

Guess Who's Coming for Christmas:
Everlasting Father
Isaiah 9:2-7

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INTRODUCTION:

The Bible was written in an era and culture which was clearly patriarchal. While we believe it to be the inspired Word of God, it was written by real people in a real time and places. They, like we, have been influenced by their culture in inescapable ways. In addition, we know and understand that language has its limitations. For instance, in describing God: We believe God is "personal" and yet we would also say that God transcends sexuality. In other words, while God is neither male nor female, yet in the English language God is predominantly referred to with male pronouns.

Today the focus is on the imagery of the name of the Messiah as "Everlasting Father". This can be problematic. For instance, early on in my ministry a woman approached me and said: "I have a hard time praying the Lord's Prayer. My own father was abusive toward me, so I can hardly choke out those words, "Our Father".

Thankfully there are other images and names of God in the scriptures which speak to the maternal aspects of God's character, as when Jesus says of Jerusalem "how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Luke 13:34). As noted last week, God's character is multidimensional, much like different facets of a diamond, and this is reflected in biblical language about God.

Keep this in mind as I read from Isaiah 9:2-7.

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 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.

[Pray]

The father-son relationship is unique. Here are a few imagined comments of fathers to their famous sons.

- Michelangelo's Father: Mike, can't you paint on walls like other kids? Do you have any idea how hard it is to get that stuff off the ceiling?
- Napoleon's Father: All right, Napoleon. If you aren't hiding your report card inside your jacket, then what are you hiding??
- Albert Einstein's Father: But, Albert, it's your senior picture. Can't you do something with your hair? Styling gel, mousse, something...?
- Thomas Edison's Father: Of course I'm proud that you invented the electric light bulb, Thomas. Now turn off that light and go to sleep!

On the occasion of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, Luke tells us that "heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, [whom] I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-23 NIV)

In a patriarchal culture the father is the head of family, clan or tribe. As such he has the greatest responsibility and the greatest power and influence over those under his care. In a similar way, the King is charged with the fatherly care of his subjects. So it is not surprising that fatherly imagery in this setting is a compelling way to speak of God. Second, it is not surprising that these fatherly tasks of God are assigned to the King. And Thirdly, it is not surprising that this language is connected to Jesus, however awkward, since the "Son" is not the "Father". (p.34, W. Brueggeman)

Isaiah prophesies about the promised Messiah named "Everlasting Father". "Everlasting" signifies steadfastness over time—one who exercises forbearance and persistence, a constancy or consistency that characterizes this One of whom Isaiah speaks.

“Everlasting Father” seems incongruous when applied as a name to Jesus. But you’re familiar with the saying: “Like father, like son”. Or another, “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”. In other words, who we are is due in large part not only to our genetic makeup, but due to the character and personality of our parents who have an immense impact on us. If this is true of us, it is true of Jesus and his Father too.

What does the scripture tell us about God the Father?

We read in Psalm 103:8-12

⁸The LORD is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love. ⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; ¹⁰he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; ¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

These verses demonstrate at least four characteristics of not only a good father but also a good mother—a good parent. And if well parented, the offspring will grow to express similar characteristics as one’s parents.

God loves us, sinners that we are. Parents love their children, even when they make mistakes and poor decisions. Here we see that God has a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin and a big heart!

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.”

(v.8) The context of this verse is drawn from an episode in the history of Israel, recorded in Exodus 24. Moses had been gone awhile up on Mt. Sinai, getting instructions from God. When he descended back down the mountain, he discovered the people of Israel worshipping a Golden Calf that Aaron had made. It was an affront—an abomination. God was not just offended; God was ready to give up on them and start over with another people. But Moses prevailed upon God to give them another chance. This is just one example of God exercising great patience and forbearance toward his people. God has a long fuse and a thick skin.

Verse 9 says *“He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.”*

A guy complained to his buddy that whenever he argued with his wife, she got **historical**. His friend said, “You mean **hysterical**.” He said, “No, I mean **historical**.”

She dredges up the past, and reminds me of every time I ever made a mistake!" We get historical don't we? With our spouses and perhaps even with our kids, or our friends.

God the Father chooses to have a short memory. God gets neither hysterical nor historical. God has a long fuse and a thick skin. In fact, it says in v. 10 *"God does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities."*

Imagine if we had a punch card, and every time we sinned, the card got punched. Wouldn't take long and that card would be all punched out, wouldn't it?! Thankfully God does **not** relate to us that way. God does not keep on accusing; God does not allow anger to build up against us. God chooses to have a short memory when it comes to our sin, assuming we are repentant.

"Love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) Thank God, that it does or we'd all be in BIG trouble!

IF God punished us every time we were deserving of it, we would be in bad shape; like playing Monopoly and getting sent to jail, not only **not** passing GO and **not** collecting \$200, BUT with **no hope** of a "GET OUT OF JAIL FREE CARD!" (Whenever that happens to me, my granddaughter laughs. When it happens to her it is an entirely different story!)

God does not treat us as our sins deserve!

It was Lindsay's fourth birthday. Her parents were in a season of their lives that was challenging. Her father Brent was in a job transition so funds were tight and her mother was undergoing treatment for a serious medical condition. I offered to help with Lindsay's birthday party.

Carol, her mom and I, baked and decorated a cake. We hung streamers in the dining room, blew up balloons, and wrapped some gifts. Everything was looking good when Lindsay came in one door just as her dad walked in the other, having just arrived home from work.

"Really? This is the best you could do?" Lindsay said critically.

Her mom was crestfallen. I was stunned. But Brent her father, did not miss a beat. He launched into a sermon (he was a pastor after all) about how Lindsay

should be grateful for all the work we had put into making this day special for her, etc. Then he instructed us to take down all the decorations and put everything away. Lindsay was sent to her room for a time out. In tears. She wasn't the only one crying!

We had not gotten very far when Brent told us to stop. Put everything back. There would be a party after all. A short time later, a very different Lindsay entered the dining room. She began to cry all over again—this time because the party was on! She ran to hug her mom and me, expressing sorrow, joy, and gratitude, all mixed up together. This is a story of amazing grace!

God the Father has a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin, and a big heart. So does Jesus, his Son.

Jesus displays endless patience with his disciples who seem to take forever to “get him”, to understand his mission and his message. Jesus constantly acts like his Father—demonstrating forbearance toward those who are threatened by him and plot against him, those who refuse to believe his message. Jesus' big heart is expressed in loving care for little children, toward prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors, who were the outcasts of his society, toward the sick and the mentally ill.

No question about it, Jesus is not only the spitting image of his Father. He is a chip off the old block. Like Father, like son.

Jesus talks a lot about his relationship with God, his Heavenly Father.

When *Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”*⁹*Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? **Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.** How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (John 14:8-10 NIV)*

Jesus got himself into trouble with the religious authorities at the time, because he said plainly: “The Father and I are one.” (John 10:30). This claim was considered blasphemy by his Jewish opponents who sought unsuccessfully to stone him.

Bill Cain, took a leave from his work in order to care for his father as he died of cancer. Though the disease was taking its toll physically, his father's mind remained alert and lively. In the role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in childhood.

Each evening as Bill read, his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling. Bill was exhausted from the job of care-taking. He would plead with his dad, "Look, here's the idea. I read to you. You fall asleep." Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes. But this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son.

Bill would catch him and whine, "Now, come on." The father would, again, oblige, until he couldn't anymore, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son. After his father's death, Bill said that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid.

How much more so God?

"What's true of Jesus is true for us, and so this voice breaks through the clouds and comes straight at us.

Can you hear it? "You are my Beloved, in whom I am wonderfully pleased."
(Greg Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart)

Such is the love of the Father –not only for the Son – But for you, for me, for all of God's children!

Thanks be to God!