

Wonderful Counselor
1st in Advent Series
Isaiah 9:2-7
Nov. 29, 2020
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer: By your holy spirit, in a way that only you can, prepare us in body, soul, and mind to step into this season with hope. Amen

Message:

“What is it you want?” What would make you happy? Not what would make things easier or make the hard stuff go away, but what do you want that would make you happy - bring you joy? What would bring you that deep down center of your soul kind of happy? The kind of happy that gives you a sense of being centered / grounded, no matter what comes your way.

In the midst of what has become our “new normal” what do you seek? With frustrations mounting, disappointment being a regular thing, patience growing thin, the pressure to do what is best, changes and updates happening every day, numbers, stats and projections swirling around like winter wind, what do you want? In the midst of keeping kids on track with school, making yet another adjustment to holiday plans and travel, juggling what is, what isn't and what might be, canceling this and avoiding that, wondering if you have been exposed yet again, and living in the tension between being safe, cautious, and responsible and just not caring anymore, what do you want?

After all, that is the question of the season now upon us. You have probably been asked or have asked someone else, “what do you want for Christmas?” If not and if you have young kids or teenagers in your life, you have probably been given the annual Christmas wish list.

In our house it is hunting gear, outdoor survival gadgets, mountain man hunting and trapping books, medieval weaponry and historic battles, and anything related to war or military history.

What about you? What do you want? How about the assurance that life over the last eight months will be worth it for the joy that awaits you? How about the promise that in the midst of every sigh, disappointment, heartbreak, argument, election speech, or medical report, there is something bigger? How about the absolute that despite the anger, blame, fear, or uncertainty, love will prevail? I am talking about the undeniable hope that comes at the sound of the greatest proclamation ever penned or spoken; ever put to music or ever recorded.

It is nothing less than the assurance that God is up to something far greater than any of us could imagine, expect, or anticipate.

All who have ears to hear, listen...

Read text: Isaiah 9:2-7

These words have been spoken, sung, put to music, and proclaimed since the 8th century BCE, when the prophet Isaiah uttered them. They were often used to announce the birth of a royal prince in Jerusalem or the

coronation of a new king. Words of a leader that would far surpass every expectation and make good on every promise.

These are not words given specifically as the prediction of Jesus' arrival, but rather they are most likely words that the great prophet borrowed from coronation liturgies in surrounding countries. Why? Because they are words the people of his time would recognize and understand.

They would know these words as a governmental or royal proclamation, much like we know the great speeches of our time. Isaiah knew his listeners would understand the scope of these words; the depth of what they meant, and the breadth their impact could have when lived out by someone truly worthy of them. He was telling the believers to look beyond the government; to see beyond the limited and earthly powers around them and consider God's greater plan of a leader who would fulfill the role of each title.

Isaiah was telling the people of God to soak up these words with a spiritual sponge, taking them in on a deeper level and let them be words to hold on to when faced with persecution, oppression, and difficulties. These were words they could cling to in a time when nothing made sense, when the powers at be seemed to be playing games, and when their futures were uncertain, answers were unclear, and hope sometimes seemed elusive, even in the depth of their faith.

Could it be that these are the words we need to hear and hold on to today just as much? Could it be these are the words to bring us hope in our own darkness? To reveal truth in times of uncertainty, confusion, and division? Are these the words of assurance telling us we can find our way, that we are stronger together, and that who we are in Christ, as children of God, as the church, does not change because bad things happen or hard things come our way?

If the last six to eight months haven't already been a constant blur of politics, protests, covid, elections, schools and businesses open then closed then open, numbers up and down, conflict, and contradiction, then the next six to eight weeks will be.

For now is the season when time seems to both speed up and slow down. Kids can hardly wait til Dec. 24, adults can't believe Dec. starts in two days! Some can't wait to put up the tree and the festive decor, and in fact already have, while others feel like they just put it away from last year. It's a race to the finish line of 2020 and some can't get there fast enough, but it feels as if we are running with ankle weights through thick mud while heavy fog continues to lift and fall upon our path.

So yes, I would say these are the words we need to hear and we need to hear them now - take them in, soak them up, and let them pour over us physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

Over the next four weeks we will come to know these words in deep and meaningful ways. Each week we will explore one of these extravagant

royal titles. We will come to know the imagery behind them and the purpose within them. We invite you to not only follow us in worship week to week, but also to pick up a copy of Walter Brueggemann's Names for the Messiah, the book which this Advent series is based on. You can pick up a copy in the church lobby or call and let us know you need one and we can send it to you.

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Prince. This four-fold inventory of honorable titles was ready at hand for the early church when it came to bear witness to Jesus; to describe what and who he was. It was and has always been a reminder and a source of the hopeful revolution contained in the hand of a baby who came to show us a better way and to continue the love story between God and humanity.

The title of Wonderful Counselor refers to the exercise of governance, the capacity to administer, to plan, and to execute policy. In this text, Isaiah praises God for assigning in a new human king who is expected to devise plans and policies for the benefit of the entire realm (not just the wealthy and powerful). The term wonderful suggests that the new king will not only have extraordinary wisdom and foresight about planning but that the royal plans and policies will be of exceptional quality, a big surprise that goes beyond all the usual conventions of political power and practice.

In other words the new king will have wisdom beyond their years and a wisdom that flipped existing systems, standing operating procedures, and traditional expectations end over end. Luke 2 tells us Jesus was exactly that. "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor

of God was upon him...and Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Jesus did not do things the way people were used to or in the way the Roman authorities had forced upon them. His teachings contradicted all usual assumptions. He confounded the authorities; he engaged the powerless crowds, he recognized the value of the marginalized, he bridged the gap between what we call the Old Testament way of the Law and the New Testament way of community. He did not abolish, dismiss or deny the law but rather he fulfilled it in ways no one expected; with love and compassion rather than hatred and violence; with humility and freedom rather than arrogance and oppression.

Jesus, as Wonderful Counselor, articulated a world under alternative governance that did not conform to old patterns of abuse and exploitation. His was a regime of peace and well being that went on to displace the older order of violence and extortion. Jesus opened the world to the impossible and gave hope that things could be different; that there was a better way and that way was to live in service to one another, to stand up for and speak out for those who have no voice, to draw strength, courage, and comfort from a faith rooted in the God who loves so much so that God's own son gave up everything so that all would have something wonderful.

This Advent season, prepare your hearts to encounter God in ways you might not expect. Prepare and be open to the possibilities God places before you even now. Prepare your heart to be transformed in ways you

don't have answers for just yet. Prepare, and trust that the Wonderful Counselor is with us every step of the way.

AMEN