

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Baby Names: Mighty God”

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Last week Rachel kicked us off in our Advent series “Baby Names.” In this season of preparation and listening, as we near the day we celebrate our Lord’s birth, we’re looking at one of the most common Advent or Christmas passages in all of the Bible: Isaiah chapter 9, at least a part of it. It’s a powerful word of prophecy, speaking of the hope for a coming king, a coming deliverer, a coming Messiah. The reason we are spending four weeks in this same passage is because within it, in one of the best-known verses in this passage, there’s a list of four names, four titles, bestowed upon this expected child. It’s in v. 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.” Four names, four titles for this expected child, and none of them, none of those names, really make much sense to give to a baby. So why do we say they talk about Jesus?

This Advent, we’ll look at one name each week. Rachel started us off last week with the first one, “Wonderful Counselor,” and this week we’ll look at the second, “Mighty God,” reading from Isaiah chapter nine, verses 2-7. Here now the Word of God.

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

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

Many of you know already that Frances and I had our second child this past summer. His name’s Harry; he’s almost five months old now. He’s a good baby, pretty agreeable. But one of the last words I would use to describe him is “mighty.” Not about to call him “*Mighty God*”

either for that matter—he'll have enough issues being a preacher's kid—but “mighty” just doesn't seem to fit...*at all*...when we're talking about a baby.

I mean, you see a baby, what words come to mind? Sweet. Precious. Squishy. Take your pick, but mighty? Just doesn't apply.

What does come to mind when you hear the word “mighty”? The Mighty Ducks? A mighty fortress? Sometimes on Sunday afternoons, Fran Dotterweich'll tell me, “Jay, that was a mighty fine sermon.” To which some of y'all are thinking, “Jay, which one would that have been exactly?” That's what comes to mind when I hear “mighty.” It's kind of an old-sounding word, isn't it? Makes me think of Vikings or big monsters. And that's how we usually use it, right? Some big, powerful force or hero, just big and strong doing big and strong things.

And in a lot of ways, it'd be easy to think that's what Isaiah is talking about. “Mighty God” is one of the titles given to this expected child that has been born. The word used there that we translate as “mighty” is used throughout the Old Testament in very much the same way, like “mighty” warriors or “mighty men” or “mighty deeds.” A display of power and strength.

That makes sense, honestly, given what the Israelites were facing at the time. The backdrop for this passage, the context in which these words would have been first heard, was one of a betrayal and civil war. Part of Israel had allied with a foreign power against the southern kingdom of Judah. That was the threat: betrayal and civil war. That's what those words at the beginning of the passage are talking about: “The people who have walked in darkness...” and “those who lived in a land of deep darkness.” It's a dark time in Israel, enemies massing against them and marching at the gates. But into that darkness comes this promise of light, an assurance from God that the nation would be multiplied, increased in joy, that their burdens would be broken, that all the mechanisms of war against them would be dissolved.

And what is the promised sign of this light, this assurance from God? “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us,” it says in verse six. Surely a reference to a coming king, a coming deliverer, an heir to the throne of David. Now *that* would be someone mighty, someone powerful, someone to come to lead the armies of the people of God against this threat, to beat back this betrayal, to strike fear in the hearts of one's enemies.

So imagine how silly it would feel if you were stationed on the walls of Jerusalem, and this invading army had come against you, threatening to attack the city. But you call out, “All y'all are in big trouble now! The one named “Mighty God” is here.” Then they say—and I don't know why they're talking back and forth—but they say, “Who is he?” And you say, “It's a baby.” Not sure anyone would be all that scared.

Because when it comes to naming babies, “mighty” isn't quite the word that best describes them, is it? They're downright helpless when it comes down to it.

There's a scientific term for this—I learned about it this week. The word is “altriciality,” and it refers to the degree to which a species' young have to be cared for before they're able to fend for themselves. And compared to most other animals, humans are pretty dumb in this regard. Think about it. For so many animals, there's a degree to which a newborn has to be ready to rock and roll. A baby giraffe can stand within an hour of being born and run within a day. A

baby sea turtle comes into the world having to crawl across the sand and swim to safety immediately. Lizards give birth and after one day they expect their babies to fend for themselves completely. Baby humans can't even hold their own heads up, much less stand, much less walk, much less get their own food.

We've got this little booster seat at home—I forget the actual name of it—but it's meant for newborns and it's to help Harry learn to hold his head up and to sit up. So we'll put him in it if we need to take him into the kitchen. But one time we left him in there a little longer than we should have, longer than he could hold his head and upper body up, so we look over while we're cooking and he's slumped over like a miniature Jabba the Hutt, drool coming out of his mouth, and a wide-eyed, open-mouth look of confusion on his face.

That's how silly it sounds to call a baby "Mighty God." Nothing mighty about it.

Nothing much mighty about Jesus either, if you looked at him a certain way. Definitely not if you looked at him the way those who had read Isaiah 9 would have looked at him. Sure he could do some amazing things—you might even call them mighty things. He could heal, he could cast out demons, he could walk on water; those are all impressive things. But where was his army? Where was his kingdom? Where was his throne? The way Isaiah talks about this child named "Mighty God," there's a throne involved. Not just any throne, the throne of David, that is, the king who would restore and reunite and gather a scattered people back into the fold, throwing off the yoke of the oppressors and defeating any threat. Jesus didn't seem to be doing any of that. In fact, it seemed that half the time when he could have had the chance to show his power he shirked away from it, or he retreated once people became too interested. Even when he got arrested and he really had the chance to show his power before the authorities that were holding Israel down, what happens? He doesn't say much at all. He doesn't do much either, just gets crucified, the standard fare punishment for anyone who would dare cross the powers that be, a horrible mix of physical pain and public humiliation. And that was the end of him. When it came down to it, nothing much was going to change. Nothing mighty about that.

So it means that if we're thinking about baby names, as they pertain to the infant Jesus born in Bethlehem, "Mighty God" just doesn't seem to fit.

Unless of course we don't get what "mighty" really means.

You know, when I think about it, you know who the most powerful person in our household is right now? Harry. Much of what we do revolves around whether he is hungry or tired. In fact, it's documented how powerful a baby's cry is to adult ears. Not even just to a child's parent's ears, just to human ears. You ever been on a plane or in a crowded room with a crying baby? Did you try to tune out that baby? How did that go for you? It turns out that the sound of a baby's cry triggers something in the human brain more urgently than most other noises that makes it near impossible to ignore. But more than just the sound of a baby crying, a child's helplessness has changed something about how humans interact. Sociologically, it's thought that the reason infants are so helpless is precisely because of the effect that helplessness has on adults who care for them, not just even their parents. It changes something fundamental about how we interact as people. You might argue that much of the development of human

society has been in part for the sake of creating a more and more stable and secure environment for helpless children. Otherwise we might as well be sea turtles. Just laying eggs and moving on.

So helpless, and yet so powerful. Kind of makes you rethink what “mighty” could mean.

Jesus certainly wasn't setting out to fit the world's bill or Israel's expectations for being “mighty,” but in his helplessness, his true power is shown. In submitting to the pain of the cross and atoning for our sin, he showed that the way of the sword and the way of power are not one and the same. In rising from the grave three days later, he showed that powers of death rule no longer. In taking on our human flesh, Son of God and Son of Man, that Christmas morning, he showed what mighty things can happen because of a humble birth.

Maybe for some of you Jesus has been someone you consider a close and indispensable part of your life, even the first part of your life. Amen. Praise God. But then maybe for others of you, Jesus has more been someone you've tried to keep at a distance but just haven't been able to look away from. Maybe to you Jesus has been someone you've tried to ignore but couldn't.

If that's where you are this Christmas, my hope is that you'll see Christ coming anew within your life, in all of his grace and all of his power, but not power as the world would define it. And if we take any cue from helpless babies and how mighty they can truly be, my hope is that the child that we anticipate and celebrate this Christmas will do a mighty work in you.

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