

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Baby Names: Wonderful Counselor”

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Our Old Testament Reading today is Isaiah 9:2-7. We will be reading this beautiful passage each Sunday during Advent. Let us hear the Word of Lord.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in and 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, 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

Advent is much about listening. And isn't it true that some people can hear out of one ear better than the other. Perhaps it is like this for someone in your family, and you arrange the seating at the Thanksgiving dinner accordingly, with Uncle Bill or Aunt Josephine sitting on this side of the table so they can hear the conversation. Maybe for a few of us, our left or right ear is better, and we depend upon that ear, and listen out of it. It made me think about life and our experience of it, our hearing of it, the highs and the lows, and if we listen out of the ear of fear, or out of the ear of faith. I have to ask myself that question.

As only a loving parent would, Isaiah speaks the words of the loving, holy God, urging his people to return to him, and to listen out of the ears of their faith. For the people of Israel had lost faith, in those centuries, 800 years before Christ. They had lost leadership, lost love for God's law, rebelled against him, betrayed his covenant. They became like all the nations around them and found themselves in a very dark place, in cycles of fear and faithlessness, a nation fractured, with the Assyrians taking them into captivity by droves. As they had walked away from God, at the same time they wondered where God was.

I had a little poster as a child with a picture of a little truck zooming off into the horizon, and the caption was “If you think God is far away, guess who moved?”

Isaiah, in the very midst of pronouncing judgment for sin of the people, tenderly reminded them that God would not forget them, that God would not stop loving them, that God would not forget His promise, that one day from a restored Judah and Jerusalem a Light would shine, a Savior would come, a BABY!

And one name for this child would not be enough. How to choose a name for a baby? Isaiah prophesies names/titles, each of which would describe the One who would sit on the throne of David and so surpass it as *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

Pastor Mark reminded me of George Frideric Handel's beautiful "Messiah," and how in the piece "For unto us A Child is Born," Handel and his colleague take that first title, Wonderful Counselor, and put a comma/a rest between those two names, as if they should stand alone.

"Wonderful" the baby would be. The word wonderful in the Bible literally means incomprehensible or unsearchable. It's a word so much weightier than how we use it in normal conversation; we may say "the turkey was wonderful," or "it was a wonderful day." What it means here is "outside the realm of human explanation or understanding," or "full of wonder."

In Judges 13, Samson's father asked the lord what his name was. The angel responded, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?" The Psalmist says of God's knowing of him "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it." So the prophet Isaiah declared that the coming child, the Messiah, would be wonderful in a way that is beyond us, beyond our understanding. And he would be counselor, who would counsel his people as a wise king would. The prophet Micah asked the people "Is there no king in your midst? Has your counselor perished?" Long before this son was given, Isaiah foretold that God was sending a counselor for the brokenhearted people of the world.

In reflecting upon these verses, my thoughts went to the summer of 1982, when I was able to see a distant part of the world going with a group of college students to Japan. We spent that summer getting to know the Japanese people, and serving them by teaching English, spreading across cities, towns in Japan. Neighbors from around, adults and children, came to the churches eager to learn English; they were also invited to be in chapel services where they could hear the Gospel.

We learned together, we laughed, we ate together. Oh, how I remember the food, the fish, rice, anchovies, eel, octopus, egg, including raw egg, cucumber, (did I mention rice?) and lots of soy sauce. I snuck Jiffy peanut butter into the apartment.

In between classes, we took outings; we rode bullet trains. The students wanted us to see their many temples, with the Great Buddha, 53 feet high, cast in bronze. They showed us all the little stands surrounding the temples, selling rabbits feet, statues, good-luck charms and the little altars in their homes for the honoring and worship of ancestors. The students would toss down coins and clap and bow before the Buddha, the statues, to get the attention of the gods, and there were (for them) millions of them, and you could never know which ones were good, so you just

had to wish for the best. There was a darkness in that land where less than 1% of the population was Christian, and yet in the midst of the people there was a spiritual yearning. One student said, “I want an eternal friend, one who never goes away.”

We sang a song, in Japanese & English, the one Breyon just sang for us, with those very names of the Messiah. *“Isn’t he, beautiful, beautiful, isn’t He? Prince of Peace, Son of God, isn’t He? Isn’t He wonderful, wonderful, isn’t He, Counselor, Almighty God, isn’t He?”*

That there was one God, who was love, who was personal, who knew and cared about them, was beyond what many of the students had ever heard; it was a wonder for them, and it should be a wonder for us! This One God who so loved the whole world that He sent His Son, conceived in the womb of a virgin, who would show himself to be “wonderful” in His power to still the storms and heal the bent and brokenhearted, who would give sight to the blind, touch the leper, embrace the children, multiply exhausted offerings, condemn the spiritually proud, turn over tables in the Temple, delay two days to go to sick Lazarus. One who would work beyond the grave, who would cry, and die, and rise, who would teach many wonderful things that are counterintuitive to the human mind. “Blessed are those who mourn.” “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” One who would counsel, like no human counselor ever could, with all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Who would see and hear each of us, and know what we are going through, and know the way, who would give the peace that passes human understanding.

Several days ago a friend in Berlin and I talked, also about the ongoing challenges with COVID virus, also in Germany. We talked about the isolation, the sadness, and the shattered dreams. She said, “we all look at the sky because we don’t want to look one another in the eye.” So much fear and uncertainty. But then she brought to our conversation a passage from Mark 6, when the disciples are in the boat on the Sea of Galilee in a terrible storm at night and Jesus comes walking on the water, nearly passing them, and they cry out, thinking he is a ghost; and he turns to them and says “Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.” The words of our Wonderful Counselor, for us. “Take heart. It is I. Do not fear.”

Before anything is resolved, or the storm is stilled, there is a PROMISE, a person who came, who comes every day, who is coming again.

Perhaps we can together see Advent this year as an opportunity to listen anew with the ears of FAITH, and not fear!