

Wonderful Counsellor

Isa 9:6

Call: Psalm 33:18-22 (NIV)

Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7 (ESV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

Good Morning! Isaiah 9:6: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given.”* Those are familiar words aren’t they? Thanks to George Fredric Handel and his “Messiah” oratorio, nearly everyone has heard those words. Although for me, I think it was Charlie Brown.

As Bernard said, *“What Child Is This?”* is the title of our Advent series this year. And, we will focus on verse 6, and the four titles given to this child:

1. Wonderful Counselor
2. Mighty God
3. Everlasting Father
4. Prince of Peace

Extraordinary names for a child, aren’t they? I wonder what Isaiah thought when he wrote those names for a child?

So, today is Wonderful Counselor. So, where do you go for wonderful counsel? Where do you go for wise counsel today? Youth – it’s good to have you with us today. Where do you go for wisdom on how to live life in the real world as a teenager? College students – it’s great to have you home from college this week. Where do you go for wisdom on how to live life in the real world as a college student? To the rest of you – where do you go for wisdom on how to live life in the real world? Our lives here in the west are quite complicated, aren’t they? We lead busy, fragmented, difficult lives, moving to and fro at a breakneck pace trying to get our to-do lists done. Then, we end up each night laying in bed exhausted, only to wake up and repeat it all again the next day, like the movie *Groundhog Day*. And, the Advent/Christmas season only adds to the complications, doesn’t it? Then, at some point in our lives in this real world, things fall apart. At some point in life, we enter darkness and gloom, don’t we? You may be here today in the midst of darkness and gloom. So especially when that happens, where do you go for wisdom? When things begin to unravel for you, where do you go for direction and discernment?

As we will see today, the prophet Isaiah, living some 2800 years ago, has some thoughts of his own for where true wisdom is found. Let’s pray.

B. Prayer

Lord God, as we come to your Word today, will you illuminate our mind, rekindle our hearts and strengthen our wills through your Spirit. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

C. Historical Context

So, we're spending the next four weeks in Isaiah, an Old Testament prophet. And, whenever we read a text from a prophet, we need to remember that the words are first spoken to a particular people, in a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular purpose. In particular, Isaiah was speaking to a people who were living in the real world and were very anxious. No, actually, he was speaking to a people who were not only anxious, they were very afraid. Their world was falling apart! Their world was unraveling at a breakneck pace.

It was the 8th century BC. Assyria was the dominant political and military power in the Middle East, and they were known to be absolutely ruthless. No one wanted to fall into their hands. But they were slowly gobbling up all the smaller, less-powerful nations around them. Around 732 BC, the King of Assyria, Tiglath-Pileser III – we'll call him Tiggy for short – captured Syria. And, by 722 BC, Tiggy had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and was perched at the border of Judah. The people of Judah could hear the boots of trampling soldiers. Darkness was descending all around. Gloom was rising all around.

Put yourself in the shoes of those people of Judah. A super power sits at your border, ready to invade and destroy. You and your family are terribly afraid. But, in the midst of it, God speaks a word of hope. Have hope, he says. And, why?

- Because of the power of their own army? No.
- Because another army will come and rescue them? No.
- Because Judah has great intelligence and skill? No.

God says, have hope... because of a child! The foundation of your hope is the birth of a child! Wait, what?

D. This Child Historically

The question is then who is this child? Who is this Son? Around the time Isaiah prophesied, the wife of King Ahaz of Judah gave birth to a son named Hezekiah. Was Hezekiah this special child on which this hope rested? He turned out to be a good and Godly king. But he hardly ushered in the light and joy, the freedom and peace Isaiah foresaw in chapter 9. After Hezekiah, then came Josiah, also a really good king. Was he this special child? He did bring about tremendous ethical and economic reform. Yet he hardly ushered in the kind of light and joy and freedom and peace envisioned in Isaiah 9. Who then is this child? Unless this child is born, the promises foretold in chapter 9 cannot be realized. Hope will not be realized. None of the kings after Josiah even came close. How could they? Look at those names again. How could any mere mortal ever live up to them? Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. How could any mere human possibly embody all that those names imply, let alone a helpless child?

Now, any time a child is born lifts our spirit. The miracle of birth does something for us, doesn't it? Isaiah is, however, obviously speaking here of a special unique birth. *"A child will be born, a son will be given"*. Note the verbs: *"born...given."* "Born" suggests the child's real humanity.

This child will be flesh and blood like you and me. “Given” obviously suggests a gift. Isaiah saw a gift, a special and unique gift. Isaiah went out under his Christmas Tree 2800 years ago and carefully unwrapped a box – and out came a person! Well, not quite. But, he saw a child born, a son given, and his name was called “*Wonderful Counselor.*” And, that would be where hope would be found in the midst of darkness, gloom and oppression.

II. The Wonderful Counselor Foretold

A. Wonderful

So what does Wonderful Counselor mean? In the Hebrew it is two words. “Wonderful” is a word Isaiah uses in other places ... but only of God! It means “marvelous, exceptional, even incomprehensible and glorious.” It describes something that people wouldn’t normally expect, something “supernatural, something that can only be explained by God.”

The first time this word is used in the Old Testament, it is used of the birth of Isaac to a 90-year-old previously barren woman named Sarah (Gen 18:14). That is quite marvelous and supernatural. Later it is used of the power that God exhibited in the Exodus from Egypt, the signs and wonders that only God could do to lead the Israelites to freedom from slavery. Here, the child to be born is wonderful, an incomprehensible, supernatural wonder.

And, this child will be a counselor, a “child counselor?”

B. Counselor

A counselor is one to whom to turn for wisdom. Someone who embodies uprightness, discernment and truth. But Isaiah promises something even better. He promises that this child will be a *wonderful* counselor implying this child will not only embody uprightness, discernment and truth, but will also lead people into the counsel of the Living God. Isaiah implies that this child will know God so thoroughly and intimately, he will counsel people in God’s wonderful plans and God’s wonderful ways. In other words, this child will bring the wisdom of God with him.

C. Wisdom

What is wisdom? In general terms, wisdom is the ability to navigate life well and avoid the normal pitfalls which accompany life in the real world. In some ways, this is what we are always doing, isn’t it? From the time we are born, we are forming a wisdom system that includes ways of thinking about our identity, the meaning and purpose of life, what relationships are all about, where happiness is to be found, who God is, what’s right and wrong, and a bunch of other things. We are all trying to make sense of our existence so that we can navigate life well in the real world. That’s wisdom.

Scripture, though, defines wisdom a little differently. Many years before Isaiah, the writer of Proverbs summarized wisdom in one phrase: “the fear of the Lord.” “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (Prov 9:10). Indeed, in a few chapters, in chapter 11, Isaiah will say that this particular child who will be born, who will be given, will “*delight in the fear of the Lord*” (Isa 11:2-3). He will be a wonderfully, wise counselor.

Now, don't get confused about this kind of fear. This fear is not the fear that makes us run away and hide. This fear is more like awe, but even that doesn't quite get at it. This fear, the fear of the Lord, is a fear that trusts and is in sync with the basic order of things as God has created them.

D. Who is Truly Wise?

In Isaiah's time, "Who is truly wise?" was the question on everyone's minds. "Who is truly wise? Who really knows best how to live life in the real world?" The ancient Israelites answered that question with, "We do! We know what's best." And, they simply did what was right in their own eyes. In chapter 8, Isaiah says they were even consulting the dead through mediums to learn how about life (instead of consulting God). Each person decided for themselves what was their truth, what was their wisdom. And, it plunged them into darkness and destruction.

E. Where Do We Go?

So, how do we answer that question today? Who is truly wise? Where do we typically go to find wisdom for life in the real world today?

1. Some people go to the internet. Crowd-sourced wisdom seems to be a common place to go. Someone asks a question about life, either hypothetically or from an experience, then seeks the crowd's insight on what is truly wise? The majority of votes is generally considered the wise way.
2. For others, the way of wisdom is thought to be found in knowing a lot of information. We are the most technologically advanced society ever. With telescopes, we can peer into deep space and see far away galaxies. With microscopes, we can see the basic building blocks of matter. And, after thousands of years of human experience, we now understand the basic foundations of life and can determine the intricacies that bring about human life. And, yet, when I watch the news, I see that we still struggle with how to live life well. We know so much about life in the real world, but it doesn't appear we know how to live it well.
3. For others, the way of wisdom is found in self-help books. I know best how to live life, and I just need to help myself get there.
4. For others, the way of wisdom just has to be the new ideas and philosophies that people are putting out there. If it's new, it has to be wise, right?

But, true wisdom cannot be found in the knowledge, goodness or reason of humankind. Wisdom cannot be found in science or self-help books or new ideas or new philosophies.

Who is truly wise? Who knows best how to live life in the real world? Isaiah has an answer for us. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor."*

III. The Wonderful Counselor Comes

A. Introduction

Years passed. Decades passed. Centuries passed. Then it happened. In Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Caesar Augustus thought he ruled the world. When he thought the government rested on his shoulders. In a village under occupation by foreign troops. The night sky was filled with the angelic army singing *"Glory to God in the Highest"* (Luke 2:9-11). Why?

Because the child was born. The wonderful counselor had been born! Finally! The child had been born. The son had been given!

And what a scene it was! It was a "marvelous, exceptional, even incomprehensible scene." A scene that could only be attributed to God! For, a virgin had given birth! Wonderful! A star appeared in the heavens announcing his birth! Wonderful! According to an angel, this child will save his people from their sins! Wonderful! Surrounded by wise men, noble pilgrims from the East, who were honoring this child as a king! Wonderful!

Yet, take a step back. A helpless child, unable to feed himself, lying in a cattle trough, born into this evil world, at the mercy of sinners? Is this really wonderful, we ask? Is this really wisdom?

B. The Way of Wisdom

Yet, as this child grows up, he grows in the *wisdom* of the Lord (Lk 2:52). In one of his first sermons, he quotes from Isaiah 61:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).*

That good news sounds very similar to Isaiah 9, doesn't it? For those in darkness, there is light. For those under the yoke of oppression, there is liberty. For those struggling with bondage, there is freedom! Wonderful!

He then spends three years accomplishing those words, bringing this good news of God to all. He lived in the thick of life, and showed us how to make life work in the real world. Primarily he loved with abandon, he showed mercy with abandon, he showed compassion with abandon. And, in his speech, he truly was a wonderful counselor, full of wisdom and insight and truth (e.g., Luke 2:52; Mark 6:2; Matt 11:28).

But, in the end, he gets crucified on a Roman cross. We don't like to think of the cross during the Advent time, but the cross is already in view at the manger. This is the hidden message of the manger, that there is a cross looming. And, at that cross, everyone asked, as Israel of old asked, "Is this true wisdom? Is this really in harmony with God's purposes? Is his way really the best way to live life in the real world?"

C. Paul's Explanation

Twenty years later, Paul reflects on the cross and says this:

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

... For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men... so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18-19, 25; 2:5; Isa 29:14).

D. The Way of Wisdom

In other words, Jesus and his way are wise. This way *is* wonderful counsel. This *is* wisdom and understanding. Jesus and his way reveal the power of God. But, it's a different kind of power, for this is the power of humility, self-negation and self-giving love, all things we've talked about this fall in the Gospel of John. Even though it's foolishness to us, the cross is *the* beacon of wisdom, of wonderful counsel. Yet, how do we really know that this is wonderful counsel?

E. The Resurrection

Because the cross isn't the end of the story. Three days later, wonder of wonders, Jesus is resurrected! Wonderful! And, this wonder confirms his way as the wise way and confirms Jesus as the wonderful counselor. He even says it while standing with his disciples in his resurrected body, and I said this last week but our youth weren't with us, so I'll say it again. After being resurrected, Jesus stands with his disciples in a resurrected body and says, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"* (Matt 28:19). What he is saying is his resurrection confirms that his way of life is true wisdom. Because of his resurrection, he really does have the last word in every sphere of human existence – in the private and the public, in the moral, the scientific, the economic, the sexual, the political, the legal, the medical, in business, in entertainment, in sports – in every area of our life in the real world. He has the last word on all of it. He really is the wonderful counselor from Isaiah.

F. He's Coming Back Again

But, there's more. If he's alive, he can come back again! And he says he will come back again to set all things right. As Bernard said, that's another great theme of Advent, the looking forward to the 2nd coming. As Kelley sang earlier, when he returns, he will make life in the real world a life "without tears, without pain, without sorrow and without shame." At some point in the future, life will never again unravel. Life will never again fall apart because of this Wonderful Counselor.

And, it all began with a child born and a son given. Those two verbs. It all began with the gift of a child that Isaiah saw 2800 years ago.

IV. Implications

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... And His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor."

So, what does it mean for us today, 2800 years later?

1. **Get to know this child:** You'll want to get to know this child. You'll want to make space in this Advent season to get to know this child. On our website are Advent readings, which Bernard mentioned earlier. Read them. Even more, read the Gospels. Get to know this wonderful counselor and be filled with wonder. And, when you do, you'll find wonderful counsel. You'll find true wisdom.
2. **True Wisdom:** Get to know this child, and you'll find true wisdom. Who is truly wise? Who knows best how to live life in the real world? This child who has been born and given, for he is the wonderful counselor. Wisdom is not found in a rule book or a self-help guide or a new philosophical system. Wisdom is found in a person. He is the great gift of this season, given to every one of us.
3. **True Hope:** Get to know this child, and you'll find true hope. Is your world falling apart? Is your world unraveling? This child brings hope. Nothing can save us that is possible. The only thing that can save us is wonderful, something only of God. All those promises from chapter 9 surrounding the child are now realized because of this child:
The people in darkness have seen a great light... There will no longer be gloom... The yokes of oppression are broken... Get to know this child and you'll find true hope.
 - **Hope to move from darkness to light:** Because this child is born, darkness does not have the last word. This child, this wonderful counselor, the light of the world, shines into the darkness and conquers the darkness. Jesus, the light of the world, breaks the spell of darkness in our lives. He shines into our darkness and makes a way through it.
 - **Hope to move from gloom to glory:** Because the child is born, sorrow and gloom do not have the last word. Jesus can lift the heaviness of disappointment and despair. His presence pushes away the weight of gloom. I know for many people this time of year is a very difficult time...filled with sorrow and sadness. I encourage you to do what the text calls us to do: look not at the disappointments... look not at the broken expectations...look not at all the needs...look not at the losses. Rather, look at the child. Keep your eyes fixed on this child, because when we see him in the picture, then he can break through the gloom.
 - **Hope to move from oppression to freedom:** Because the child is born, oppression – whether it be political, economic, emotional, or spiritual – does not have the last word. Jesus, the wonderful counselor, shatters the yokes! Is not our time a time of terrible oppression? The west is being held captive... not to a superpower like Assyria, but to a superpower named “addiction”? Isn't that what is happening all around us today, whether it be alcohol, harder drugs, pornography, money, you name it! But, because the child is born, oppression does not have the last word. Because the son is given, there is hope for freedom from addiction. Jesus, the stronger-than-any- superpower, can break the yoke of all of it! Jesus the wonderful counselor can even free us from terrifying memories, crippling guilt, bitterness, self-pity, poor self- esteem. He comes to break the yokes and set the captives free!

And, the ultimate hope is that there is a day coming when all of that darkness and gloom and oppression will be done away with for good. As someone has said, we don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future!

V. Conclusion

So, get to know this child this Advent season, and you will find true wisdom and true hope. He is the truly wise one. He is the wonderful counselor.

VI. Reflection

At this point, let's close with a time of reflection. I'll invite the worship team up here to sing for us as we reflect. As we enter this Advent season, let's take some time to reflect. As the team plays, I invite you to name any darkness, any sorrow, any bondage, any strife, in you or around you. What is out there on the border of your life, threatening to unravel you? I invite you to then open up those places... and welcome Jesus in, welcome in this child. Invite Him in as light in your darkness.

And, something will happen. Maybe not in this instant, maybe not today, but keep getting to know this child and something will happen, For Isaiah said, *"The zeal of the Lord will accomplish this"* (Isa 9:7). The zeal of the Lord, the passion of the Lord, is to overcome all the darkness, gloom and oppression.

Let's spend some time reflecting as the worship team plays.
Amen.

Benediction

As you leave here, may the Almighty God give you grace to cast away the works of darkness, gloom and oppression, and put on the armor of light, in this time in which Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility, so that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, you may rise to life immortal, through him who lives and reigns with God and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

(Adapted from Thomas Cranmer's Collect for the first Sunday of Advent)