

# Sermon Text for March 29, 2020

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Psalm 119:41-48, Acts 25:6-12  
**“Appealing to the Emperor”**

So, how are you doing? Every time that we are meeting together I’m going to ask that question. It is possible that today you are answering it in a different way than you answered it on our first Sunday when we began worshipping this way, on March 15. How are you doing, especially now that it has become very real for all of us. We have lost jobs or our hours have been reduced dramatically. So it is real. We have been in quarantine and some of us are just coming off this past week, others of us are facing it for the first time. So it is real. We have been working in hospitals or in medical offices and we have been on the frontlines as police officers and firefighters. So it is real. We are staying at home and aware that a trip out could bring dire consequences. So it is real. Families of 2 have become families of 6, and it has been nice for the first week, but now that we are facing week 3 and 4 the niceness is starting to see some ragged edges. So it is real.

So how are you doing? We are in the midst of Lent on top of all this. A time when we are encouraged to remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for us so that we could have eternal life which we believe begins here and now on this earth with a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who died and rose again for our sins. Our first week of Lent we saw together how important it is to post positive. This has become even more important as the walls close in around us that we post positive. We then saw our second week how to use our citizenship to our advantage as disciples of Jesus Christ. In our third week of Lent as we worshipped together at home we saw how our singular agenda of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior has kept us together through this pandemic and has the power to keep us together even beyond that. Last week for our fourth week of Lent we understood what it means to speak truth to power, and that the truth continues to be the power and the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ even in the midst of a reality that attempts to shut him down.

This week we find Paul appealing to the emperor. We find Paul going in a direction that on face value can seem desperate, but in reality it was planned and exactly what God wanted. I fully realize that as you find yourself at home what people say to you in this medium has more

power and has more intensity than maybe it would have had in the past. Our human interaction has become so limited that when we have an opportunity such as this morning to hear from the Word of God then it becomes even more intense and the words that I speak, I understand this and it brings me even more anxiety than I would normally have on Sunday morning, is heard and is interpreted more seriously than in the past.

If your pastor says don't worry about the virus, keep hugging, keep going out, keep living your life as normal, Jesus will protect you. You will hear that and it will put a thought in your mind that maybe, just maybe this is true, regardless of what science and the best doctors in the world are telling you and the rest of the world. If your pastor says this virus is real, you should take it seriously, do not go out and in fact we have people who will go out for you, then you are liable to take it more seriously now than you have in the past. If your pastor tells you today that a way in which you can love your neighbor is by staying home and taking this seriously, it may make more sense to you.

I think all of us at this stage are looking for someone to whom we can appeal in order to bring this to an end. To whom can we appeal in order to bring normalcy to our life? Today, Paul appeals to the emperor, not to get out of anything, but rather to fulfill God's call. Today, I encourage you to appeal to the one to whom every emperor, every king, every President ought to bow down to, because our Almighty God is the only one who can provide relief and security for such a time as this. The church is not the way the truth and the life, Jesus is. I saw a pastor friend of mine post this and he stated: We are still the church, we've just left the building. Church, let's read Scripture together.

### **READ**

John Calvin stated that "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience." If we are to understand how to follow God, then we have to learn how to obey God. This is what the Psalmist picks up in our first Scripture, here in Psalm 119 where we read how important it is to follow the laws of God. Twice the author states how much he appreciates the laws of God, because he loves them. Look at vs.47 and 48. In the Old Testament there is a sense that if we follow God's commandments then there is a conditional covenant that God's response will be His everlasting love. There is a direct link between our morality and our following the laws of God. A direct link between morality and legality. If you do that which is illegal then you are

doing that which is immoral. The laws are in place not to limit but rather to define and give freedom in our relationship with God.

I hope that makes sense. I will be going deeper on that point in our Bible study together this week on Thursday evening. Join us won't you? We had our first one this past week, I don't know about you, but I really enjoyed it. This past week at chapel for the preschool we acted out Daniel and the lion's den and we told the story of how Daniel had disobeyed the king because he had to obey to God and pray. He got thrown in the lion's den and God saved him from the hungry lions. I asked the kids and they answered by chat: okay, so who was it that saved Daniel from the lion's den? The answers poured in: God did, God, and one said: Pastor Bob did. I mean, that was very flattering but the point of the story, the point of this Psalm is that ultimately, it is God who protects, it is God who delivers, it is God who provides. So when we appeal for help, our help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

And we read in Scripture that those who are in power, the emperor, the king, the president, our political leaders are given the task and the responsibility to be God's agents in providing that protection, that deliverance, that provision.

Paul, in our Acts Scripture, has a background where, as we saw last week, those in power don't tend to give him the benefit of the doubt. Those in power have tried to stone him, have actually beat him, and today he remains in prison for years as the authorities are trying to figure out what to do with him. Yet somehow he is still able to say in one of his later letters in Romans 13: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. That didn't sit well for us in the revolutionary war and it is hard to believe that it would sit well for the 1<sup>st</sup> century church. But there we have it.

Today, we have a new player in our drama today, Festus has become governor once Felix has left. His first day in office he travels to Jerusalem to speak to his political base, the Jewish religious leaders of the day and they bring up Paul who is floundering in prison in Caesarea and they ask a favor of Festus if they could somehow get rid of this troublemaker. He tells them, come to Caesarea with me and together we will take care of this problem. We pick up the verses where Festus sits on the judgment seat with Paul's accusers present. We know that he wants to do a favor to his political base, but after the accusations Paul speaks and appeals to the emperor.

Okay, so we find ourselves in a place where Paul by appealing to the emperor as a Roman citizen is given the opportunity to escape a trip to Jerusalem which would have meant his

sure death, and guarantees a trial before the emperor in Rome. Some commentators see this as a tricky ploy by Paul. I see it as an opportunity for Paul to fulfill what he had previously stated in Acts 23:11, verses which we did not cover. We find Paul in prison and while he is in prison we read: "That night, the Lord stood near him and said: "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome." God had told him in a vision earlier that he would go to Rome and bring the Gospel. And we know he did that. In fact, every mission trip that has gone to Italy through this church has seen the prison where Paul was kept.

When Paul appeals to the emperor it was not to save his own life, for as he states elsewhere for him to die would be gain, but rather for the purpose of bringing the Gospel to Rome as God had commanded him to do. So in this case even the Romans could be useful in protecting a disciple, but would be even more useful in advancing the Gospel. The question that faces us today is how do we work within our empire to accomplish our purposes? Especially now that we are so far apart. How do we fulfill our kingdom purposes? Paul found himself limited by people who were actual enemies. We find ourselves limited by situational enemies, not people, but rather circumstances. No one has it out for the church but the church had better learn how to adapt.

Make no mistake, God is still using us for his kingdom. Make no mistake our ultimate appeal is to almighty God who is able. We find ourselves in unprecedented times which require unprecedented actions. I think you will find that when session meets on Wednesday evening that they have been listening and beseeching for the Holy Spirit to move. I urge you my dear family, to appeal like you never have appealed before to the God who is still able. Amen.