

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Baby Names: Everlasting Father”**

**Dr. Jay Howell**

December 13, 2020

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

*Isaiah 9:2-7*

This is the third Sunday in Advent, and as we continue this series “Baby Names” we take another look at the names, the titles given this expected child in one of the most commonly read passages around Christmas: Isaiah 9. In particular verse 6: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” There in just one verse, four striking names bestowed upon this expected child who would deliver the people of God. As Christians we read this passage and we see Jesus, we see the expectations and longings evident here, and not just here but in the entire Old Testament, fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. But that doesn’t mean that everything fits neatly into a tidy box. Each one of these titles, when you really think about it, is a bit strange when you consider them applying to Jesus. Rachel led us about “Wonderful Counselor” two weeks ago, then last Sunday we talked about “Mighty God,” and this week it gets even stranger as we look at the third title, “Everlasting Father,” and honestly, this is the one that really turns my head into knots. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

A common phrase heard in locker rooms or at least in sports columns is, “The backup quarterback is the most popular guy in town.” Have you ever heard that? “The backup quarterback is the most popular guy in town.” Now, understand first off that this is not meant to be in any way, shape, or form a commentary on a certain local team. It’s just a saying. The backup quarterback is the most popular guy in town.

Now what is that supposed to mean? That the backup QB is always the most likable person? No. It means that when frustrations come for whoever the starting QB is, all of the hopes and potential, everything that isn't being fulfilled with the starter, start to get projected onto the backup. Any mental mistake the starter makes, well, the backup would've gotten it right. Any throw that goes too long or too short or off target, well, the backup would've hit his man. Anything that's not quite what it should be would be fixed if the backup were in the game. And it's perfectly fair and reasonable to assume that's the case. He hasn't done anything wrong, he hasn't made any mistakes. It's all potential, all unknown. Who's to say things wouldn't be better with him taking snaps instead of the other guy? And that's why the backup QB is the most popular guy in town.

Every once in a while that ends up being true. The backup really is better. Probably the best known example of this is almost twenty years ago in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Second game of the season against the New York Jets, the starting QB Drew Bledsoe goes down with an injury. The backup goes in. They end up losing the game but the backup stays in the rest of the season, and they end up winning the Super Bowl, and would go on to win five more with backup. The team was the New England Patriots, and the quarterback was Tom Brady. The backup really was better.

But for every Tom Brady story, there are a hundred, or even a thousand stories of the backup quarterback going in, and it panning out a different way. Maybe he goes in because of an injury, maybe because the starter is struggling, maybe just to bring a change of pace, but whatever the reason, when he goes in, there is much rejoicing, because finally this idiot coach is doing what he should have done long ago.

And then the game continues. Lo and behold, the backup makes a mistake. Maybe makes another mistake. Maybe can't throw quite as well or run quite as fast as everyone thought he could. Then it dawns on people, maybe this guy was the backup for a reason, because he might not have all the same shortcomings as the old starter, but he does a whole bunch of other ones, and now we see them, plain as day. Now the old backup, who's now the new starter, isn't quite as popular anymore. But then what about this other backup? Maybe he should come in. And so on, and so on.

Pretty common tale, really. Projecting hope on the unknown, only to be let down when reality sets in. Definitely doesn't apply just to quarterbacks. Can apply to new bosses, to incoming presidents or governors or mayors, to principals, to pastors too for that matter. We have a natural tendency to take whatever frustrations we may have with the way things are and project their fulfillment onto someone or something new, thinking a change of pace will make everything better. Then, when that change of pace comes, time passes, and we realize not everything was magically fixed, so the frustrations continue.

Because that is such a common tale, you could be forgiven for thinking that that is exactly what's going on in this passage in Isaiah 9. Projecting an unrealistic hope upon an unknown. An expected child, born for us, a son given to us. "His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace." You might be thinking, "Oh come on. This is just the backup QB being the most popular guy in town. If this is hope for a coming king, it's just frustrations with the current

king projected unfairly onto a baby. Everlasting Father? It's just a baby. We'll be let down by this one just like we've been let down by all the others ones before him."

And if you had been in Israel's shoes, you could be forgiven for thinking that too. A name, a title like "Everlasting Father" could've sounded a bit lofty, because the last thing you would have seen, when it came to kings, was anything "everlasting" about them. If you've never read books like 1 & 2 Kings or 1 & 2 Chronicles in the Old Testament, I'll give you a quick crash course. They consist mostly of a revolving door of disappointing kings. Sure a few of them do the right thing, correcting Israel's course, but eventually they all fall short too. One after another, a king rises, a king falls, a new king takes his place. And maybe for some people, even for many, with every new king there's new hope, new possibilities, like the backup QB going into the game, but eventually, after disappointment after disappointment, you'd have to get a bit jaded, wouldn't you? To the point that all this talk of "Everlasting Father" just doesn't ring true to you anymore.

Maybe you've found yourself feeling the same way sometimes. You've put your faith, or maybe that's putting it too strong, you've had high hopes, rather, for someone new. Maybe it actually is a quarterback, maybe a president or a governor or a mayor, maybe a new boss, maybe a pastor. Maybe it hasn't even been a specific person, more a set up, an arrangement of things, but whatever it is, you've had high hopes that whatever or whoever it was, something new was coming, and it would make everything better. And then time and again, you've found yourself disappointed. Whatever or whoever it was comes in, things don't quite pan out like you had hoped, and things move on. Not much lasting change for the better to speak of at all, much less anything everlasting.

For truly that's what so many of us hope for in those dark seasons of life. Not just a temporary fix, not just a band aid. Sure maybe some kind of relief could be welcome, but really we're hoping for something more than that. Truly that's what Israel was hoping for too. Not just a flash in the pan, not just someone who would eventually be another disappointment, but someone that would restore things, who would make things right, and things would stay that way.

That's what a title like "Everlasting Father" is supposed to signify in this context. It's a king's title, referring to the beginning or the restoration of a kingdom that would last forever. "He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore," it says in the next verse.

And by the way, for you theology folks out there, you might have been curious how Jesus could be called Father when he is God's Son, and he himself refers to God as Father. That could be a much longer conversation, but the short version is that we shouldn't take this title necessarily as something that would muddy the waters of what we understand as the Trinity: one God, three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, Jesus does claim such unity with God, with the Father, that it was not received well. In John 10, as one example, Jesus says he and the Father are one, and then people try to stone him. That's not a coincidence. That claim, one of unity with God, isn't just a challenging notion to understand. It was downright blasphemous to ancient Jewish ears. Jesus said it and nearly gets himself killed on one occasion and winds up getting himself killed eventually anyway.

I mean, in a very blunt way of putting it, that would be among the biggest reasons for doubting Jesus as the Messiah, as the Christ, as God's anointed. For many, it didn't look like Jesus was everlasting, at all. Did he look like he was on his way to establishing an everlasting kingdom? No. First of all, where was his kingdom? He didn't have one, at least not in the way folks were looking for. Second, he wasn't everlasting. He aged. He was a baby, then he got older. Stands to reason that he would continue getting older, but that's not everlasting. Then, in the clearest sign that he wasn't everlasting, he died. Everlasting kingdoms aren't led by dead Messiahs.

But then the Lord revealed his true nature. Christ rose from the grave, and in so doing showed us that everything he had been saying about his unity with God the Father, about his coming kingdom, things that sounded like gibberish at best and blasphemy at worst, now rang true in light of the life of the Messiah.

That's what it took. All this longing for a Messiah, for an everlasting kingdom, an everlasting Father that we hear in Isaiah 9, it foretold of Jesus but that didn't stop Israel from looking for it everywhere else. More kings would come, and with them more disappointments, because they kept putting their faith in the flawed, temporary leaders and movements of this world, rather than in the faithfulness of the eternal, living God.

Hard to knock them for it. We do the same thing, don't we? All those backup QBs that we think will save us but only end up letting us down.

But embedded in the message of Christmas, of Christ coming, is that it took the Messiah, and not just a worldly understanding of a Messiah, that is, a military liberator, but God's Son, God himself, the Christ, to show us his true nature and to establish a kingdom that would not be defined by borders or conquest or greed, but rather by sacrifice, forgiveness, and new life.

That's what it took then, and that's what it takes still today.

Friends, there's no shortage of reasons today that you might be hoping for something better. A better life, a better job, a better country, a better family, a better school. Sure there might be relief. Things can get better. Sometimes we're blessed with that. There's certainly encouraging news about the vaccines being distributed now as one example. But if you think something like a vaccine, or a new job, or a new relationship, or a new leader is going to establish a world that will not perish, a world defined by peace, justice, and righteousness, then you'll always be looking for the backup QB to come into the game, because you will always find yourself disappointed when reality sets in.

But the good news of Christmas, the good news of Christ, is that in taking on flesh, in walking among us, in dying, and in rising again, the Messiah has shown us what an everlasting kingdom looks like, ushered in by an everlasting king.

And that king could rule in your heart as well.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.