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in•ter•cede: Our Nation

1 Timothy 2:1-6

This is the second sermon in our New Year series, *in•ter•cede*. For the coming weeks, I am asking us to pray together about certain things. Last week, I asked you to pray for the “Big C” Church—to join me in praying for HCC and Harbor Covenant and Fox Island and St. Nick’s—that God would bless them and add to his kingdom through their ministry. So, did you? How many prayed for our brothers and sisters outside these walls?

Today, we begin a week of intercession for our nation. With Inauguration Day on Friday, I can’t think of a more appropriate time to turn our prayers toward this topic. Our text comes from 1 Timothy 2: 1-4.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Last week, I was in Orlando with the pastors of the 24 largest churches in our denomination. These are some very influential leaders. One of them was waiting for a phone call from Vice-President Mike Pence in hope that he will help us liberate Andrew Brunson, an EPC pastor, who is being held in a Turkish prison on bogus charges. (Keep praying!)

I’ll admit; I couldn’t help but be a little impressed. The closest I ever came to a Vice President was when I was a first-grader in Yakima. We went out to the Airport to welcome Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. Frankly, I don’t have a clue what Lyndon Johnson flew into Yakima for. But I remember standing there as his limo drove off the runway and past the crowd. I’m certain he waved to me personally!

Most of us will never connect with persons of such power. Yet Paul tells us that even we little people have important spiritual work to do on behalf of the powerful people in the world. 1 Timothy was written by the Paul to his protégée in Ephesus. Timothy was a youngster, perhaps in his twenties, yet Paul entrusted him with the daunting task of leading a congregation that was dealing with huge issues: sexual immorality, idolatry, false teaching and division!

Paul writes to counsel him and notice where he starts: "First of all, then, I urge that you pray." "Timothy, the most important thing you can do in this enormous task of ministry to which you have been called is to pray, pray, pray for all people."

All people! That's a sweeping category, but notice Paul specifies one particular category of people. Did you see it? Verse 2: "...I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions..." The word for "kings" is also translated "emperors", and the plural suggests that Paul is talking about the succession of emperors. In other words, whoever happens to be on the throne of power at the time, that is who you are to pray for.

Just let that sink in for a second. Let me remind you of the succession of emperors who ruled from the birth of Jesus until Paul's day: Caesar Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. These were no friends of the Jews! All these men worshipped the pagan gods of Rome. More than that, each considered himself to **be** a god. Emperor worship was the fastest growing religion at that time. It was expected that every person in the Empire would go to a temple of Emperor worship, burn some incense and declare, "Caesar is Lord!" But the Jews didn't do well with this!

And don't forget, the Jews hated the Romans because they had invaded their land, had stolen their freedom, taxed them mercilessly and desecrated their holiest places. So when Paul tells Timothy, "Pray for kings...", it was like saying, "The man who rules the empire that has crushed you, persecuted you and crucified your people by the thousands... pray for him."

And it gets worse. Among that list there were some particularly repulsive human beings. Caligula: He executed his son, his grandmother, his father-in-law and his brother-in-law and had incestuous relationships with his two sisters, whom he later exiled. He was a sadistic mad man who killed for his own amusement. One time, he ordered his guards to throw an entire section of the crowd into the arena to be eaten by the animals because there were no criminals to be executed and he became bored with the games.

Then there was Nero, the emperor at the time of this letter. Nero also was known for his barbarity, including the execution of his own mother and his first wife. He later stomped his second, pregnant wife to death. He made Christians the scapegoats for the fire that destroyed Rome... a fire he probably set himself. And for fun, he tied Christians to a pole, dipped them in pitch and set them on fire in his garden as a source of light.

When Paul tells Timothy to pray for "kings," these were those kings—despicable, bloodthirsty, immoral men. I can imagine Timothy reading this letter and saying, "Are you kidding? Pray for Nero? I'll pray for him... pray that he has a stroke!"

Now to the present. If Paul could tell Timothy to pray for vile Nero, the persecutor of Christians, surely it will be clear that we are called to pray for our leader—our president—regardless of the person he is or his politics. One week last year, a member approached Pastor Megan, upset because she had prayed by name for President Obama. He felt it was too political. It wasn't! It was biblical. She was obeying Paul's call to pray for "kings and all who are in high positions."

And now, when the shoe is on the other political foot, we are called to pray for President-elect Trump. Some of you are thrilled to do so. Some of you not so much. It doesn't matter. We are called to pray for him and all who—by God's permission and providence—have been called to lead our nation.

And what should we pray? Surprisingly, Paul gives us only one specific thing to pray for our leaders, and it's the same thing we pray for the rest of the world. What? Read verse 3: This [praying] is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The specific thing we are urged to pray for is the salvation of all people, and specifically, of our leaders. We are to pray that God's salvation will touch our leaders. I know Barack Obama went to church. I do not know if he is a follower of Jesus, but we are called to pray for his salvation. I do not know what Donald Trump's relationship is with God. He is a Presbyterian, but I have no idea whether he has a genuine relationship with Christ. I don't care how great a deal-maker or swamp-drainer he might be, Mr. Trump needs to know Jesus. It is a matter of his eternal salvation, as it is for every single human being. And if he knows Jesus—and if he grows in his relationship with Jesus—it will make him a better man and a better president.

So we pray that our president will discover the love of Christ, confess his sins and admit his need for the salvation that comes only from Jesus. And the good news is, God has surrounded Mr. Trump with followers of Christ. Mike Pence is a devout Christian. The candidate for director of the CIA is a faithful member of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, an EPC church. Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State nominee, has taught Sunday School in his Baptist Church for much of his adult life. Even if you are at complete odds with them politically, is it not a good thing to have people in power who love Jesus Christ, who pray that God will guide them in their decisions and, hopefully, obey the Holy Spirit when he tells them what to do regardless of the consequences?

So we pray, first of all, for the salvation of our leaders. And as that prayer is answered, Paul tells us we will see a consequence that benefits us all. Verse 2: "...I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." Do you see that phrase, "peaceful and

quiet life?" It means more than not fighting. At its core is Paul's understanding of "shalom," a deep, God-given sense of unity and harmony and well-being.

Don't we long for that as a nation? I do not recall a time since the sixties, when the whole nation was torn apart over Viet Nam, when we have been in greater upheaval and disunity as a nation. It seems that the racial divisions are worse than they were. What would Dr. King think? Racial divisions, religious divisions, decay in the inner city, terrible violence, assaults on law enforcement officers. While in Orlando this week, Officer Debra Clayton, an apparently wonderful young woman, was shot down and then shot repeatedly as she lay helpless. Add to all this the constant and increasing threat of terrorism, and it is clear that our nation is anything but "peaceful and quiet."

We pray for God's salvation to touch our leaders so that God's salvation might touch our nation. Our nation needs saving! Whatever "greatness" is—and I do believe ours is a great nation—surely it includes, but extends beyond our own prosperity and self-interest, doesn't it? We are a nation that proved its greatness when laid the lives of over 500,000 young men on the altar of two great world wars and in so doing, saved that world from consummate evil. We are engaged in a similar war today with shadier enemies that are every bit as evil but harder to destroy.

I hope we can desire a "peaceful and quiet" life, not just for the suburbanites of Gig Harbor but also for desperate families in Aleppo and persecuted believers in Somalia as well as hopeless families in Detroit and Baltimore and the murderous south side of Chicago. The United States has never turned its back on brutality and injustice. Trying to figure how to balance our own interests and security against the desperate needs of a world that looks to us for inspiration and leadership—that is a precarious balancing act that requires godly wisdom.

And so, we pray. That God's salvation will touch our leaders. That God will bring together people of common faith and good will in the service of our country's interests and those of greater humanity. And there are hopeful signs! I spoke with Doug Burleigh last week. Doug is one of our missionaries who leads a ministry in Washington DC that is responsible for the annual President's Prayer Breakfast held in February. That breakfast is always co-led by two Christians of opposing parties. This year, senators Chris Coons, Democrat from Delaware and John Boozeman, Republican from Arkansas, are the co-chairs. Doug told me they spent an hour with president-elect Trump and that he is eager to attend along with Vice President Pence.

Not only that, Doug tells me that 25 Christian leaders from Russia and 50 Christians from Ukraine, including government leaders and young professionals, will also be present! Surely that is a hopeful sign!

This week we will witness one of the greatest of American democratic traditions: the voluntary and peaceful transfer of power from one elected official to the next. Some of you are thrilled; some of you are not. But regardless, we are called to pray for our new president and all who hold high office. This week I heard someone say that rooting against your president is like rooting against the pilot of the plane on which you are a passenger. It is in our interest, and the world's interest, that God hear and answer our prayers on behalf of President Trump and the rest of our political leaders.

In your bulletin you will find an insert that will guide those prayers this week. We informed every one of these politicians that we would be praying for them and invited them to send us their specific requests. Those who did, we included in this document.

II Chronicles 7:14 may be the most familiar verse on this topic: "... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." Our land needs forgiving. Our land needs healing. So I invite us—I challenge us—to rise above the rancor and partisanship that divides our country. I urge us—as Paul urged Timothy—to offer up prayers for our leaders. In fact, if you are able, I want us to go to our knees...and I am going to close this message with a revision of the prayer I wrote for our blog the week before the election.

"Heavenly and hallowed Father, as we approach Inauguration Day when we install the "leader of the Western world," we remember that you are the leader of the West... and of the East and of the North and South. You are the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Before you, every knee—every knee—will one day bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Nothing catches you by surprise; nothing can vex or divert you in the fulfilment of your divine purpose for your creation. Forgive us when we place politics over prayer, thinking that our machinations are more important than the prayer of Jesus: "Thy will be done!"

And so, we pray, "Thy will be done"—in this election, in this nation, in this world, in this generation, thy will be done. Grant that we might trust you and bow before your sovereign will regardless of how our plans turn out.

Soon, Donald Trump will be the president of this land. We pray for him whom you have permitted to take this post. If he is a true believer in Jesus, fill him with your Holy Spirit. If he is not a true believer, surround him by your Holy Spirit and by those who love and listen to you. May he be guided by godly counsel. Grant him supernatural wisdom that seeks what is good and just and right for this land.

Make him generous and not greedy, honest and not deceitful, humble and not arrogant, honorable and not base, compassionate and not self-serving. May he have the courage to do what is best for this nation even if it goes against party or

the powerful who have paid for access and influence. May he truly love this land, its rich legacy of faith, liberty, justice and unprecedented opportunity and blessing. May he love that legacy and fight to preserve and promote it.

Now that you have seen fit to install Mr. Trump in this office, we pray that through him—or despite him—your kingdom will come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. And amen.