

And His Name Shall Be Called ...

Advent Reflections 2007

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During Advent, the church both remembers the waiting of Israel for the coming of the messiah and remembers her own waiting for the coming again of the messiah. Now *how* Israel and the church wait looks different. Israel waits for the one who is to come. The church waits for the coming again of the one who has already come. But *who* we wait for is the same. Despite the different form of our waiting, the content of our waiting is identical. Therefore, we can learn from Israel about the one whom we await. We can learn from them about him.

Learn from them about him. That's what I aim to do in the following four-week series of Advent Reflections. Specifically, I am going to reflect on **the four messianic titles of Isaiah 9:6. His name shall be called (1) Wonderful Counselor, (2) Mighty God, (3) Prince of Peace, (4) Everlasting Father.**

Now I will acknowledge up front that much of what I will say in the following reflections cannot be gleaned directly from this prophetic text. Much of the content of my reflections will draw on the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ (a.k.a., the New Testament). **Isaiah 9:6 will for the most part serve as a way of organizing and orienting my thoughts.**

However, I join the church in believing that the truest referent of all prophetic texts is Jesus Christ, even if there is not a perfect one-to-one correspondence between text and referent in matters of detail. In other words, **I believe Isaiah really is talking about Jesus.** Although it must be applied cautiously, this claim must be affirmed confidently. Well, enough preliminaries. On to the first title.

Part 1 - Wonderful Counselor

First of all, it is worth noting that there should not be a comma between "wonderful" and "counselor." This disjunction nicely fits the cadence of Handel's *Messiah*. But such a division disrupts the parallelism of the titles in the original language, each of which consists of a noun and a modifier. So the first thing we must say about the one who was and is to come is that he is a counselor, and wonderful one at that.

So, what does it mean for Christ to be called Wonderful Counselor?

(1) He accomplishes the *purposes* of God.

One's counselor is a party to one's counsels. A participant in one's plans, both in deliberation and execution. The messiah is God's counselor. We'll get to how he is our counselor in a moment. But in the first instance Christ is *God's* counselor. He is a party to

the "counsels of God" (an archaic but telling phrase). He participates in the willing and enactment of God's plans. Although it is difficult to render in English, this notion is probably the closest to the original sense of the phrase. The revelation and execution of God's mysterious plans is celebrated in Ephesians 1:3-10. Although we don't want to turn the trinity into a committee, there is a sense in which the Father and Son make and fulfill plans, plans which glorify God and benefit us. His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, because he accomplishes the purposes of God.

(2) He guides us into truth and righteousness.

But he is not only God's counselor; he is also our counselor. He is our counselor not in the sense of accomplishing our purposes, but rather as our *guide*. I'm thinking here of how Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as "counselor" (*paracletos*) in John 14 & 16. He says that the Spirit will guide us into truth and righteousness. Interestingly, the Spirit is introduced in John 14:16 as "another counselor" (*allon paracleton*). The Son is one counselor, the Spirit is another. So, the Christ is our counselor. Though their work must be differentiated, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit share in this guiding activity. His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, because he guides us in matters of truth and righteousness.

(3) He is our advocate before God.

But the language of counselor not only connotes friendly guidance but also legal representation. This multi-valence of the Greek *paracletos* is also found in English. Lawyers are actually referred to as "counselors" in the context of a courtroom. So Christ not only counsels us in our daily knowing and living, but also stands beside us as our advocate before God the Father. He is our advocate. If we sin, we have an advocate before the father, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, who is the propitiation for our sins, and not only our sins but the sins of the whole world (John 2:1b-2). He stood in for us on the cross, he stands up for us now, and he will stand with us at the final judgment.

His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, because he is our advocate before God. Jesus Christ wonderfully accomplishes the purposes of God, wonderfully guides us into truth and righteousness, and wonderfully advocates for us before God. Jesus Christ so counsels wonderfully. This advent we remember waiting for and remember to wait for the coming one, whose name shall be called Wonderful Counselor.

Part 2 - Mighty God

Last week we began our Advent reflections with the first of Isaiah's titles: Wonderful Counselor. This week, let us turn our attention the second: Mighty God. Unto us a child is born ... and his name shall be called ... mighty God. During Advent we remember waiting for the coming of the Messiah, and specifically about his coming as a child. What does it mean to call this child mighty God? What a mystery! Let's unpack this mystery a bit by means of a series of statements that progressively build on each other.

God became a child.

During Christmas we speak of God becoming human. We call this the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh. But this becoming is not only linked to Jesus' public ministry. It refers to his whole life. And a life has a beginning, a starting point. From the beginning of his life, this man is God. And so we say with boldness and wonder that God became a child. This is the central mystery of the Christian faith. If we want to know and love God, we must know and love him through an encounter with this child, whose name shall be called Mighty God.

The Mighty God became a child.

We not only speak of God becoming a child, but also of the *mighty* God becoming a child. We are talking about the very God who created the heavens and the earth. The God who providentially governs all things. The God led the people Israel out of Egypt. This is the mighty God. This mighty God does not remain only at a distance, perhaps leaving the world to its devices. He comes to us, experiences our world and engages us where we are. This thought is perhaps worrisome, because the mighty God is getting in our face. He is getting in our business. He won't leave us alone. We must not forget the seriousness with which we must take the coming of the mighty God in the flesh. But we can also thankfully say that *unto us* a child is born. The mighty God is for us. It is good news that the mighty God has come near, for it means he will not leave us to our own devices. The mighty God who comes will use his might for our good. So, although we may shake in awe, we need not fear the birth of this child, whose name shall be called Mighty God.

The Mighty God became a weak child.

But perhaps the most amazing thing about the mighty God becoming a child is that this child is and remains a weak child. The mightiness of God does not overwhelm the weakness of this child. We may sing "no crying he makes," but we have no basis to think that this child was exempt from the weakness of human nature. In fact, we have every reason to think that he experienced the depths of human frailty and sorrow from the beginning. The passion of the Christ commences at Christmas. He emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and humbled himself. And yet saying that this child is weak is not a denial of God mightiness. Rather, in his weakness his strength shown. God is so mighty that he can become weak without ceasing to be mighty. It is through this weakness that God's mightiest acts take place. He who was mighty in himself became weak so that we who are weak may be made strong. This display of divine might in human weakness comforts us in our weakness. It also critiques us in our use and abuse of might. And it calls us to see his might in weakness.

During Advent we re-await the coming Messiah. In Christ, God became a child. In Christ, the mighty God became a child. In Christ, the mighty God became a weak child. Unto us the Christ-child is born, and he shall be called "Mighty God."

Part 3 - Everlasting Father

I have been organizing my Advent reflections around Isaiah 9:6b. We have already said a little bit about what it means for Christ to bear the name "Wonderful Counselor" and "Mighty God." Let's turn our attention to the third title: "**Everlasting Father.**"

I must admit that I have a hard time with this title. It's not that the Fatherhood language doesn't connect with me; it does. It's rather that "**Father**" **does not work well as a title for Jesus**. Although he may evince Fatherly qualities, the New Testament never refers to Jesus as Father. Rather, Jesus distinctly and consistently calls God Father, and his apostolic witnesses followed suit. When one adds that the traditional trinitarian doctrine says the Son has everything the Father has except that the Son is not the Father, so that the only thing that distinguishes the persons is their constitutive relations, it seems all the more problematic to use "Father" as a name for Jesus. Because of this potential confusion, it may be good to avoid a 1-to-1 application of this messianic title.

Such avoidance does not mean, however, that we should avoid all talk fulfillment. For **in Christ we have God as our Father**. It is Christ who teaches us to pray to God as Father. It is Christ who reconciles us to the Father. It is Christ who is not ashamed to call us brothers, so that in him we might have God as our Father. In Christ the Fatherhood of God is forever made manifest and secure.

Note that such a move is, formally speaking, not too far removed from the original meaning of Isaiah 9:6. This passage speaks both of a coming human king and God as king. There are some debates in OT scholarship over whether and how such oracles might be used in the celebration of God's kingship. But whatever the state of this debate, the basic contours of **the royal theology of Israel** are clear: the Davidic King is the Son of God and as such is the representative of God to the people. God's fatherly care of the people is made manifest and secure in the King's leadership of the people. So as the Son of God, the King functions as Father for the people. It is in this sense that we speak of the coming messiah as the Everlasting Father. **This royal office is fulfilled in Jesus Christ**, in whom the Fatherhood of God is forever made manifest and secure.

In Christ the Fatherhood of God is *forever* made manifest and secure. It is this foreverness, expressed in the adjective "Everlasting," which must require the remainder of our attention. What does "Everlasting" add to the equation? Is not the Fatherhood of God good enough news? Actually, the Everlastingness of God's Fatherhood is what makes him unique. We do not merely think of a good father and extrapolate that notion to God in the nth degree. **For God's Fatherhood is unique-in-kind**. What makes God's Fatherhood so special? **God is an Everlasting Father**. The eternity of God conditions his paternity in such a way that he is a father like no other father.

What does it mean to say that in Christ we have God as our *Everlasting* Father?

On the one hand, in Christ God has always been our Father. Even before the coming of Christ, God was the Father of Israel. Even before calling Israel out of Egypt, God was

the Father of all creatures. Even before creating all things, God was from all eternity the Father of the Son who would become incarnate in time for us. In Christ God has always been our Father. **Therefore, he's not new at this.** God does not have to learn how to be a father by trial and error. He knows what he is doing in his fatherly care for us. So we can be **confident** that, even when it seems like God is failing us, God knows what he's doing.

On the other hand, in Christ God will always be our Father. Even after Christ died, God vindicated his Sonship by raising him from the dead. Even after Christ ascended, God adopted us as children by the Spirit of the Son. Even after our biological and spiritual parents are gone, God remains our Father. Even after we are gone, God remains our Father. Even after the heavens and earth pass away, God will be for all eternity the Father of Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead among many siblings who too will be raised. In Christ, God will always be our Father. **Therefore, we never grow out of his fatherhood.** God's relationship to us is not conditioned by the anxieties that plague all human relationships. We never have to take over, for he is our Father forever. So we can be **calm** that, even when all other care fades, God's fatherly care remains.

In Christ we have God as our Everlasting Father. He has always been our Father and will always be our Father. So in him and him alone we can be confident and calm.

Part 4 - Prince of Peace

This week contains both the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Day itself. And so we come to the close this year's reflections on the messianic titles of Isaiah 9:6. We have already considered what it means for his name to be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and Everlasting Father. Let us conclude with some thoughts on the last of these titles, **Prince of Peace.**

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the birth of a child who will be called "Prince of Peace." The church has long made use of this language to describe Jesus her Lord. And yet the birth of Christ is anything but peaceful. This tension should tell us something about the kind of Peace this Prince brings, which brings us to our first point.

(1) **At Christmas, peace breaks through in the midst of strife.** Despite the apparent peacefulness of many Christmas songs and scenes, the nativity story is a story full of strife. Mary and Joseph were caught in the middle of a shameful family situation. Traveling down to Bethlehem during her ninth month is hard enough, but they had to do it with the added weight of shame and fear. You add to this that the reason for their travels is a census for the purposes of taxation. Now for us April 15th is no December 25th, but for them taxation was not merely a nuisance but the sign of foreign oppression. It had not been long since the Israelites led by Jacobus Maccabeus had violently rebelled against foreign rule (the occasion for the Hanukkah holiday) and it would not be long till they would rebel again. And strife not only precedes but also succeeds the nativity, as Herod decrees the slaughter of the innocents. So Christmas is a story full of strife. And yet, the birth of Christ is the birth of the Prince of Peace. Jesus, Lord at his birth, is

already the prince of peace, the one who brings the peace of God. Christ's peace is a peace that invades, which breaks through in the midst of strife. It does not find an already peaceful scene. It brings peace into times and places that need peace most of all.

How can this be? How can peace break through in the midst of strife and still be genuine peace? To answer this, we must turn to our second point.

(2) The Peace of Christ is not defined by the cessation of conflict, but by reconciliation. This is why it can break through in the midst of strife. He is the Prince of *Shalom*, the Hebrew word translated "peace" in Isaiah 9:6. The meaning of *Shalom* cannot be reduced to the mere cessation of conflict. *Shalom* is not a temporary ceasefire. Rather, *Shalom* means a life of wholeness and abundance, were the nations are living and working together and God fulfills his promise to bless all the nations through Israel. *Shalom* thus has the character of reconciliation. *Shalom* is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who in his very coming brings reconciliation between God and humanity. Because it is defined by reconciliation, the peace of Christ can break through in the midst of strife. In fact, the announcement of the reality of reconciliation may itself incur greater strife, for people do not always want to be reconciled. Peace can be a rude awakening, as the shepherds can attest. Peace interrupts our seemingly peaceful lives and drives us out of ourselves to encounter God and neighbor.

What does this mean for us? How should we then live if the peace of Christ is defined by reconciliation? Answering this question will bring us to our last point.

(3) Genuine peace consists in relationships. Peace is not a feeling. It is not a state of being. It is not an escape, even an escape from the greatest conflict. Peace is the reconciliation of parties, and therefore the establishment of relationships. Since peace is so defined by reconciliation, it is by definition impossible in the absence of relationships. Beware of false peace which isolates itself from the active life of reconciliation. Beware of the apparent peace of the shepherds, who inhabit a peaceful pastoral scene, restfully tending their sheep at night. True peace disrupts this false shepherds' peace, waking them up and telling them to go. Of course, relationships for so many of us are the very source of strife in our lives. And so we are tempted to recoil and retreat from relationships in order find peace. But isolation is not true peace. This Christmas, let us not isolate ourselves. That will only bring false peace, a temporary ceasefire, a shepherd's peace. Rather, the peace of Christ is expressed in acts of reconciliation. Surely there are times for quiet aloneness, and reconciliation cannot happen overnight. But Christmas points us in the direction of relationships. May we be faithful not to isolate ourselves, and to reach out to those that are isolated, so that the peace of Christ may be seen and heard on earth.

At Christmas, peace breaks through in the midst of strife because the peace of Christ is defined by relationships and therefore genuine peace consists in relationships.