a statistician.

Jones begins and closes the book reflecting on the famous poem of Pastor Martin Niemöller in Germany, whose words sound like a prophet.

Niemöller wrote:

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me



In *BACKSLIDE*, Robert Jones adds some history to this well-known poem. Niemöller was arrested in 1937 and spent then next eight years in a concentration camp for opposing the Nazis.

A few years after the war, Niemöller and his wife visited Dachau with his wife. There was a sign saying that from 1933-1945, 238,000 people were cremated there. Niemöller reports that his wife fainted because of the 238,000 number.

But what troubled Niemöller was the dates: 1933-1945.

He did not initially oppose Hitler. In fact he was a supporter of the Nazis originally. But gradually as he realized what was going on, he spoke out, and because of his speaking out, he ended up in the concentration camp in 1937.

But he wondered to himself, as if God were asking him, “Where were you from 1933 until 1937?”

In a 1946 speech, Niemöller shared:

on that day when we got home, I read the chapter Matthew 25 with new meaning: “I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirty, and you gave me nothing to drink; I was in prison, and you did not come to me. As a Christian I could have known and should have known in 1933 that in each of these human brothers—may the be called Communists or whatever—God in Jesus Christ was asking me whether I wouldn’t want to serve him. (*Backslide*, p. 7)

He realized that if he and other Christian leaders had spoken up sooner, millions of lives would have been saved.

The prophets inspire us by courageously speaking out against corrupt, greedy, and blasphemous leaders.

Jesus calls us to turn from evil and follow him,

by loving neighbors and even enemies;

by caring for the widows and the orphans and all who suffer,

by serving God's Kingdom above any other.

May God grant us wisdom and courage for faithful living today.