

He Will Be Called: Wonderful Counselor Sunday, 11/28/21

How many of you have ever sung at least a portion of Handel's Messiah with a choir? It's a magnificent experience, isn't it? It's been many years since I've done that, but I feel like the music is written on my heart. It's traditionally sung at both Christmas and Easter, so whenever I read our earlier passage from Isaiah 9 during the Advent season, I can't help but hear Handel's music in my head. "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."¹

Isaiah 9 is one of those passages that's a little confusing, because it was written in an ancient historical context. Scholars believe it referred, at least in part, to God's raising up of a human king to deliver God's people from the Assyrian Empire. But it's also long been appropriated through Christian interpretation to refer to the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, who we Christians understand to be Jesus. That's why we sing "For unto us a son is given" at Christmas time. We're borrowing Isaiah's language to herald the birth of Jesus, an event that took place some 700 years after Isaiah lived.

That Isaiah's prophecy is filled with images of military conquest is simply a reflection of the nature of life in ancient Israel and Judah, when Kings ruled the people of the divided kingdom and led their armies off to war. It was entirely natural for people of that day to expect the Messiah, God's anointed one, to be a human king. After all, they themselves had begged God for a king. Consequently, when we read Isaiah's names for the Messiah, we should resist the temptation to immediately jump to what we know of Jesus, and linger for a moment on what we might expect of a human king.

"Wonderful" in our modern English usage is just one of many superlatives, like "awesome." In fact, it sometime means the exact opposite in English, depending on our tone of voice and the expression on our face, right? "Wonderful!" But back in Isaiah's day, the Hebrew word we now translate as "wonderful" probably packed a bigger punch. Maybe "Extraordinary" would be a better translation, something to connote awe and even incomprehensible greatness. In other words, wonderful is not just a polite affirmation of a

¹ Isaiah 9:6. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

new king in this context, but an exclamation of the very highest magnitude, pointing unmistakably to the providence of God.

What's specifically wonderful about this king is his ability to be a counselor. When we think of a counselor today, we tend to think of a mental health specialist, or a camp or school counselor. Maybe even a financial counselor. A counselor is someone you can trust to steer you in the right direction. Isaiah most likely had something a bit more specific in mind.

Kings were expected to be counselors to their people in a variety of ways. You might recall the account of King Solomon who wisely and impartially judged the dispute between two women over a child.² Kings judged the people and ordered the local economy. Kings often served as special mediators between the people and God, passing on the counsel of God to the people. At their best, kings were called to serve as rulers of the people in the name of God, carefully planning and managing the life of the kingdom according to the covenant established by God. It's the King as counselor that Isaiah had in mind, something that comes out even more clearly in Isaiah 11.

Here's Isaiah's description of the Wonderful Counselor King: "Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the Lord will 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. He will delight in obeying the Lord. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment."³

David's family- often translated here as the "stump of Jesse"- refers to King David. This wonderful counselor king will be descended from David, who was anointed by God to lead God's people. His wisdom will exceed his own, because he'll also have available everything that the Spirit of God has to offer: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and holy reverence for God. Isn't that the kind of counselor you'd want on your side? What's more, he's a counselor that walks the talk. He gives justice to the poor and

² 1Kings 3:16-28

³ Isaiah 11:1-5. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

exploited. He'll forcefully stand up to the wicked. And in all he does and says he'll act with righteousness.

Isaiah's wonderful counselor is so much more than a kindly dispenser of advice. He's the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the King of Kings. Did you notice, though, that the Wonderful Counselor doesn't stand alone? He depends on God's Spirit. Let's take a huge leap forward in salvation history now, jumping from Isaiah to the Gospel of John, where we'll hear of the Wonderful Counselor's plan for providing for his people. I'm reading from John 16 in the New Living Translation, beginning with verse 5.

{Read John 16:5-15 NLT}

It might seem strange at the beginning of Advent to be jumping past all the usual Christmas stories about Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and John and moving so close to the beginning of Lent in the Gospel of John. But it's here that we find the continuation of Isaiah's promise of a Wonderful Counselor.

By now we know that the reign of this Messiah is not going to be one of military might but of humble self-giving, even to the point of giving up his own life. But the Wonderful Counselor promised to not leave us bereft of his good counsel. The same Spirit of God who rested on him in his earthly ministry will now be send by him to us. The Holy Spirit is often represented in Christian art as a dove, recalling the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. The Spirit is also commonly represented by fire, recalling the falling of the Holy Spirit as tongues of fire upon the crowd at Pentecost.

Notice that this Spirit isn't a free agent any more than Jesus is. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have the same agenda. Just as Jesus does and says what he learns from the Father, the Spirit says what he learns from the Son. So even though the Wonderful Counselor has moved his throne into the heavenly realms, we can still have access to his good counsel through the Holy Spirit.

Notice also the names and roles Jesus gives to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is our advocate and the Spirit of truth. An advocate is someone who looks out for your best interests, but in this context, it especially means someone who defends your case in a court of law. You don't have to dig too deeply into your own life to understand why you might need a defense lawyer in regards to God's perfect law. We all fall short in various ways, but

when we turn to Jesus and the advocate he's sent us, confessing our great need, we find the perfect and only defense. Which brings us to the truth that we most need. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, and according to John, the truth we all need is to be convicted of our sin and convinced of God's righteousness, believing in the Wonderful Counselor, Jesus.

Can you see how amazing God's provision has been to us? Even after the Wonderful Counselor ascended to the right hand of the Father, he sent the Spirit of the Wonderful Counselor to continue to guide us, defending us with the truth of the sacrificial love of Jesus.

To say that we're living in a confusing world would be a colossal understatement, right? So much of what we've taken for granted as the usual way things happen has been called into question. It's been especially challenging because Covid restrictions have meant that we've been less immediately connected with the people we're accustomed to leaning on for good counsel: our friends, our families, our schools, and our church families.

Jesus didn't include any instructions in his teachings for how to cope with a pandemic, but he did leave us with the essential truths that we need to ground ourselves in God's law of love. And he sent us the Holy Spirit, who continues to serve as our Wonderful Counselor, if we have the ears to hear, the eyes to see, and a heart that's soft enough to change. And that's the real challenge that we need to face today. All the counselling in the world won't help us if we don't humbly seek the Wonderful Counselor, prepared to conform our lives to God's loving plan.

How about you? As we prepare our hearts and lives for Christmas, how ready are you to receive and act on the Word of the Wonderful Counselor?

Please take some time now to reflect on how Jesus is your "Wonderful Counselor."



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