

**WONDERFUL COUNSELOR**

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- Is. 9:2      The people who walked in darkness  
                  have seen a great light;  
                  those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
                  on them light has shined.
- 3      You have multiplied the nation,  
                  you have increased its joy;  
                  they rejoice before you  
                  as with joy at the harvest,  
                  as people exult when dividing plunder.
- 4      For the yoke of their burden,  
                  and the bar across their shoulders,  
                  the rod of their oppressor,  
                  you have broken as on the day of Midian.
- 5      For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
                  and all the garments rolled in blood  
                  shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
- 6      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.

**NAMES FOR THE MESSIAH**

This Advent I'm going to try something different.

I'm going to preach four sermons that focus on the names for the Messiah found in Isaiah 9:6. In this verse the Messiah is called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.

I want to ask two questions:

1. Why were those titles important?
2. And how did Jesus claim those titles in a new way?

Sometimes during Advent our expectations are shaped more by our culture than our faith.

Yes, we want hope and change.

But we want our own hopes fulfilled.

We want things changed to match our own desires.

In order to receive the Messiah, we have to change our expectations.

We have to lift up our heads and see the star that burns in the distance.

I like what the author of our Advent devotional had to say for this first Sunday of Advent. She wrote,

“When we say we are preparing for the Advent of Christ each year, we are not pretending to go back in time to prepare for Jesus’ historical birth. We are not throwing a nice birthday party for Jesus.

We are doing something that demands so much more of us. We are readying ourselves for the end of time when, St. Paul says, God will be ‘all in all.’”

This demanding task requires that we examine our expectations of the Messiah more closely.

We must ask about:

What kind of man did the child, Jesus grow up to be?

When the Spirit of Christ enters our lives today, how will we know?

What kind of Messiah do we wait for at the end of time, when God is all in all?

The expectations for the Messiah are spelled out by the titles given him in Isaiah.

And in some regards Jesus did fulfill those expectations.

But, in other ways Jesus transformed those expectations into something different, something greater.

If Christ is to be born into our lives anew, we will once again need to be given eyes to see and ears to hear. We will need to be surprised by the kingdom that comes.

For you see,

The Messiah is not always the Messiah we expect.  
The Messiah is not always the Messiah we want.  
But, the Messiah is always the Messiah we need.

## WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

Today we begin by thinking about the one who is known as Wonderful Counselor.

Originally this title was probably used to announce the coronation of a new king, namely King Hezekiah in the eighth century B.C.

I wonder if it might have been a bit like the anticipation we now feel before a new president is installed. We never really know what that president is going to do or how he (or one day she) will lead. But, in the days leading up to the beginning of a new administration we hope for the best. We want our president to succeed and so we give him the benefit of the doubt.

This was true in ancient Israel.

God's people not only hoped for the best; they also looked upon their King as one who had been chosen by God for the task.

As God's chosen one, the King would be given the skills he needed to do the job.

So, this verse from Isaiah was part of a coronation liturgy.

This "child," this King who is new to the job will be given the authority to run the government.

(That's what "the government will be upon his shoulders" means.)

And ... he will also be given divine power to successfully do the job.

He will be like a Son of God.

That's where the term Son of God was first used. It was a way of saying that the new king would receive divine guidance for the job at hand.

The real power behind the throne was God.

The weight of being totally in charge of a country is enough to drive anyone to seek divine help.

NOW WHAT DO I DO?

For example, when a new president is elected, there's a moment when that person realizes the awesome nature of the job. If you look closely on election night, you can see that look.

Some have likened it to the dog who actually catches the car and wonders, "Now what do I do with it?"

I watched an old movie on TBS last week, "The Candidate" starring Robert Redford.

In this 1972 movie the good looking Redford wowed the voters with his style and youth.

And he actually defeats a strong incumbent and wins the election.

Everyone is cheering and is calling for him to speak at the celebration.

But, Redford hastily pulls his campaign manager aside in a motel room and asks with a look of absolute terror in his eyes, "And now what do I do?"

And that's how the movie ends.

"And now what do I do?"

He had been elected on style, but he had no idea about how to govern. The government was now upon his shoulders, but in terms of political experience, he was just a child.

This feeling of not knowing what to do is especially true when a country is facing great problems. And let's be honest about it.

The country, no matter which country you're talking about, is always facing great problems.

But, some days are more desperate than others. And when Hezekiah was anointed as King, there was a dire need for a wise leader.

The dust stirred up by the Assyrian war horses could be seen on the horizon.

A great darkness had spread over the land.

And yet, in spite of the tenuous political and military situation, this new King was expected to be (in the words of Isaiah) a “great light”.

He was going to change things.  
He was going to win great victories for the people.

No doubt the people prayed that the prophecy was right. Their very survival depended on the leadership of this new King.

I wonder if king Hezekiah stayed up at night wondering what in the world he was going to do next?

His options were very limited.  
With Assyria threatening from the north and Egypt and Babylonia threatening from the south, what’s a king to do?

And yet the prophet Isaiah boldly said that this King would bring light to this desperately dark situation.  
He would know what to do ... not because he was so smart ... but because he was God’s chosen one.

He would be a “Wonderful Counselor”.

## GOOD POLICIES

I make it a point to listen to Handel’s Messiah each Christmas, and he uses this passage in one part of that great work. And for those of us who grew up listening to that music and reading the King James version of the Bible, we notice something new ... the power of a comma.

In the music we read Wonderful Counselor as two titles instead of one.  
How does the music go?  
Wonderful, Counselor. (And so forth.)

That phrasing might make for good music.

But, it's a bit misleading when it comes to theology.  
Wonderful is an adjective that goes with Counselor.

The King, the Messiah, God's chosen one will be a Wonderful Counselor.

That means the King will be what we might call a policy wonk.

The Messianic King will execute good policies.  
He will be "wonderful" in that he will demonstrate wisdom and foresight in the way he governs.

He will dazzle people with his ability to make the right decision. Imagine, a political leader who shows wisdom and foresight in the way he governs!

I'm beginning to wonder if that might be the greatest miracle of all!

Many in the past had made promises that proved to be empty. But, this new King ... will make good on his promises.

Peace and prosperity and justice will just not be pipe dreams. They will be a reality.

So, how did King Hezekiah do in this regard?  
Not too bad given the circumstances.  
He did manage to keep the Assyrians at bay through his wise policies.

But, in the end Hezekiah was, like most politicians, a disappointment. He capitulated to the rising power of the Babylonians.

When you choose the lesser of two evils, it's still evil.  
He, in essence, made a deal with the devil.  
And of course things went downhill from there.

No matter how high our hopes for a new leader historical realities always seem to get in the way. Who could have predicted 911 or the various crises that seem to plague every presidency?

The best laid plans go astray for any leader.

## JESUS AS THE WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

And yet, the story of the Bible teaches us that God's plans do not go astray.

The Bible tells us that the "wisdom of the wise shall perish." (Isaiah 29:14; 1 Corinthians 1:19)

But, God's plans multiply and expand in ways we cannot imagine.

Isaiah thought that he was just writing a prophecy about King Hezekiah. But, the Word of God has a long shelf life.

The words of the prophet would be applied to a new King, a King who would be unlike any other the world had seen.

When political leaders disappoint, maybe it's time to forget about politics and politicians and take a different approach.

That's what King Jesus is all about.

His kingdom is not based not upon business as usual. His kingdom is not of this world.

And that's what makes him the Wonderful Counselor.

He will be the King who delivers on his promises.

Our Christmas carols make this is abundantly clear. Notice the words of the Christmas carols we will soon be singing.

They are filled with royal imagery. They are about the coming of a new king and a new kingdom.

The gospels are also filled with this royal imagery.

For example Mark begins his gospel with these words,

"The time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15)

The "kingdom of God" has come near.

The kingdom God was in Christ, and that meant people and things had to repent.

Repent means that everything and everyone needed to go in a different direction. And that was good news because things were not going so well in the ancient world.

In the Advent carol we speak of the “long expected” Jesus who comes to set his people free.

Jesus was born a King in a world that longed for new leadership.

Just as King Hezekiah faced a terrible threat from the Assyrian Empire, so when Jesus was born the people were under the domination of the Roman Empire.

The land was filled with a hostile military presence and was burdened by a crippling taxation. Their “king”, Herod collaborated with the enemy.

The people needed a new administration.

They needed a new King who would make the right decisions, a Wonderful Counselor who would take the government upon his shoulders.

The time was ripe for the prophecy of Isaiah to be fulfilled in a new and dramatic way.

And so Jesus stepped into that void.

He claimed the royal title.

What was it about Jesus that made him such a Wonderful Counselor?

WISE

Jesus was a Counselor because he was wise.

Quite often Jesus would say something that would absolutely astonish the people and they would ask,

“Where did this man get all this?

What is this wisdom that has been given to him?

What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mark 6:2)



There was a reason Jesus was so wise.  
God was in Christ.  
And so the wisdom of Jesus was literally out of this world.

According to Paul the wisdom of Jesus contradicted the foolishness of the world. (1 Corinthians 1:25,27)

He took on the power of Rome and the religious elite not with military might, but with a new way of thinking and acting. This astonishing and unexpected policy came from above.

He took on an oppressive government by humbling himself, taking up a cross and sacrificing his life for the world. This did indeed seem like an odd policy when most kings did whatever was necessary in order to stay in power.

But, when all was said and done, the Counselor, the wise One proved to be right.

In the end there was more power in his humility and sacrifice than all the armies that occupied the Promised Land.

And that's still true.

The people who follow Jesus, discover each day that his policies are indeed the wise ones.

His way is the way that lead to eternal life.

WONDERFUL

That leads us to the adjective applied to the Counselor ... Wonderful. The Hebrew word translated "wonderful" could also be translated "incomprehensible."

There are some people who are so smart that we can't begin to even understand them.

Stephen Hawking comes to mind.

Some of the best minds around cannot fully understand his theories. He's in a league by himself.

Jesus was like this, yet even more so.

The Scribes were some of the shrewdest and learned men of that era. But, Jesus exhibited a knowledge and an authority that went well beyond what they knew.

(Mark 1:22)

His teachings defied what most people believed to be true.

He talked about a kingdom where the golden rule (the idea that he who has the gold makes the rules) did not apply. Instead, all of his effort was devoted the least in society ... the children, the widows, the immigrants, those who mourn, and the poor.

Jesus talked about a kingdom where everything was turned on its head, and the impossible became possible.

He told a story about a Samaritan (a sworn enemy) acting in kind and compassionate ways.

He told a story about a Father who is is gracious toward his ungrateful sons.

And these were more than stories.

They were paradigms, models for the kingdom that was coming. They introduced a new way of thinking and a new way of life.

It was amazing.

It was mind blowing.

It was incomprehensible.

It was wonderful.

Wonderful Counselor.

## WONDERFUL ACTIONS

Of course, wonderful words were not enough.

If Jesus were to be accepted as the long expected king he would have to give a sign to the people.

So Jesus did wonderful things like feeding 5000 people with two small fish and five small loaves.

He healed the lame and the deaf.  
He even healed a man who had been blind from birth.

John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus with a pointed question,  
“Are you the one or should we expect someone else?”

And Jesus answered,  
“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”

In other words Jesus not only said what only God could say, but he also did what only God could do. He was the one.

## CONFLICT

And then Jesus told John’s disciples,  
“... blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

The words and actions of Jesus made it clear that there was a new king in town.  
And that meant the old king had to go.

The old king and his cronies definitely would take offense at Jesus.  
They would not go softly into the good night.

In word and deed Jesus did prove to be a Wonderful Counselor.

But, some did not like his policies.  
They took offense at him.  
And out of jealousy the empire will strike back.

The coming of the Messiah was always portrayed as a time of great conflict as well as a time of salvation.

For example, when Mary learned that she would bear God’s child, she began to sing, and part of her song was prophecy taken from the Old Testament,

“... he has scattered the proud in the thought of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:51-53)

The political and religious leaders knew the prophecies.

They knew that their authority was being challenged.  
And that’s why they looked for a way to kill Jesus.

But, for a long time they couldn’t do it.  
The people were spellbound by what Jesus said and did. (Luke 19:47-48)  
He was, after all, a Wonderful Counselor.

## FOLLOWING THE WONDERFUL COUNSELOR

That’s still true today.  
Jesus is still our Wonderful Counselor.

He challenges us to look at the world in a new way.  
And he challenges us to follow him.

This message is not for the faint of heart.

Jesus told those first followers that preaching his message would get them into trouble.  
And it might just get us into trouble too.

Think about it.  
If you preach today a message of loving enemies, forgiving deadbeats, and welcoming foreigners like long lost brothers and sisters into the country, do you think that might stir up a little controversy?

When we talk about Jesus being born a King, we mean it. And that means we follow the policies of King Jesus.

The “increase of his government” will not happen because Jesus’ imposes his will on the people by force.

Jesus isn’t that kind of King.

Instead, he's a Wonderful Counselor who wins over the people by what he says and what he does.

And according to the apostle Paul,  
"We are the body of Christ."

We get to be a part of this movement.  
We get to interrupt the foolish practice of business as usual.

We get to end all this foolishness, not because of who we are or what we can do  
... but because of who Jesus is and what He calls us to do in His Name.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit of God in Christ is in us.

We have heard the message.  
We have seen the miracle.  
We look forward to the kingdom that comes.  
We are empowered by the Spirit to carry out His policies.

Jesus challenges us to live every day with eternity in our hearts.

A new day is dawning.  
The kingdom comes.  
The birth of the Wonderful Counselor draws near.

Repent,  
turn from your old ways,  
and believe the good news.

Amen.