

Wonderful Counselor

First in Advent Series *The Names of Jesus*

from the pulpit of
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December 3, 2017

Isaiah 64:1-4

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence—²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence! ³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. ⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³²“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

Every year during Advent, often on Christmas Eve amid the glow of candlelight and the hushed tones of awe and wonder, these prophetic words wash over us: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* On Christmas Eve in sacred worship, surrounded by family and church friends, and filled with love and joy, the ancient titles ring true and these names for Jesus resonate with deep faith. But what do these names mean, exactly? And how could a Hebrew prophet's declaration from the eighth century before Christ actually be pointing to Jesus of Nazareth?

Today, and in these coming weeks of Advent we will examine each one in turn. We will explore what the name meant to Isaiah in the eighth century BCE, and how Jesus fulfills that Messianic expectation often in unexpected ways. Using these names for Jesus as the lens through which we will interpret the scriptures about him, I hope that, beyond their comforting familiarity, a deepened understanding will enrich our faith in the Child whose birth we are about to celebrate.

So that whether you are praying to our *Everlasting Father*, or sending and receiving Christmas Cards emblazoned with *Prince of Peace*, or listening to *Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God* crescendo during Handel's *Messiah*, these signs pointing to Jesus might also call forth a renewed sense of participation in his reign over the Kingdom of God. For that is what they are; they are royal titles pointing to a king not of this world. Specifically, the oracle of Isaiah 9 anticipates a new regime of peace and prosperity; it points to a season of "great light" contrasted with the "darkness" of the imperial exploitation under the Assyrian empire. It anticipates the kind of hope that any nation feels when there is a transition of power into the hands of new leaders.

The first of these royal titles is *Wonderful Counselor*. At the outset, let me point out that while Handel's famous oratorio separates Wonderful from Counselor with a comma and a pause, the terms are meant to be taken together, and can actually be inverted to mean "Counselor of Wonders." The

title refers to the exercise of wise governance, the capacity to administer for the common good. Here in Isaiah, God is praised for assigning a new human king to work for the good of all people and for the benefit of the entire realm. The term “Wonderful” is a modifier suggesting that the new king will have extraordinary wisdom, foresight and creativity to enact policies that – as Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, notes: “will dazzle in its effectiveness and in its practical benefit for the subjects of the king.” ¹

This is why our Christmas Carols abound with royal imagery: *Come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free... Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king... It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold: Peace on the earth, good will to all from heaven’s most gracious king.*

You know, there are some things a pastor cannot say on Christmas Eve. We refrain from too much biblical exegesis, and pastoral sensitivity keeps us from questioning the history, the science and the wonder of the family drama, the angels and the alignment of stars. But I would hope, and believe, that the intellectual and spiritual capacity of this congregation can hear this, on the first Sunday of Advent. Our beloved Christmas carols, based on Isaiah’s prophetic royal signs, are about an insurrection. I am not talking about a plot to unseat our current government, or any particular nation’s regime at any given time in history. I am talking about how the reign of God holds stark contrast to any human institution that does not constitute a Counselor of Wonders for all the people within its realm.

Back in Isaiah’s time King Hezekiah, to whom these royal titles were originally given when he was a newborn royal prince, would turn out to disappoint. And when the long awaited Messiah did come, in Jesus of Nazareth, the early church had to rethink what kind of king Jesus was,

1) The idea for the theme of this sermon series and much of the biblical insight regarding these royal titles from Isaiah 9 are from Walter Brueggemann’s *Names for the Messiah: An Advent Study*, Westminster John Knox Pres, 2016.

because even he did not fit conventional royal expectation. During Rome's military occupation of Galilee with harsh classism and unbearable taxation, Jesus fulfilled His role as *Wonderful Counselor* by seeking to order public life with extraordinary love, with unconditional grace, with uncommon forgiveness and with a spirit of serving others, particularly those in need, the oppressed and the marginalized. He is wonderful in his counsel because amid strict social convention he opened up new possibilities that were thought impossible.

The ancient images that once declared the coming Messiah in terms of a royal king upon a throne, become the crown and scepter that should be enthroned in the human heart so that we begin to act more like our brother, Jesus. That is the lens through which we interpret Jesus' own words about the coming of God in full glory. We can learn from the fig tree, he says, when it begins to show new green life again, we know that summer is coming. So also, when we see a cosmic shift in the way the world is ordered, toward love, grace, forgiveness and a spirit of serving others for the common good, we will know that God's kingdom is fully here. In the meantime, we look for it. We watch for it. And we try to emulate the values of Jesus Christ who is an amazing Counselor of Wonders.

I have not read Walter Isaacson's new biography of Leonardo da Vinci, but I plan to. However, I have heard Isaacson discuss his research for it on television and I've read a couple of book reviews. I was particularly interested in something the author said about trying to get his head around Da Vinci's amazing genius, as an innovative forerunner of scientific method, a portrait artist, a designer of waterways and flying machines, and a man curiously fascinated by the mechanics of everything from the human body to architecture to great poetry and prose. Leonardo da Vinci listed "... all his questions to study that week. Why is the sky blue? How do the emotions get reflected in the expressions on the human face?... and Isaacson said of reading those notebooks: "Seeing the questions he lists, we can say, 'I can try that, try to be more observant in my daily life.... Right at this moment, I am walking in Central Park in a light rain, noticing how water swirls as it runs off the pavement,' the author goes on... 'That's the kind of thing Leonardo notes in

his notebook again and again. In admiring Leonardo, I can push myself to be more curious, more observant.”²

That is the kind of observant watchfulness to which Jesus calls us. “Keep awake!” he says, for you do not know when God is coming... but we can look for the signs. Jesus is ever reminding us that we can live now in such a way as to participate in God’s good future. We can try to be more observant in our daily life of the ways Jesus invites us to be governed by his Counsel of Wonders – love, grace, forgiveness and serving others for the common good.

Tish Harrison Warren has written a beautiful devotional book called *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*. She begins the book by asking the question: How do we embrace the sacred in the ordinary? and says that with a little more mindfulness, our often rushed or overlooked moments and routines, can make us aware of God’s presence in surprising ways. Paying attention to what happens when we first wake up in the morning, she writes: “Whether we are children or heads of state, we sit in our pajamas for a moment, yawning with messy hair and bad breath, unproductive, groping toward the day. Soon we’ll get buttoned up into our identities: family members, business people, students, friends, citizens. We’ll spend our day conservative or liberal, rich or poor, earnest or cynical, fun-loving or serious. But as we first emerge from sleep, we are nothing but human, unimpressive, vulnerable, newly born into the day, blinking as our pupils adjust to light and our brains emerge into consciousness.”

Then she notes that before Jesus said or did anything remarkable he was baptized and named “Beloved child,” by God. Warren compares that moment in Jesus’ life to our own daily waking up to God’s blessing, writing: “Before we begin the liturgies of our day, the cooking, sitting in traffic, emailing, accomplishing, working, resting, we too begin beloved. My works and worship don’t earn a thing. Instead, they flow from God’s love, gift, and work on my behalf. This reality seeps out of my soul quickly. Days can pass into a

2) John Timpane, “The Genius of the Complete Misfit,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11/28/17, pages C1 & 6.

bluster of busyness, impatience and distraction. But each morning in those first tender moments, in simply being God's smelly, sleepy beloved, I again receive grace, life and faith as a gift." Concluding this thought, Warren notes: "God is a mystery and the joyful scandal of the universe... God is forming us into a new people. And the place of that formation is in the small moments of today." ³

To keep awake, as Jesus invites us, calls us into a mindful watchfulness for the signs that the *Wonderful Counselor* reigns over the kingdom of God. This kind of mindful watchfulness invites us to make fewer lists and say more prayers; to think less about what we want and more about what others need; to take our faith into the streets as participants in the Kingdom of God – where every person is recognized as a beloved child of God, where the poor are served, the neighbor is loved, the sick are healed, the vulnerable are protected, the hungry are fed, and the empty are filled with good things. In so doing, we enact Christ's Counsel of Wonders. And we receive the Unexpected One as our true King, a Wonderful Counselor indeed.

AMEN.

3) Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life*, p15-24.