

Saturday, December 24, 2022

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1351762092318764>

(Sermon begins at about 31:10)

“Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”

Among my most prize possessions are a number of cross-stitch pieces done by my mother. She went through a period of prolific cross-stitching. For a number of years, we could count on receiving at least a couple of pieces each year as birthday and Christmas gifts. For me, Mom primarily did pieces with Native American or Christian themes. While they are all very dear to me because they were lovingly prepared by her just for me, one of my all-time favorites hangs in my study at home. It hangs on the wall opposite my desk, so that when I look up from my work, it's right there. It contains a portion of tonight's reading from the Prophet Isaiah, although in the King James Version as opposed to the New Revised Standard Version we heard this evening: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end" (Is 2.6-7a).

The image is about a foot tall and a foot and a half wide, with the words of the basic text forming a border for the primary composition, which are the various descriptors for the child given to us. There in the center, interspersed with images such as a manger, a cross, a shepherd's crook, a grapevine, and a crown, in large, colorful text are Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. An ever-present reminder of the One we follow. An ever-present reminder of the One whose birth we celebrate this night. The One who was born into a world 2,000 years, at a time when these very qualities were so needed. Qualities that we continue to need manifest in our world today.

Looking back at human history, we see various times when the world yearned for someone who had the qualities, who would fulfill the role, described by Isaiah. In fact, Isaiah's oracle on this matter was not even originally thought to be about a messianic figure, let alone about Jesus. Probably written in the eighth century BC, this oracle was Isaiah's vision of an ideal king, at a time when the monarchs of Judah were becoming increasingly corrupt. At a time when the nation of Israel had fallen to the Assyrian Empire and the nation of Judah was threatened. In those tumultuous and uncertain times, there was a yearning for an ideal king, in the model of King David, who would restore the nation and the people to the righteous path as God's Chosen People. Such a king seemed to appear in the form of Hezekiah, with Isaiah's words likely written as a celebration of Hezekiah's coronation.

Over time—particularly with the eventual fall of Judah to the Babylonian Empire—this vision of what makes for an ideal king would come to be attributed to an anticipated messianic figure who would eventually come on the scene. God's anointed one who would liberate the people

and make all things new. This was a very specific vision of a messiah for a very specific people. An image of messiah that continued on even to the time when Jesus was born. A time of continued occupation and oppression, only now under the Roman Empire. A time when the Jewish religious and cultural identity was threatened. In those tumultuous and uncertain times, the people once again yearned for a messiah who would liberate them. A messiah who fit the qualities of the one foretold by Isaiah for his own time 700 years before. But as we know, even that was too limited a vision. God had a far more expansive idea of messiah. God had a far more expansive and radical idea of how to provide a messiah. Not a human king who would be the anointed one. No, God would come among us in the flesh, in the form of his only begotten Son, to be THE Messiah.

Following Jesus' death and resurrection, the world came to recognize him not merely as a messiah for the Jewish people. No, it became increasingly obvious that he was the Messiah for the entire world, for ALL people. Isaiah's vision of a messianic figure, along with other attributes identified elsewhere in Isaiah's oracles eventually came together in the Christian era, shedding even more light on just who this Messiah truly is. In light of this new revelation, we are able to look back and see how what Isaiah had prophesied—like so many prophecies—had multiple layers. Not only serving as a vision for an ideal king as attributed to Hezekiah, but also a foretelling of the ultimate ideal king, the Messiah. The One we celebrate as being born this night. That in the Christian era, these same descriptors—Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—would become central to the Christian understanding of Jesus as the Messiah.

While Isaiah's oracles contain no further explanation of exactly what these attributes—what these descriptors—precisely mean, we nonetheless recognize that they apply to Jesus Christ as the Messiah. The One who, as Son of God, is indeed Wonderful—that we are filled with wonder at what he can and does accomplish. The One who through his teachings and ministry was indeed Counselor, guiding us into the fullness of who God created us to be. The One who, by virtue of being the Son of God, of being God in the flesh, is indeed Mighty God—accomplishing things beyond our imaginings or understanding. The One who loves us as the ideal father loves his children is indeed Everlasting Father. The One born into a time and place of political and military oppression, bringing a vision and message of liberation is indeed the Prince of Peace.

Fast forward to our own time. A time, while not exactly like that of Hezekiah, while not exactly like that of the Roman occupation, is, nonetheless, a time fraught with political, social, even religious upheaval. A time of uncertainty in so many ways. We are still in the midst of a global pandemic. Better than it was the last few years, but a pandemic nonetheless, threatening the most vulnerable among us. We are dealing with a major war in Ukraine and the uncertainties as to what that means for the rest of the world, particularly with threats of escalation. We are dealing with the economic uncertainties that are largely a byproduct of the pandemic and the war. We are dealing with increasingly volatile weather conditions resulting from climate change. We continue to face political uncertainty in our own nation and other nations around the world. We face social upheavals as we struggle with changing understandings of who we are as human beings and what that means for civil and human rights. We are dealing with uncertainties in our religious life, with the decline in membership and participation among mainline denominations. These are just the major items. There are other issues in our society

that bring some semblance of uncertainty or concern. And then we each have our own personal concerns, be they family, work, health, finances, relationships. All this coming together resulting in collective and personal uncertainty and dis-ease. For which we yearn for One who can and will turn things around and make things right. Just like the people of eighth century BC Judah. Just like the people of first century Israel.

Of course, God has heard our cries and has provided a means to fill our yearnings. The One whose birth we celebrate this night. The One who came into the world to help ease those things that are of greatest concern to us in our individual and collective lives. The One who is Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Wonderful in that he still, 2,000 years later, fills us with wonder at what he can and does accomplish in our lives. Counselor, providing a source of guidance and comfort as we navigate the uncertainties of our lives. Mighty God who is our source of strength as we face and take on the challenges the world throws at us. Everlasting Father who is an ongoing source of unlimited love and support. Prince of Peace who continues to show us that there is a way better than hatred, fear, animosity, and violence.

While we recognize the words of Isaiah's vision as being applicable to Jesus as our Messiah, the specific descriptors sometimes get lost in the holiday shuffle. They make an annual appearance in the Old Testament reading for Christmas Eve. They are featured prominently in the "Halleluia Chorus" in Handel's *Messiah*. But otherwise, they tend to be mostly in the background, lost in the shuffle of life. Perhaps one of the best gifts we can give ourselves in this time filled with uncertainty is to hold on to the ancient and yet timeless vision gifted to us by the Prophet Isaiah of the Messiah who fulfills our yearnings. The vision whose fulfillment was heralded by an angel: "to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." The child who has been born for us, who has been given to us and to the whole world. The One who is named Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Merry Christmas!