

Guess Who's Coming at Christmas?
Wonderful Counselor. Isaiah 9:2-7. Luke 2:1-7

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²The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ³You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder. ⁴For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. ⁵Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire. ⁶For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"...William Shakespeare.

Really? What do you think? If a "rose" was called a "skunk cabbage" would it smell as sweet?

What is in a name?

Names are important. Names reflect our identity; they tell us something about who we are. In high school I had two female classmates with holiday themed names:

Kandace Kane (yep, Kandy!!) she was really sweet!

And Merry Kristmas. No kidding! You probably know someone with an interesting name. Some names can be unremarkable. "Jane Brown" or "Bob Smith".

An Anglican bishop and his wife named their daughters Faith, Hope and Charity. That's a lot to live up to, isn't it?

What is the origin of your name? Were you named after someone in particular? What influence has your name had on you? (Turn and talk)

British Royalty in recent years have been in the spotlight more so than usual since the two princes have both married and produced new additions to the Royal family. Babies have been born and one more is on the way!

When Kate and William became parents, there were bookmakers taking bets on not only the sex of the babies but the names of their offspring.

Did you know that while Prince William and Prince Harry each have four names, the Cambridge's (William and Kate) have mercifully opted to give their children just three? Good choice!

Prince George Alexander Louis is named for the Queen's father, who reigned as King George VI. Alexander is said to be a tribute to the Queen herself, whose full name is Elizabeth Alexandra Mary. Louis comes from his father's name, William Arthur Philip Louis, and is seen as a nod to Lord Louis Mountbatten, uncle of Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

Princess Charlotte's full name – Charlotte Elizabeth Diana – was received as a tribute to both of William's parents, Charles and Diana, as well as to the Queen.

Now, you know you're in trouble when Mom (or dad, or nanny) calls you by your first, middle and last name! Or all first, second and third names!! Imagine the royal tongue twister when one of the little tykes get in trouble: George Alexander Louis, or Charlotte Elizabeth Diana!

During Advent we are going to focus on the names of the Messiah found in Isaiah 9:6 and made famous by Handel in his epic oratorio, The Messiah.

Biblically, naming is an act of power and significance. Naming is the first "job" or vocation given to Adam in the creation story. It was his job to name all the animals! Furthermore, **names** in the Bible **carry significance and meaning--not only names of people, but names of places as well.**

In order to fully appreciate this passage in Isaiah, we need to understand the context from which it comes. Isaiah is a prophet. He lived approximately 8 centuries before Christ. His career as a prophet—functioning as God's messenger to the king and the people--spanned the tenure of four different kings of Judah over a period of approximately 60 years.

(He served under Kings Uzziah (or Azariah), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It is an educated guess that Isaiah must have begun his ministry during the reign of Uzziah, approximately in the 740s BCE. Isaiah lived until the fourteenth year of Hezekiah's reign (who died 698 BCE).

During that time, the political situation was quite precarious. The people faced foreign invasion and domination, with a little "fearful gloom" and "utter darkness" sprinkled in (Isaiah 8:22). The situation was dire. The king faced difficult decisions. He chose to make alliances that would ultimately prove harmful to the welfare of Judah.

This oracle of Isaiah 9:2-7 anticipates a new regime of peace and prosperity in Jerusalem, a season of "great light" that is contrasted with the "darkness" of imperial exploitation under the Assyrian empire. It anticipates that the coming king will release Judah from that oppression, ushering in a new reign of "endless peace" with "justice and righteousness" forever (v.7).

This part, v.2-5, Handel did **not** set to music:

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The prophet foresees a time when oppression and domination will finally end, a time when peace and prosperity will result in great rejoicing!

This is followed with a royal birth announcement (v.6-7)! A baby is going to be born into the royal family! However, it is not into the House of Windsor, nor is it into the house of King David--at least not yet. Isaiah is likely making reference to the birth of a son to King Ahaz--that would be his boy Hezekiah.

In actuality, as king, Hezekiah did enact some remarkable policies, however he capitulated to the rising power of Babylon (Ch. 39) and such high expectations were never completely realized under his rule.

Made memorable by Handel's Messiah, four extravagant royal titles or "names" are assigned to the new king (v.6). The first of these is Wonderful Counselor or Counselor of Wonders. (Handel mistakenly placed a comma between the two, which is not there in the Hebrew.) Wonderful is the modifier of Counselor. **Wonderful--amazing, astonishing, awesome - is this one whom God will send. We shall be filled with wonder at this gift, this Son, this Messiah!**

In this context, "counselor" is indicative of one who exercises governance. That is to say, one with wisdom and the capacity to plan, administer and carry out policies that would, in this case, benefit all the citizens of the realm. There are occasions today when lawyers are called 'counselors'. (So when you hear that word in this context, it does not refer to a therapist!)

Fast forward to the NT church, eager to bear witness to Christ. It would be natural for them--and later for Handel--to connect these royal titles to the hoped for Messiah and the OT expectations surrounding the "anointed one".

Jesus entered human history during a time when Israel was, yet again, under the coercive rule, this time of the Romans. Luke tells us (2:1-3) that, in order to satisfy the emperor's desire to levy taxes, a census was needed; and that determined the birthplace of Jesus. The Roman emperor has influence on the birthplace of the Son of God!

If Jesus is indeed a king, one deserving of these royal titles, in what way will he interface with the rule of the Roman Empire?

What kind of King will Jesus be?

How will he oppose the royal power of Rome?

How will Jesus live into this name "Wonderful Counselor"?

What I know, and know for sure, is that the world in which Isaiah lived, the world in which Jesus lived, and the one in which you and I live—is in desperate need of such a “wonderful counselor”—a leader who will guide and rule with wisdom, with justice and righteousness. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?!

In her book on prayer (Help, Thanks, Wow), Anne Lamott says there are three basic, simple prayers: Help. Thanks. Wow.

"Wow is often offered with a gasp, a sharp intake of breath, when we can't think of another way to capture the sight of shocking beauty or destruction, of a sudden unbidden sight or an unexpected flash of grace.

'Wow' means we are *not* dulled to wonder. We click into being fully present when we're stunned into that gasp...

'Wow' is about having one's mind blown by the mesmerizing or miraculous." (p.71)

'Wow' because you are almost speechless, but not quite.

You can manage, barely, this one syllable.

When we are stunned to the place beyond words...Wow! That's a prayer." (p.73)

If we pay attention **we will notice that Isaiah uses the past tense, as though these events have already happened, when they have not.** Yet from the perspective of God and God's prophet, it's as good as done. That is the level of confidence that Israel has in response to this prophetic word.

What the prophet Isaiah could see only in the shadows, we can see in full color. This child who is born, is none other than “God with skin on”, Immanuel, “God with us”. Wow!

Jesus is God's wonderful counselor--the embodiment of God's saving plan for the world, the kind of plan that elicits a “wow-worthy” response.

It is probably impossible for us to truly wrap our minds around the reality of the incarnation—that. God, loving us beyond our imagining--decided to redeem the world by sending his Son:

--uniting divinity and humanity,

--the infinite taking on the finite, **WOW!**

--the most powerful, becoming the most vulnerable,

all wrapped up in the flesh of a humble, human infant. **WOW!**

One who would ultimately die, forsaken, on the cross, only to rise again to new life!! **WOW!!**

A labor and delivery nurse who has attended hundreds of births, once told me that she loves her job because--every birth is a miracle--full of awe and wonder. **WOW!**

As we move through this Advent season, may we experience the “wow-worthy” presence of the Wonderful Counselor whom God has sent, and who promises to return. **WOW!**

Guess who’s coming for Christmas?! Wonderful Counselor!

What a wonder He shall be! Thanks be to God!

[Pray]