

2023 1st Advent: Wonderful Counselor

Psalm 16

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.'

As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble, in whom is all my delight.

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink-offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips. The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also, my heart instructs me.

I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;

in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

1st Corinthians 1:18-20

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

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.

1st Advent (2023)

Good Counsel

December 3, 2023

Psalm 16; 1st Corinthians 1:18-20; Isaiah 9:6-7

This morning we are beginning an Advent series on the Divine names for the messiah found in Isaiah in chapter 9 (vv 6-7): Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. The series is loosely based on a short book authored by Walter Brueggemann.¹ If these titles sound familiar, it is likely from Handel's *Messiah*. Handel, like many Christians, has read Isaiah backward through the lens of Jesus. Jesus walked the trails of Palestine, however, some eight centuries after Isaiah's scribe put quill to papyrus. Among 8th century BCE Israelites, the names would have sparked anticipation that things would improve sooner than later. They were seeking literal liberation from oppression, or even captivity if you happened to live among the Northern tribes.² Think about hearing these words if you were living in Donetsk, Gaza, or Mogadishu. Even North America exudes a sense of oppression and a need for liberation.

Misinformation and disinformation rears its ugly head at many a family visit or coffee table conversation. Racism, sexism, and homo-phobia is well and alive. Many are enamored with Christian nationalism which holds that Christians are called and pre-ordained to impose Christian values on society; all under a very particular definition of Christian values which oppress both my intellectual and religious sensibilities. While visiting my parents a week ago, I learned from CNN that the U.S. has topped 400 mass shootings in 2023, and we have a month to go.³ Who but a messiah could possibly liberate us from the gun lobby? We have an opioid crises, a health care crises, some say a climate crises, and so on. These are some of the systemic issues circulating all around us which oppress.

And then we have the train load of heavy personal freight we tow. Some households struggle with estrangement, addictions or mental health. Other homes are navigating financial concerns, illness, or the results of aging. Some have soul draining work, insufficient work, or no work. While our world is different than that of Isaiah or Jesus, there is oppression and a need for liberation among us.

Before turning my attention to the "Wonderful Counselor" we claim Jesus to be, I want to detail the implication of the terms from Isaiah 9:6-7 within the Ancient Near East. "The names given to the child are usually called throne names because they are the names that a king would receive at [their] enthronement (Seitz in Friesen's commentary)." The singing of *God Save the King / Queen* at a coronation or an international soccer match is one example of how we continue to do something similar in the 21st century.⁴ *Wonderful Counselor* describes the king's wisdom in

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

² Brueggemann, p 2.

³ [United States tops 400 mass shootings in 2023 | CNN Politics](#)

⁴ A text and short history of the British National Anthem can be viewed at: [National Anthem | The Royal Family](#)

resolving interstate disputes” [as well as enacting domestic policy which benefit the entire realm and not just the wealthy (Brueggemann, 3)]. From the British anthem: “the choicest gifts in store on her be poured”. *Mighty God* asserts the king’s power” to get done what needs to get done. From the anthem: “send him victorious, happy and glorious”. “*Everlasting Father* attributes long life to king. Within the anthem, there are numerous appeals for long life / long reign / God saving the head of state. *Prince of Peace* refers to the king as the source of economic, social and political well-being.⁵ From the anthem: “may he defend our laws, ever give us cause, to sing with heart and voice”. It is not a perfect match, but it isn’t that far off.

The messiah God has promised through Isaiah will be none other than one whose leadership will yield reconciliation, authority over the coercive “wisdom of the world”, and a more benevolent society. All of this into the everlasting. If, that is, the people accept the Messiah whom God calls forth. Unfortunately, humanity has routinely chosen other messiahs to follow. To the *Wonderful Counselor* we go.

Jesus reflected the wisdom of God in the 1st century, and that caught the attention of those of the early church. As they pondered the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they identified in him the distinct marks of the long-awaited Messiah of the of Is. 9 and the suffering servant of 2nd Is. (ch 40-45). The leadership of Jesus was unlike any political ruler they had ever seen or heard. This included the breadth of Babylonian, Jewish, Greek, or Roman rulers. In Jesus they saw a “Wonderful Counselor” who had extraordinary plans and policies for ordering the public life to benefit all. He had a desire and ability to mediate peace in the trans national conflicts that existed. “Jesus astonished his contemporaries by his capacity to see and act beyond conventional assumptions. As they observed his work, people asked: Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mark 6:2)....

The notion of Jesus wisdom is “extended in Paul’s exposition of the wisdom of the cross that contradicts the “foolishness” of the world (1st Cor. 1:25,27). If we consider this reference in the context of governance, being a king, then we can see that the raw power of Rome was indeed foolishness, even though it is typical for a world power.” Jesus was accessible to rich and poor alike. He spoke into lingering hostilities between Jews and those of other ethnicities. Extraordinary really.

Extraordinary is one translation of “wonderful” from the Hebrew into English.⁶ Jesus was extraordinary in his teaching because “he exhibited an

⁵ Ivan Friesen, *Isaiah*—in the Believer’s Bible Commentary Series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), p. 85.

⁶ פְּלִי in Francis Brown, Driver and Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 810-811.

authority that was unlike the authority of the scribes, the shrewdest and most learned of his contemporaries (Mark 1:22)...His teaching confounded the [religious and Roman leadership]. He articulated a world under an “alternative governance” that did not conform to old patterns of abuse and exploitation.” He insisted that the impossible is possible—you can move mountains, he said. This is hope for those under occupation or house arrest or held captive. This is not the fear and hate mongering which powers of the world employ to keep a population trapped and enslaved, or foment hostility. Wonderful counsel offers hope among the hopeless.

It remains, then, for the church at Christmas to consider what that title means for good news here and now.⁷ Followers of The Wonderful Counselor seek to emulate the Messiah in word and deed; how does one do this? To get us started down that road I will share a story which describes ordinary people being good counsel in this world. It is the condensed account of teacher Bai, her daughter Ms. Nie, and retired veteran of the 2nd WW Richard Katz.⁸

Teacher Bai started her educational life in the hinterland of China. The school she attended as a youngster was a cave. In that region it was unusual to send daughters to school as they were needed around the farm and in the hut, but her parents saw something in young Bai. This was parental discernment. Wise counsel is manifest regardless of economic, educational or social status. With the “eyes of our hearts open” (Eph 1:18), we receive extraordinary gifts of insight into persons and problems. So the parents sent Bai to the cave for grade one.

She did well in school and wanted to continue her studies in teacher’s college. The financially strapped family scrimped and saved for her to study in the big city far away on the coast. As she worked at her degree, a group of Chinese ex-pats who knew the impoverished classroom situation in rural China began raising money, formed a non-profit, and partnered with a Catholic parish to build a school. One school building where there had been none, extraordinary. Teacher Bai was asked to be the first teacher—she knew the culture and the dialect which is neither Mandarin or Cantonese. These choices and decisions reflect wisdom from God’s people in the church and beyond the church; wonderful counsel, actually.

Ms. Nie was teacher Bai’s daughter. She did well in that new high school. She wanted to continue her education. But like her mother, had limited resources. This is where Richard Katz enters the story. His wife was Chinese American, and before her death they sponsored numerous young people in furthering their study. In an effort to improve her language skills, the non-profit arranged for Katz and Ms. Nie to be pen pals through her college years. After completing her degree, Mr.

⁷ Brueggemann, pp 6-14

⁸ Ann Scott Tyson, “The Legacy of Teacher Bai” in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (week of October 16, 2023), pp 22-28.

Katz found ways for her to continue graduate studies in the U.S. The retired American war vet and a 20 something Chinese graduate student upgraded their correspondence to telephone conversations every day to further her language skills. But her confidence was still fragile. Then Mr. Katz taught her to take in the world around her. “You just need to observe,” Ms. Nie recalls him saying. “You have to be in the [moment]; then you can learn more.”

Katz taught her to drive. They talked about everything—her friends, the news, books. Katz even spoke to her of his Christian faith, but he never put pressure on her. “I want you to know about these ideas. Then you can make up your own mind,” she recalls him saying. Ms. Nie now has a double masters, lives in China and works for a solar energy firm. The compassion, commitment, honesty, sensitivity, and appropriate self-disclosure of Richard Katz reflect attributes of good counsel, wonderful counsel. For her part, Ms. Nie is sharing what she has learned to promote a source of sustainable energy in China, and with her language skills, the world. In her own right, she is offering good counsel to the world.

There are currently 11 schools in an area which once had a cave as its only school. Teacher Bai became principal Bai. She plans to retire soon. Her oversight and management of this school district required wisdom: negotiations among the schools, among teachers, and with government regulators—not that different from what our principles do in Canada. Through the years she has offered good and wonderful counsel to students, parents and teachers alike. End of story.

This sermon began with the text in historical context, and I will conclude with an observation regarding the Messianic names within 1st Isaiah (ch 1-39). The chapters around these beautiful images from Isaiah 9:1-7 are a steady drum beat of Divine judgement towards a self-serving people who exploit the most vulnerable. They are as abusive as the nations around them. The Divine expects more of God’s people. Some days, we are not much different. This is why the Advent lectionary readings, which we are not using this year, always invite us into a posture of humble reflection and rededication. In that respect the texts around Is. 9:1-7 echo the lectionary. The Messiah comes to wayward people and that is good news.

Let us examine our lives and commit ourselves again to the way of the Messiah who came so long ago and dwells with us still. Ask for calm and wisdom on the way to work, to a meeting, to be with family, amidst conflict, etc... May this desired alignment with **The Wonderful Counselor** enable us to mediate good counsel in the places we go and among the people we meet. Amen.

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