

Wonderful Counselor FCC 11-29-20

Charity told me that the theme for the New Year's Day parade this year was hope. Something tells me that those who decided on that theme had no idea how much we would need hope by the end of the year. I've lost track of how many times I've had conversations with people in which we talk about when things will be normal again. Sometimes the conversation takes a bit of a philosophical turn and we talk about what normal even is. Then sometimes the conversation takes a psychological turn and we talk about how none of us are normal anyway. The fact of the matter is that we decide what normal is and we decide when we will be that. But how do we know when to start being normal again? And how do we go about the process of starting to be normal again?

And while we're asking questions, maybe we should ask another one- do we even want to go back to the old normal? How good was the old normal anyway? A pastor I used to serve with said 'the good old days never were'. So maybe we should ask if we want to step into a new normal? And what should that new normal to be like? Maybe instead of looking back longing for something that maybe wasn't that great anyway, we should look ahead and catch a vision for what life could be.

What better time to think about that? That after all is the core of what Christmas is about. Turn with me to

Isa_9:6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This was written almost 800 years before Christ. The people to whom God gave this promise were in a time of financial and political darkness. They prayed for deliverance from an army that was surrounding them and ready to destroy them, and in response God promised a ruler who would be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. That sounds perfect, but here's the problem- that ruler wouldn't show up just yet. They didn't know that

of course. But even if he showed up the next morning, they didn't see themselves as needing a wonderful counselor, they needed a wonderful cavalry, in order to fight off their enemies.

God was showing them that he didn't just want to deliver them from their immediate physical enemy. That would only be a short-term and shallow solution. God wanted to cure their problems at their source- and their problem was their unfaithfulness. And God didn't just want to solve one problem, he wanted to solve them all. God was concerned with their salvation and restoration in every way, in a holistic way. They needed a kind of salvation that was beyond what any cavalry could provide. They needed Calvary. Any less of a solution to their problems would really be no solution at all.

To understand how God would accomplish this holistic salvation, we should take a closer look at this verse. A little background on this- it was common in the ancient near east for the king who was ascending to the throne to take a throne name for himself, or several throne names. These names reflected his qualities and accomplishments, and even the idea that the king was a god. Now many times each name would be a sentence in itself, and many times that sentence would be about a deity, a god. That's why so many names in the Bible begin with Jeho or El and end in iah or el, because those are names of God and so then the person's name was essentially a statement about God. That's called a theophoric name. But ordinary people didn't use names that declared that they were a god. Only royalty were given names that declared that they were a god. That was common practice.

But there is something unique here. Notice that Isaiah says name, not names. It's like he's saying that these four names are one name. He's running them all together as one long compound sentence. This seems like a way to emphasize the unity of character, in other words, the integrity of the Messiah.

It was also common in ancient times that prophets would declare a king would come and bring reform, stability, and prosperity. His favor with a deity would open the gate of heaven permanently and peace

and justice would come from the deity ruling through that king. The Marduk prophecy from 1100 BC in Babylon is one example. Marduk was the Babylonian god. So many of the ideas in Isaiah 9 are things people had heard before. Why is that? Because every human being and human culture dreams of life being better, and they couch those dreams in terms that fit their own worldview, culture, religion, etc.

The difference between Isaiah 9:6 and all the other religious propaganda at the time is that Isaiah 9:6 actually has come true, and is coming true. The proof is in the proverbial pudding. We actually have a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Let's focus on the name wonderful counselor today.

The Hebrew word that is translated as wonderful means beyond understanding. It was a word people used to describe things that were too amazing to put into words. So Isaiah is saying that the Messiah will be so wonderful we can't really describe him.

The Hebrew word that is translated as counselor means one who instructs or guides from a position of authority. This kind of counselor is not like the friend you call late at night and vent your problems to them and they say oh yeah that stinks but you can do it, you will be ok. Nor is this the kind of counselor who is a professional who charges you to tell you basically the same thing your 2am friend told you. This kind of counselor in Isaiah's prophecy is a counselor who can show you the way out of your problems because he has authority over them. His counsel is real help because he knows all things. He is omniscient, as our confirmation students learned last week.

This name wonderful counselor reminds us that Jesus came for people who have problems they can't solve.

Luk 5:31 And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

Luk 5:32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

If you have your life figured out, then Jesus is not for you. But if you don't have your life figured out, if you have problems you can't

solve, if you are at the end of your rope, then Jesus wants to be your Wonderful Counselor. Jesus didn't spout off wise sayings in order to impress people. He offered truth and wisdom in a helpful way to people who needed help. If you didn't need his counsel, then you were the one who was left wondering what it was Jesus meant.

The only way you will really understand the counsel of Jesus is if you admit you have problems that you can't solve and if you actually want a solution, regardless of what form that solution may come in. Sometimes we like the idea of change, but when it comes down to actually being different, we lose momentum. We like the idea of becoming something different and better, but we are so accustomed to our status quo that we aren't sure we really want to change just yet. If we change, then life will be different. The challenges that come with a different life will be new and different. The old saying goes 'better the devil you know.' Maybe we aren't sure we are up for the new challenges that will come with a different life. Maybe we feel scared and uncertain.

But even if we do want to change, are we ready to do what Jesus says we have to do in order to actually become different? I think of Dave Ramsey, maybe you've read his books about managing money and solving your financial problems. He has great books; but owning and reading his books will not fix your problems. You actually have to do what he says to do. You have to do it his way or you will never attain the financial peace he talks about. That's the way it is with Jesus. We have to actually do what he says if we want to have the new life he promises.

Another reality is that if we want to have a different life, different in a good and better way, different in God's kind of way, then we need to look ahead and not back. We can't look back on what we used to have. God never told Israel to dream about having another King David or another King Solomon. Neither did God tell them to dream about the life, the city, the temple, the national glory they had under

Solomon. Because God never wanted his people looking back. He always wanted them looking ahead.

Why? Because God's vision for his people was bigger than that. His vision for a deliverer and king for Israel was much bigger than David or Solomon. His vision for a restored Israel was much bigger than anything David or Solomon had ever built.

What does God want next for us? If we were to picture the type of future God has in mind for us today, what's that look like? Now the first thing we might tend to do when we think about answers to such questions is to point our fingers at our political leaders and talk about what kinds of things they should do better. But this challenge from the Bible today to embrace God's desired future is not a challenge given directly to secular political entities today, although they are always welcome to get on board. This challenge is for the people of God specifically. What future does God desire for us? To make this more relevant, let's put the question in terms of what's happening right now. Does God want post-Covid Christians to be just like pre-Covid Christians? Does God want the post-Covid church to be just like the pre-Covid Church? You can't tell me God doesn't have something better in mind.

But what if Covid, and to be specific, our culture's responses to Covid, drags on for a while- for months or years? Does God want Christians and churches during Covid to be pretty much just like pre-Covid Christians and churches? What is God's desire for us? Who does he want us to be for such a time as this? If we admit we don't have the answer to that, and we actually want an answer, and we are willing to act on that answer, then our challenge this Advent season is to pray about that and then to listen to our Wonderful Counselor. And then we have to recognize and follow his counsel when it comes.

Americans are known for being loud. We are loud about our politics, we are loud about our culture, we are loud about our wants. We have loud voices around us, and we even have loud voices in us. But if its loud, it's probably not the Lord. His counsel comes in a form

that at first looks weak, foolish, insignificant, kind of like a baby born to destitute parents in the middle of nowhere.

1Co 1:26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

1Co 1:27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

1Co 1:28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,

1Co 1:29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

1Co 1:30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

Speaking of Christ again, Paul says in

Col 2:3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

The wonderful counsel of Christ is hidden, but he is waiting to show us. We have to be attentive- it may come in an unexpected form, just like it did 2000 years ago. Let's ask, seek, knock, listen, and then let's follow.

Let's pray...

Benediction: Eph 3:20-21 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.