

Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named:

Wonderful Counsellor,
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 onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Excerpts from Ezekiel 34

Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them. (34:2-6)

So I will seek out my sheep...they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat of the strong I will destroy. I will feed them justice. (34:12-16)

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them, and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (34:23-24)

Everlasting Father

We live in an “orphaned” world. This is a compelling phrase which Walter Brueggemann used in his chapter on the Everlasting Father and ties together themes from our world, the ministry of Jesus, and the idea of an Eternal Protector.¹

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Names For the Messiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), pp 33-49.

The reality that we live in an orphaned world ought to be evident when we listen to the news. I do not need to show video clips of the recently orphaned in Gaza. There is immense human suffering in a region we call the Holy Land with orphans increasing daily in numbers. Or consider the hundreds of thousands of migrants risking much for opportunity in a new land. A news report from Thursday's edition of the PBS Newshour cited some 10,000 migrants a day have been crossing into the US from Mexico;² some parents die in the migration leaving children orphaned; other families live apart for years. Other orphans are out there—there is vulnerability, loneliness, and dislocation within families and communities. We live in an orphaned world.

When the writer of Isaiah was given names for the Messiah, it was in a particular language the people would have understood. For example, the term Everlasting Father is a very patriarchal designation reflecting the patriarchal societies of the Ancient Near East. With the title came great respect and responsibility.

In the lands of Isaiah, it was the father's responsibility to care for the entire clan. Psalm 68:5-6 describes some of what that meant in relation to God: "father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity." God is praised because God protects widows and orphans, the most vulnerable in society, as well as prisoners. This character trait of God appears in the Torah, the Prophets, and the writings of the Hebrew bible—the entire Hebrew Bible. This is God. It is a composite of compassion and protection.

The responsibility of a Messiah, and all the political kings and queens, is to perform the role of God in society as a regent or surrogate for God. Messiahs, Kings, and Queens are surrogates for the Eternal Protector. The king is charged with the duty of pastoral justice towards the poor and needy. The adjective "eternal" suggests that policies and economics will not be short sighted. The messiah will organize and lead a sustainable society.

The Israelite communities who knew of Isaiah's oracles were desperate for a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, a champion of Peace, and an Eternal Protector. So they affirmed the best candidates they could find, and their plans crashed badly. Earlier we heard sections of Ezekiel 34 which harshly criticizes the shepherds who were no shepherds. They were Eternal Protector pretenders. The metaphor of Shepherd applied to the royals of that time: Royalty=shepherd. This makes, for example, the 23rd Psalm a particularly political and pastoral Psalm.

What we have in Ezekiel is an indictment of the leadership gone awry. I don't need to reread it, but I would note that the failure of leadership is framed in

² [December 21, 2023 – PBS NewsHour full episode | PBS NewsHour](#)

negative terms: they have NOT fed the sheep, NOT strengthened the weak, NOT healed the sick, NOT bound up the injured, and so forth. the Divine responds in the positive: I SEEK my sheep... they SHALL be filled, I will MAKE them lie down, I will SEEK the lost, I will STRENGTHEN the weak, I will SET UP over them one Shepherd, my servant David, and he shall FEED them. God is frustrated. All this in the 4th through 8th centuries before Christ. Orphans abounded.

I will not drift too far into the regional and international issues before us, but that linkages to our world must be considered. As I was beginning work on this sermon, COPE 2028 was just finishing. Agreements have been touted.³ Still, consumption, extraction, and exploitation continue to erode the quality of life for people, creatures and the ecosystems which sustain us all. In my more cynical moments, I have the sense that the earth has been orphaned. Orphaned species are all around us. Tailing ponds and mounds toxify water systems and soil. If we are stewards of the land, as we take Genesis 1 to imply, we have neglected our leadership responsibilities. Parts of the creation have been orphaned, and we have been part of the problem. We dare not become too smug as we read our scriptures in this Christmas season.

And that brings us to Jesus. He is born in the city of David of Jesse's lineage. In John's gospel he says, I am the good shepherd and Jesus does seek the lost. Handle and the rest of us hear these references in the Gospels and we begin to wonder if Jesus is that long awaited Messiah of Isaiah 9. The problem is that Jesus as God's son does not translate to "Everlasting Father". And consistently through the gospels Jesus refers to God as Abba (father); Jesus is often referred to as the "son" of God or "son" of David.

Take the Sermon on the Mount, for example. The Lord's prayer begins with an address to "father". Elsewhere in Matthew chapters 5-7: your Father who sees in secret and so forth. Your heavenly Father knows all that you need. The disciples are to be perfect "as your heavenly Father is perfect". Or take the scene of Jesus on the cross in Luke's gospel: Father, forgive them for they know not what they do (Lk 23:34) and Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (v. 46). There is no confusion—the Son is the Son and not the Father. Sorry Handel, Jesus is not the Messiah of Isaiah 9:6. But that is not the end of the story.

Were the care of orphans left to the Father, the Son would not be in the orphan business. Jesus takes up that task which the Hebrew Shepherds ought to have been doing. Jesus speaks to his soon to be orphaned disciples as little children (John 13:33). John 14 only intensifies that, Jesus shares with his disciples that "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." In that era of rabbinic

³ [COP28 UAE - United Nations Climate Change Conference](#)

schools, it would not have been uncommon usage that disciples without their master are “orphaned”, and John’s gospel takes it further. In John 19 (26-27) an orphaned disciple is given a new mother and an orphaned mother is gifted a new son. And we must not forget that Matthew, Mark and Luke all report Jesus saying, “Let the little children come to me” (Lk 18:15-17 and parallels). Chapter after chapter Jesus is seeking the lost, healing the wounded, feeding the flock. This may not have been the Eternal Protector Isaiah envisioned, but it does fit the Hebrew understandings of what Good Shepherds do among the flock. And in terms of the Eternal part of the equation, Jesus does say something along the lines of “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20).

As I mentioned to begin this sermon, we have orphans in our world as well. We are not the Eternal Protector of Isaiah 9:6. We are not the Son of the gospels who extend adoption to the orphans of the world. We do, however carry their name. In this world, in our time and place, we are the shepherds to whom the angels appeared. We are invited to behold this thing which has taken place. We are to make known in word and deed what has been told about this child. And despite our foibles and failures in this discipleship exercise, so we too are invited to be in the “orphan business” as God and the Christ have been. What might that mean?

Maybe it means speaking into places of war-torn inhumanity where orphans are daily growing in numbers. Maybe it means supporting organizations, like MCC or Doctors Without Border which bring real news from and real relief to the orphans of wars. Maybe it means treating Christmas as an opportunity to focus on compassion rather than consumerism. Maybe it means to take a few minutes in our busy lives to strengthen the weak and bind up what is broken in our neighbourhoods and city. Orphans abound looking for some vestige of protection. There are too many sheep who are lonely, hurting, without hope and thirsting for waters of life.

I will be honest that some days it feels as if the needs around us surpass my financial or emotional reserves. “Compassion fatigue” I have heard people describe it. In these moments it is good to pause and remember this work is God’s project and there is an eternal nature to it. Jesus told his people that he would not leave them orphaned and that he will be with us always. Indeed, this business of advocating for and protecting the vulnerable has been going on for thousands of years. It truly is an eternal endeavor. So let do what we are able and trust in the ones we name as the Alpha and the Omega—beginning and end—to continue this Divine work through us and long after we are gone. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church