

“Everlasting Father”

December 11, 2016

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

Isaiah 9:2-6

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.

FATHER

On this third Sunday in Advent we consider the third name for the Messiah, Everlasting Father.

Most of us know that the Bible often refers to God as Father.

For example, Jesus begins his model prayer, the Lord's prayer with the words,
"Our Father ..."

We say that God is revealed in the Trinity:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

So, God is in some sense like a Father.

But, how can the Messiah also be like a Father?

In order to understand this title we once again need to consider how the word "Father" was used in the ancient world.

In that world the father was definitely in charge of the family.
The father had the most power and the most responsibility.

Some of us remember an old TV show called Father Knows Best.
Well, father really did know best in the ancient world.
(Or least everyone acted like he knew best!)

The father was all powerful, and he was to use that power for the protection and care of his family.

You can understand how this image was easily transferred to the king.
The king was like a Father to his subjects.

He had great power.
But that power came with great responsibility.
To whom much is given much is expected.

The prophet Isaiah envisioned a king who would be like a benevolent father.

They were bad shepherds who did not tend to their sheep. God's people were like lost sheep scattered over the face of the earth with no one to care for them. (See Ezekiel 34:2-6)

The kings failed because they did not do certain things.

They did not feed the sheep.

They did not strengthen the weak.

They did not heal the sick.

They did not bind up the injured and seek the lost.

Does that sound familiar to you? It should.

It's a very good summary of how Jesus described his ministry.

After this severe critique of Israel's kings, Ezekiel promises that God will do what their leaders have failed to do.

God will feed the sheep, strengthen the weak, heal the sick and seek the lost. God will bring an end to their injustice and replace it with His own Kingdom.

And what happened to those kings who did not live up to their high calling?

Their reign was dismissed by the biblical historians in just a few brief lines.

There was nothing "everlasting" about their rule.

They were a footnote in the history of God's people.

Then another king will take the throne with the hope that his reign will last longer and be greater.

Some kings were better than others. But, even the greatest King, King David ... a man after God's own heart ... as the Bible describes him ... was very flawed.

So, everyone was waiting for that king who would truly fulfill the promise.

They waited for the King who would embody the compassion and love and justice of the Creator.

They waited for the Kingdom of God to invade the kingdoms of this world

It never happened of course.

After all, no matter how much they lifted them up, kings were not really sons of God.

They were flawed human beings.

But, the people still dreamed about the day when the promise would be fulfilled.

They dreamed about the day when the True King would come, and He would live up to the name, "Everlasting Father".

LONGING FOR THE EVERLASTING FATHER

In our modern world some have talked about the limitations of this Father metaphor.

For example, if your father was not so loving and compassionate, the idea of God as Father might not seem so helpful.

Others have talked about the fact that this emphasis on Father language is, to some extent, the result of a male dominated, patriarchal society.

In other words, in the ancient world women were considered to be second class citizens. In many places this is still true.

This too can make the father metaphor less effective.

Calling God Father can make some people feel alienated from God.

(Although I would add that in a number of biblical passages the compassion of God is also compared to the love of a mother. But, of course even that image also has it's problems for those who did not have a very nurturing relationship with their mother!)

Suffice it to say that there are limitations to our use of metaphors in our description of God.

And in particular this is true in our use of the word, father.

How we think about the word father is deeply influenced by our experience.

Like the kings of ancient Israel, we who bear the title father or mother often have not lived up to that title. And our past is littered with anger and regret over families that did not live up to their calling and promise either.

But, maybe our failures should create in us a yearning for something more, something better.

Instead of blaming ourselves for our failures as fathers and mothers ...
 Instead of wishing that our earthly fathers and mothers had been more loving ...

Maybe we should look forward to that day when the Everlasting Father, the Messiah comes.

Despite many kings who did not live up to their calling, God's people did not quit looking for that Everlasting Father. The hope for a Messiah still burned bright.

Indeed, even today in many Passover meals a plate is set for Elijah, the one who it is said will come to prepare the way for the Messiah. After all these years God's people still long for the One who can be called Everlasting Father.

HELP IS ON THE WAY

And we must learn to cultivate that same kind of longing in our own heart.

The message of Advent, the coming of the Messiah is an aspirational message.

It leads us into the future with a word of hope.

One is coming who shows us what it means to truly Human.
 And One is coming who will show us what it means to be truly Divine.

Lets be honest.

We are not the people we should be.

Our leaders often fail us.

Our society is filled with flaws and inequities.

But, despite being disappointed time and time again, as Christians, we look forward to a better day. In our disappointment we still sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel".

We are captive to a world filled with greed and injustice. And we need to be rescued.

But, there's good news.
Help is on the way.

That's the message of Advent.
Help is on the way

We look forward to a child being born who will be unlike those who have come before.
We look forward to the coming of the One who can embody the compassion and justice of the Everlasting Father.

This hope was also voiced by the prophet Ezekiel.
He wrote,

"I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."

This prophecy is fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus.
Jesus is the Great Shepherd in the tradition of David.

But, Jesus is more than a Prince.
He is God in the flesh.
He is the true revelation of the Everlasting Father.

In the gospel of John Jesus says it plainly,
"The Father and I are one." (John 10:30)
And also, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14:6)

LITTLE ONES AND JESUS

What was it about Jesus that made him the true revelation of God?
How did Jesus reveal the work of the Father, the Great Shepherd?

The key to understanding this is found in God's special relationship with the vulnerable.

In Psalm 68 God is called the Father of orphans and widows. To put it another way, God adopts and protects those who have no other champion.

One of the most touching incidents in the New Testament occurs when the crowds bring their children to be blessed by Jesus. The disciples say, "Don't trouble Jesus with these little ones. They cry too much and make it hard to hear the sermon."

But, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me." (Luke 18:15-17)

Sometimes the best sermon is not preached but is demonstrated by how we treat the little ones.

Many of us can remember posters on our Sunday School classrooms depicting this scene.

That was important to us.

We learned that Jesus loved the little children.

As the song put it, Jesus loved "all the children of the world."

And, looking at the faces of the children on that poster we knew.

We were included in the family of faith.

Jesus loved us too.

As we got older and read the Bible in more depth, we learned that the Fatherly care of Jesus went beyond just his care for the little children.

He extended his love and care to all the "little ones" who were a part of his family.

You see, when you come right down to it, we are all little ones at heart.

No matter how old we are; we are all vulnerable and afraid.

And we all need the ministry of the Everlasting Father.

NO ORPHANS IN GOD'S KINGDOM

In John's gospel when Jesus told the disciples that he must soon leave them, the disciples were understandably upset.

So Jesus reassured the disciples with these words,

"I will not leave you orphaned ..."

Jesus was like a father to his disciples.

In fact Jesus even referred to the disciples as his “little children.” (John 13:33)

These little ones had left their family and jobs in order to follow him.

But, the death and resurrection of Jesus would not spell the end to his fatherly care.

The Spirit of God in Christ will be with the disciples.

And the Spirit will be their Father.

The Spirit will bring them together and keep them together. The Spirit will give them the knowledge they need to proclaim the gospel.

The Spirit will give them the courage and the power they need to preserve the family of faith in a time of great trial.

The Spirit will enable the disciples to love one another as Jesus first loved them.

The ministry of the Everlasting Father truly is everlasting because it is now accomplished through the work of Jesus’ Spirit empowered disciples.

As the kings of old were given the task of being a “shepherd” to God’s flock, so the disciples of Jesus were given that same job.

In order to get close to God the Father we have to get close to Jesus.

And in order to get close to Jesus we have to get close to the little ones who need our love.

Jesus told his disciples,

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Once again we see how Isaiah’s prophecy unfolds in new and greater ways.

The ministry of the Father truly is Everlasting.
It continues even today through the power of the Spirit working in the lives of God's people even today.

THE LONGING OF ADVENT

During Advent many think about the importance of family.

We may long for that perfect father or mother.
And sometimes this longing creates anxiety and deep sadness.

Even the best fathers and mothers do not last forever. (And some fathers and mothers were not all that great to begin with.)

The coming of Christmas can remind us in many ways that we are sinful, mortal creatures.

The sense of loss is hard to bear.

But, today's lesson invites us to look deeper.
Where do we find something that lasts forever?
What promise offers us hope not only for today but for a thousand tomorrows?

The answer is found in the birth of a child.
And this is not just any child.

This child will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. Those names are important.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A NAME

Did you ever wonder why we give our children a particular name?

Quite often those names can connect us with the past and also express our hopes for the future.

We named our daughter Carrie after a beloved aunt who died much too soon.

We wanted to honor her memory.

We named our son, Christopher which means "Christ bearer".

It expressed our desire for his future.

I am a “junior”.

My father’s name became my own.

Sometimes I look at his picture and see myself.

I remember all those things in him that were good and kind and faithful.

I hope that at least some of that continues in me.

Names are important.

They connect us to the past and express our hopes for the future.

And that’s why these names for the Messiah are important.

These names do the same thing.

They connect us with the mighty acts of God in the past.

And they shape our expectations for the future.

PUT CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS

Every year we see the bumper sticker.

“Put Christ in Christmas.”

It’s become a cliché, but we know why someone just has to bring it out each year.

The commercialization of the Christmas season has reached new heights. Indeed, for some it’s politically incorrect to even say that it’s the Christmas season.

It’s the holiday season.

But, if we’re going to put Christ in Christmas, we need to make sure that it is the real Christ and not some plastic version.

You know what I’m talking about.

The plastic Jesus is the one that we put on our lawn alongside Micky Mouse and reindeer shaped lights. Those lights that scare the dog as their heads turn mysteriously from side to side.

I don't recognize that plastic Jesus.

My theology professor said that the worst thing that we can do is trivialize the gospel. Each year at Christmas the world tries it's best to do just that.

These names for the Messiah prevent us from doing that. The One who comes is more than the world expects.

The One who comes is the light that shines in our darkness.
The One who comes is the Everlasting Father.
The One who comes is the Maker of heaven and earth ... come to earth.

In fact, if you want to be technical about it ...
We don't put Christ in Christmas.
Christ puts Christmas in us.

Christ brings the joy of the Everlasting Father to us.

In our lesson for today Isaiah talked about a deep down and unexpected "joy."

It would be like the joy at harvest time ... only greater.

It would be like the joy when the battle was won ... only greater.

When the Messiah comes, the joy of God's salvation will be restored.

The world will change.
We will change.

You see, in the final analysis, its not so much about what we can do.

It's about what God can do.

New birth is beyond our ability.

But, for the One who is called the Everlasting Father, nothing is impossible.

This is the third Sunday of Advent.

The unexpected joy of God's salvation is coming.

Don't be afraid little children.

Help is on the way.

He's called the Everlasting Father.

Amen.