

His Name Shall Be Called...

The Prophet Who Speaks – Wonderful Counselor

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November 29, 2020

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 9:6-7 (NRSV)

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of

the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will

die.” Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my

words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I

command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (NRSV)

Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see and open our ears that we might hear your word in the midst of these words today, open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

The Christmas season is on us, and it is a sentimental time. We like to think about eggnog around the fire and children in their pajamas opening their presents. We like to think about Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas.” I honestly love all that stuff, and I look forward to the traditions of Christmas. It’s so full of sentiment. It brings back all these childhood memories. All the marketing around us kind of plays into that, and it all becomes part of a beautiful sentimental time.

I love that part, and I’m not pooh-poohing it. I think it’s all special. But I think we have to be really careful and we have to be careful because we might begin to think that that is all that Christmas is about, instead of really understanding why it’s a big deal that Jesus is born? Who is this Jesus? If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised Messiah, and I certainly believe he is, why is that so powerful? What difference does that make? Who is this Jesus to be born? I think we can let the sentiment soften us up. I mean that in a good way – so that we can allow the true power of who this Jesus is to seep in.

Today you heard the Scripture that – let’s face it, you know it best from Handel’s *Messiah*, which is another one of those marvelous sentimental traditions of Christmas. “And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” *His name shall be called.*

Now it’s always important to remember that in Hebrew tradition that your name corresponds to your identity. It’s not just something that you’re called; it’s who you are. Your name is who you are. It’s the role you play; it’s your character. It’s what you’re here for. So, when we say, “His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor,” we’re saying, “That’s who this Messiah is – he’s a Wonderful Counselor. He’s Mighty God, and he’s an Everlasting Father, he’s the Prince of Peace.”

Over the next four weeks, we’re going to be talking about who this Jesus is, and we’re going to look at four things. They are Prophet, Priest, King, and Child, and there’s a loose connection between those and “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace.” If you remember nothing else, I want you to remember those four components – Prophet, Priest, King, and Child. And today, we’re going to talk about Jesus as the Prophet that came.

The Scripture from Deuteronomy is the words of Moses, and God is using Moses to speak a word to the people. He says, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.” Then he repeats it in verse 18: “I will

raise up for them a prophet like you from among your own people. I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet who shall speak to them everything that I command.”

What’s a prophet? A prophet is one who speaks for God; who brings a word from God to the people. I like to think of it as sort of a downward motion; the prophet is the one who speaks to the people on behalf of God.

Now sometimes we think of a prophet as someone who foretells the future, and that’s because the prophets of old would, in a sense, foretell the future. That God has said, “This is how you’re behaving, and this will be the consequences for that.” It’s kind of like a parent telling a child, “You’re making a decision, and this is what’s going to happen.” So, when we say that something has happened that you predicted, we say, “Wow, that was prophetic,” meaning that you were told what were to be consequences, and you received those. A prophet is one who brings a word from God.

Now Israel at the time of Christ needed a word from God. And I have to tell you, in the world we live in right now we are anxious for a word from God. In a time where truth seems pliable when truth seems to be that what you want to say is regardless of any connection to anything, we are hungry for someone who will give us...for a “Wonderful Counselor.” For someone who will speak the truth to us in a way that we can believe it and understand it and claim it. We’re hungry for a word from God.

Now here’s the problem. Sometimes we misunderstand the Word. We have Scripture, we have the teachings of Christ, and somehow, we don’t all hear it, and we don’t all appropriate it in the same way.

I had a funny thing happen to me this week. I had a conversation with a pastor who’s a friend and we were commiserating on what we’re going to do about COVID and how we’re dealing with it – all that sort of thing. Here’s the text message exchange: He says, “no idea what to do about Christmas Eve. This is hard.” Then I say, “Yes, it’s hard; we just have to make a decision and live with it.” Then he responds after a little break: “Ugh! I have COVID!” Four exclamation marks!) I said, “No way! No way! You have been really careful!” He responds after a little break, “No, No, No, *Hate, Hate, Hate*, Not *have*! Stupid autocorrect! I hate COVID!” He doesn’t *have* COVID; he *hates* COVID!

I laughed about that. Of course, there's nothing funny about having COVID, but I just thought, "I'd jumped to this conclusion because he'd said, 'I have COVID.'" I think what happens is that we have this little autocorrect inside us that when we read a Scripture or hear something, we autocorrect it to say what we want it to say. We interpret so that it says what we want it to say, and we don't really hear the word from God.

Now I will tell you that what I believe is that the reason we study Scripture, the reason we work at it so hard, the reason we dig into it, the reason we read it as part of a community of people who have other thoughts and ideas. The reason we pray so hard. The reason we come together in worship, all of that is so that we will come to know the speaker of these words better – this Jesus who we worship. And that we might more fully actually understand the word that the Prophet Jesus is speaking to us. Now let me be clear – Jesus is more than a prophet, and we'll talk about that in the weeks ahead. But first and foremost, Jesus came to give us a word from God.

So, what is that word? Three things that I quickly want to share with you. Here's the first word. The first word that Jesus brings us is *repent*. Repent. I know that sounds kind of like a street corner preacher, but it's a clear word. It's time to wake up and smell the coffee; you have to make some changes in your life.

The Scripture that we use most often during this Advent season as we prepare for the coming of the Messiah is the words from John the Baptist, and you're probably familiar with them. He said, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight paths in the wilderness." You know that part. Well, let me read the entire Scripture to you. It goes this way: "In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight..." (Matthew 3:1-3). Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near.

Friends, you know you may be comfortable in the life that you're living, but what the Scripture tells us is that we are missing the mark. That's literally what the word *sin* means in the Scripture. It's translated, and it means "to miss the mark." We are literally missing the mark. And I'm going to be honest, and I want you to take this personally. I want you to imagine Jesus looking right down through the camera to you and calling you by name and saying, "You've got to make some changes! I've seen your selfishness – I've seen your attitudes toward brothers and

sisters. I've seen the way you live your life. I've seen your hypocrisy and pretense. It's time for you to make some changes."

Look, it doesn't sound very Christmassy, does it? It doesn't seem like that's the place we celebrate in this season. But the Advent season is a time for preparing ourselves to hear the message from Christ about who we are called to be and how we are called to live. It's funny; let me just say that this is one of those times when we get the elbows. That's when you're sitting there, and you glance over in the living room to the person you're watching this with, and it's like they're saying, "You're hearing him? That's for you." This isn't just for you; it's for each one of us. That I need to hear this message that it's time to repent. In the words of the songwriter, Glenn Ballard, who wrote the song you'll recognize by Michael Jackson. It goes, "I'm starting with the man in the mirror; I'm asking him to change his ways. The message couldn't be any clearer."

I hope during this Christmas season, this Advent season, you'll look at your life and ask yourself that simple question, "What in my life really needs to change?" This is the time you can do it.

This is the prophetic tradition that Jesus comes in – the first word that the prophet speaks to us is "Repent!" Then the question is, "How should we repent? What are we supposed to do? How am I supposed to live?" The second word that Jesus as the prophet speaks to us is, "Follow me." When he looked at the disciples when he called them away from their lives, he said, "Come and follow me. Live as I live. Do what I do."

One of the most interesting things about the prophetic tradition, and I mean by that how the prophets spoke in the days of old, was that it wasn't just the words they said, but it was that they used their whole lives like kind of a parable of expression. Here's an example with Hosea. God speaks to the prophet Hosea and says, "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to go find a woman who's a prostitute, and I want you to marry her." So, he does that, and they're married, and then she goes back to her ways again. Then God says to Hosea, "Now I want you to go find her again and bring her back to you." That whole picture of his life was to be a message to Israel that that's who Israel has been and that God is going to continue to come and redeem them and bring them back again. So, it wasn't just the words that he spoke it was the way he lived his life that was to be a message, a word.

Jesus is the Living Word; he is *the* Word of God. It's his whole life that is a message to us. We're called to live and love like Jesus does. Albert Schweitzer, the great theologian, organist, and physician, said, "There are three ways you can teach a child. First is by example, second is by example, and third is by example." Jesus gives us a way of life, a pattern of living that we are to step into. It's a pattern of service; it's a pattern that's about humility; it's a pattern about giving ourselves away, and it's a pattern about embracing the outsider and marginalized. It's a pattern about standing up for the oppressed. It's above all, a pattern about loving our neighbor. And it's a particular way of life that we choose to live.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great pastor and theologian, wrote this in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: "If the world despises one of the brethren, the Christian will love and serve him. If the world does him violence, the Christian will succor and comfort him. If the world dishonors and insults him, the Christian will sacrifice his own honor to cover his brother's shame. Where the world seeks to gain, the Christian will renounce it. Where the world exploits, he will dispossess himself, and where the world oppresses, he will stoop down and raise up the oppressed. If the world refuses justice, the Christian will pursue mercy, and if the world takes refuge in lies, he will open his mouth of the dumb, and bear testimony to the truth."

My goodness! You see, there is a pattern of life that we're called on to follow.

I don't know how many of you know who Eric Liddell is, and you probably know the movie about him called "Chariots of Fire." In the 1924 Olympics, he was a Scottish runner who competed for Great Britain, and he chose not to run in the finals of the 400/4 by 400 relay because it was on a Sunday. He grew up in China, where his parents were missionaries; he went back to China and taught school there. Then when World War II came, the Japanese invaded and captured that area where he was living. He went into a civilian internment camp there and was there until he died of a brain tumor just before the liberation from the Japanese forces. But what he was so well known for was not just for refusing to run on Sunday but for the way that he lived in that internment camp, how he continued to teach the children, to lift up and buoy everyone. He wrote some little pamphlets and a manuscript that was never published when he was alive. Many decades after he died, some of those who had been with him in the internment camp had that material published. There's just this one section in there that really spoke to my heart. The book is called *The Disciplines of the Christian Life*, and he called it *A Manual of Christian*

Discipleship. Here's what he says, "You will know as much of God and only as much of God as you are willing to put into practice."

If you really want to know God, you have to choose to live a different way and practice it. "Follow me."

There is a pastor named Scot McKnight, and he's a professor of the New Testament, and he's been really involved in trying to reach younger Christians. He talks about why it's so difficult to convince young people that "The days of when my parents were Christians, so, therefore, I ought to be Christian" are past. And he talks about how it's so hard to convince them to become followers of Jesus. Here's what he says, and I thought it was so funny. He says, "The reason is simple. It's because those who are following Jesus really aren't following Jesus. Those who aren't following Jesus aren't his followers. It's that simple. Followers follow, and those who don't follow aren't followers. To follow Jesus means to follow Jesus into a society where justice rules, where love shapes everything. To follow Jesus means to take up his dream and work for it."

The prophet's word to us, in Jesus, is "Live like this. This is how you live. You have to make some changes, repent, and live and love like I live and love." That's on our mission statement here at St. Luke's.

There's one more word that I don't want us to miss. And that word is a word of hope. The Scripture that we read a moment ago said that God would raise up a prophet like Moses. Here are the words that Moses says in Exodus 6: "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'" (Exodus 6:6).

The third word is, "I will redeem you." It's a word of hope.

When we think of Jesus as the Living Word, we mean his whole life is the living Word. Not just the way he lived just up to the cross, but the fact that he's resurrected. The fact that God will not give up on us. God will redeem us and make it right even when we fall short. I don't know how many times I have looked through my own prayer journal and seen my confessions and my repentance. And I look, and I think, "I'm here saying it again. I'm repenting of the same sins that I've sinned before. And I just can't seem to change! God, I don't know what to do!" Have you ever thought that way? Have you wondered if there's any way it can be different? The word from

God to you is this, “I will not give up on you. My steadfast love will be with you when you sin, and when you don’t. I love you, and I will redeem you. That’s my promise.”

During this sentimental time when our hearts get softened, I hope you’ll put aside for just a little while and take the time to take a look at your life; to know that the prophet came to show us how to live, to challenge us to change, to actually follow him and live and love like he lived and loved—knowing that in the end he has us in the palm of his hand and will redeem us.

Let’s pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you that your Son came to us as the Prophet. The Prophet who is the Word from you, and that’s a word of challenge that we might repent and change our ways. A model for us to live our lives by. A way to shape our lives to follow your Son Jesus. And we thank you, God, that as we strive, empowered by your Holy Spirit to do just those things, we know that you will not give up on us. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*