

## **He Will Be Called: Everlasting Father** Sunday, 12/12/21

Last week we embraced Jesus as our Mighty God, not limited to the confines of humanity, although he was fully human in his incarnation. We were reminded that the might wielded by Jesus to save us came not from forceful domination, but through humble surrender. We mostly closely follow in the footsteps of our Mighty God when we learn to lay down our lives for the sake of others in love.

Isaiah's next name for the Messiah can be a bit problematic for us, both because nothing in our experience of this creation is truly everlasting, and because of the mixed experiences we've all had with fatherhood. Curtis and I, and perhaps some of you as well, said goodbye to fathers this year, and so addressing God as "father" can't help but remind us of the earthly parents we've recently lost. Some of you have painful experiences with neglectful or abusive parents, and it's difficult not to import those experiences into this image of God. Others of you have never known a parent, for one reason or another, and so perhaps fatherhood remains a rather abstract concept for you.

It also messes with our heads to call Jesus a father when the Gospels are so full of references to him as the Son of God. In discourse he frequently referred to God as his father. If Jesus the Son prays to God his father, then how can Jesus also be the Everlasting Father? Fortunately, I believe we can straighten out the confusion pretty easily.

How many of you have ever watched "Father Knows Best?" In this television program from the 50's, the father of the family, Jim Anderson, was the wise figure whose role was to come home from work and dole out advice to his children in the midst of their nonstop predicaments in life. I wonder if that's the image many of us still have of God, the wise father who we're waiting for to come home and clean up the messes we make.

Much of our understanding of gender norms comes from our families of origin and the times we grew up in. When we think about God as a father, sometimes we make the mistake of importing everything we know or have experienced about our imperfect human fathers and attributing the same imperfections to God. Quite the opposite is what's intended in the Bible. Our image of ideal fatherhood should come from the very best of what we know about God's character, which includes, by the way, wisdom. So even if the parents you have known haven't been especially wise, you can be confident that your Heavenly Father really

does know best. In the same way, we know that Jesus, our Everlasting Father, is wise.

Remember that he is also our “Wonderful Counselor”

When Isaiah named Jesus, Everlasting Father, did he mean that Jesus looked like this? Of course not. Isaiah meant to say that Jesus would serve the best of the role of the father, as it was known in the ancient times this prophecy was written. In those days, the father was seen as the provider and protector. So “father” here has nothing to do with gender, and is simply being used as a shorthand for “provider and protector.” Is it more exclusive than the more flexible ideas of gender and gender roles that many accept today? Yes, but that’s not the point at all. Try to look past that and embrace what Isaiah has proclaimed: Jesus is our provider and protector.

This is Michelangelo’s famous depiction of God as a stern looking gray-haired man. For many, that image remains the primary way they picture God: an angry man. It’s true that God’s character can be stern in the application of justice, but the Bible describes God in many other ways as well, not just stern, masculine ones.

Jesus himself used a feminine image of God when he said: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me.”<sup>1</sup> Whenever I read that text, I can’t help but think of this illustration from the children’s book, “Are You My Mother?”

Even Isaiah used feminine images for God, writing this in chapter 49: “Yet Jerusalem says, ‘The LORD has deserted us; the Lord has forgotten us.’ ‘Never! Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!’”<sup>2</sup>

Can you see how easy it is for us to try to stuff God into one of our conceptual boxes, limited in power and character by the imperfect conceptions we have of the most elemental human relationships? The three persons of the trinity, however we name them, don’t really have genders. Even the identity of Jesus goes well beyond the gender of his incarnation. Let God out of the box and embrace Isaiah’s good news that Jesus is our provider, the one who

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:34. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 49:14-15. Ibid

knows we need before we know it. Jesus is our protector, the one who always sees danger coming and always seeks to lead us instead toward abundant life.

But Jesus isn't just named our father, Jesus is called our "Everlasting Father." We learn more about this aspect of our Messiah in our next reading from Hebrews. I'm reading in the thirteenth chapter, beginning in verse 5, from the New Living translation.

{Read Hebrews 13:5-9 NLT}

If you're a person who knows the pain of an absent parent, I pray God's comfort for you, especially as we move through this season that's traditionally marked by so many family gatherings. Parents can be absent for all sorts of reasons- death, divorce, abandonment, substance abuse, incarceration, job transfers or military duty, just to name a few. The writer of Hebrews reminds us of God's promise throughout the Old Testament to never leave us nor forsake us. That's a bolder promise than most of us can typically appreciate, because every earthly parent must someday leave us, as all people must eventually die. But as the Father who is Everlasting, we can be confident that Jesus will never be an absent father.

Do you remember the "Everlasting Gobstopper" from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*? We know that there aren't any candies that really last forever, but there are some that last longer than you might ordinarily expect. But Jesus isn't just a provider and protector that stays with us longer than most, Jesus stands outside of time and is therefore by definition "everlasting."

Everlasting is truly unfathomable for creatures such as us who must someday die. Every work of our hands must also someday turn to dust. We are finite creatures living on this side of our resurrections. But let's try to imagine what everlasting might look like.

If the present moment is like a single drop of water, then eternity is larger even than Lake Superior. Lake Superior is the largest of the Great Lakes. It could contain all the other Great Lakes plus three more lakes the size of Lake Erie. Water flows into Lake Superior from many small rivers and streams. Lake Superior contains three quadrillion gallons of water. That's a three with 15 zeroes after it. It's a number so large that I can't even begin to wrap my mind around it.

Depending on the size of the water drop, you might multiply those three quadrillion

gallons by as much as 75,000 to calculate the number of water drops, the number of present moments, in Lake Superior. Forever is like that and even more, like a lake that has no bottom and a fresh water supply that never runs out. That's how much we can count on the goodness of our Everlasting Father, our always faithful provider and protector.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."<sup>3</sup> That means the validity of God's promises, and the truth and power of God's Word are forever as well. Don't worry if you can't quite wrap your mind around forever. Instead, be content that Jesus is the provider and protector of your past, so you're safe in releasing to Jesus any burdens you've been carrying forward with you. Jesus is the provider and protector of each of your present moments, so there can never be a present where you stand outside of the loving embrace of God. And Jesus is the provider and protector of your future, so you can give of yourself freely in the present, trusting in the future that God has in store for you.

We're halfway through the season of Advent, and Christmas is less than two weeks away. In the midst of the season, I'm asking you to pause and ask yourself, "How are things with my soul?" Have you given up hope that there could ever be a better tomorrow? You can find a brand new hope in Jesus. Is there something in your past that's preventing you from living fully in the present? Jesus can free your heart from the pain of your past.

At Christmas, we'll celebrate the birth of the Everlasting Father, the loving provider and protector who is, was, and will always be. But I'll let you in on a little secret this morning. You don't have to wait for Christmas to reclaim the joy of living fully in the present. Believe in your heart that Jesus is your Everlasting Father, and ask for the Spirit of Jesus to set you free. That is, after all, the whole purpose of the incarnation in the first place, that we might have life, and have it abundantly.<sup>4</sup>

Please take some time now to reflect on how Jesus is your Everlasting Father.

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 13:8. Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John 10:10



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