

## **His Name Shall Be Called: The Child Who Leads**

Dr. Tom Pace

December 20, 2020

Isaiah 11:1-9

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.  
The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;*

*for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:1-9 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see, and open our ears that we might hear, and open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

You know, children are funny and fun things – most of the time. My grandson Pace had learned the song “Away in a Manger,” and he asked his mother, “Is this song about Mama Dee or about Dee Dee?” Now Mama Dee is my mother, who passed away a year ago, and Dee Dee is my wife. So, he asked, “is the song about Mama Dee or about Dee Dee?” And she said, “What song are you talking about?” He went ahead and sang it. He says, “The song says, ‘Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay, close by me forever, and love me, I pray. Bless all the dear children in thy tender care and fit us for heaven to live with Dee there.’” Not “live with *thee* there” but “to live with *Dee* there.” He wasn't sure who this was – Dee Dee, who wasn't in heaven yet, or my mom. But I guess that concerned him, and that made me laugh.

My granddaughter Clementine when she was much younger, she was very upset at her aunt, my daughter Callie, because Callie had announced that she was allergic to cats. That really upset Clementine. What it turned out to be is that Clementine was upset because she was allergic to various foods, and she thought that if Callie was allergic to cats that meant that Callie was eating those cats. She didn't think that was right.

Children are funny things. They're so cute most of the time. That's why I think it's strange that God would choose ... we don't need *cute* to save the world, so why when God sends the Messiah, does he send a child?

We've been talking about the various roles, the identity of this Jesus. Who is this Jesus whose birth we're celebrating? What is it about him that is so special?

Let's take a look at his identity, and we've talked about four things. They are Prophet, Priest, King, and Child. The Prophet is the one who speaks to us for God, who gives us a word from God, and he tells us to repent and to live as Jesus does. The Priest is the one who speaks to God for the people. So, a Prophet speaks to the people, and a Priest speaks to God for the people, and the Priest intercedes for the people and prays for them. And in fact, dies for them as Jesus does. Then King is the one who rules, who we make sovereign in our lives. And who works for peace.

But today, we're talking about Jesus as the child. I find it so amazing that in this passage today, they speak of all of the components of the Messianic age. That when the Messiah comes, the King will rule with righteousness and with justice and with compassion. And that the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and all of the peace that shall reign. Then it says, "And a little child will lead them." What an interesting way to choose to save the world?

I thought we might understand why it's important that Jesus comes as a child and what we might learn from it. There are three things I want to lift up today.

The first one is that Jesus comes as a child because a child is a human being. That may seem obvious, but it's so important to understand the whole thrust of the Christmas message. The Incarnation that Jesus came to be a human being. And the only way that human beings come into existence is by being born. There's no transporter like in "Star Trek" that beams them here, and the particles just come together. There's no Frankenstein that is pieced together out of pieces of other human beings. A real human being is born a child. And the essence of the Christmas story is that Jesus came as a human being that God himself chose to become a human being and live among us. He did not count equality with God as something to be grasped but came and was born in human form in our midst.

All of the pageantry of the Christmas story, all of the imagery of the Annunciation to both Joseph and to Mary by the angel Gabriel, the virgin birth itself, the heavenly host of angels that appear in the sky and sing "Glory to God in the highest!" to the shepherds. This magical, mysterious, mystical star that appears in the sky, and the Magi from the east come to visit. All these things are designed to say that this is not just any baby. But this baby is, in fact, the King and is God himself.

Imagine that for a moment. That the God who is so awesome, so powerful, so *awe-full* – that a Jew would believe if he or she looked directly at God, they would die. The power would be so great. That that God who is that powerful comes now as a child that you can rock to sleep. You can put your thumb in his mouth when he's crying to quiet him. Wow! Jesus came as a human being.

Martin Luther uses these words: "If you truly believe that the Word became flesh, that (the Logos, the word,) the logic of the universe became a human being, that is powerful enough to drive demons and devils away from you." Why is this so important? Well, because if Jesus is a human being, he understands us, he gets us. We talked about that when we looked at Jesus as

Priest. But maybe more importantly, if Jesus is a human being... God became a human being in Jesus so that God could be with us – Emanuel – God with us.

Those of us in the Protestant church understand Mary is an ordinary, flawed human being, just an ordinary girl. That God can have a relationship – that Jesus can have a relationship with her as close as a mother and child. The bond that's formed between a mother and child, that our relationship with God himself can be that close. Jesus came as a child because a child is a human being, and God wanted to be a human being to be with us.

Here's the second thing. Jesus came as a child because a child is vulnerable. When I was younger, a kid, we watched on Sunday nights the TV show "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom." It was because it was broadcast right around the time of "The Wonderful World of Disney," so I'd catch "Wild Kingdom." And Marlon Perkins, who was the presenter of "Wild Kingdom," pulled no punches. He let us see how wild the kingdom was. What you'd see was the lion would be chasing some group of antelope or zebras, and the babies who were the weakest and thus the most vulnerable would fall behind. And the lion didn't get the grown animals but got the babies. It was just heartbreaking to watch.

But the truth is there – babies are most vulnerable among us. Wow-what an interesting way to save the world! Wouldn't you think that if you were going to save the world as broken as it was, you'd come with might and power and an army, and you'd overthrow the evil with just the strength that you have? But the Scripture says, "A little child shall lead them." No, Jesus came to overthrow the powers of darkness by being vulnerable. By allowing himself to be tortured and ultimately to be killed. To give himself away.

Now we may think to ourselves that we're not called on to die in that way and maybe not. But vulnerability, living that life of vulnerable love, is more than that. C.C. Lewis writes about it in his book *The Four Loves*. He says, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable." (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*).

Maybe you have loved someone who broke your heart. Maybe you've reached out to a friend with whom there is a broken relationship to seek to reconcile, and you've been rejected. Maybe you've sought to serve someone in some way and been exploited, taken advantage of. We continue to choose to be vulnerable – that's the life of a Christian. To live in a way that, if necessary, would take us to a cross. And that's what a child is—the most vulnerable among us.

When I was in seminary, it always bothered me and even offended me how often, through history, the Christian faith has not functioned that way. Charlemagne, as the Frankish King, made everyone a Christian in Europe by threatening them with their death if they didn't convert. In 1095 the first Crusade was launched by Pope Urban II, and for a hundred years, the Crusaders marched across the Holy Land to rid it and rescue it from Jewish and Muslim domination. The Fourth Crusade was launched literally a hundred years later by a pope whose name was, of all things, Innocent III. During the 200 total years of the Crusader-era the historians really can't pinpoint the number, but somewhere between one and 9 million Jews and Muslims were killed in the name of Jesus as the Prince of Peace. How often do we get it wrong?

No, Jesus came as a child to show us that to really love is to give ourselves away and to be vulnerable.

The third thing is this. To say that Jesus comes as a child is to remind us that a child is a symbol, a sign of hope. I remember when our five girls were born. With every one of them, I had the same experience. Right when they're born, when you hold them for the first time, and you look down, you see this bundle of possibilities. This bundle of what could be, and you dream. You say, "I wonder who this child is going to become? I wonder what they're going to accomplish. I wonder what her gifts are going to be, how God has made her. What she's going to be good at? I wonder what her personality will be." And I must confess I think of some of the negatives too. I wonder who's going to break her heart and what tragedies will come her way that she'll have to deal with.

A baby is a symbol of possibility—a symbol of hope.

This whole passage is about that. So, the chapter just before this is a description of how the armies of Assyria will come down from the north and just ravage Israel, the northern kingdom of Israel. Will just destroy it. And the image that's used is like clear-cutting a forest. That they will just scrape the ground, so there's nothing left, that everything is destroyed. The residents of the Northern Kingdom of Israel were either killed or taken away as slaves. And then this chapter

shifts, and it begins, “But there shall come forth from the stump of Jesse...” Jesse was the father of David. “...There shall come forth from the stump of Jesse a shoot.”

Maybe you’ve seen the pictures where maybe a little sprout has grown out of a stump. I say, “Look, there’s a little Baby Jesus tree!” That’s a sign of how in the midst of such difficulties, of such brokenness, there it is – just a tiny sprout of hope.

One of the authors I like to read is a man named Stephen Montgomery, and here’s what he says. These are his examples. “These are shoots of hope, a Baby Jesus tree sprouting up. A man who thought he could never risk loving again finds himself open to overcome the fear and open himself up in a new relationship. A woman who has always equated security with a spouse discovers after a broken heart that she can make a home herself and enjoy it. A man who cares for his invalid wife for a number of emotionally difficult years finds after her death that he has energy for the pursuits and interests he has almost given up. A couple that tried and tried and tried to have a baby with no luck and then tried and tried and tried to adopt with no luck. Then there’s a baby in Peru. And then several years later another baby from Nepal.” Then Dr. Montgomery writes: “I know this firsthand, my friends, from my son born in Peru is now in his second year of college. And my daughter, born in Nepal, is now a senior in high school.”

Just Baby Jesus sprouts. A child of hope.

I have some other examples as well. A family who has a son who’s been in all sorts of trouble. They get the grade card from the military school where he is, and he has a 4.2 average and is involved in sports and a number of other things. A Jesus Tree, a sprout of hope. Or the alcoholic who has fallen off the wagon multiple times and now has made it through one day, then another, then another, and he thinks to himself, “You know, the cravings might just go away.” A sprout of hope. Or the older adult who is in his home and he hasn’t seen anyone except people making deliveries at the door for months and months because he’s been in quarantine and wants to stay safe. Then he gets word that he will be receiving the COVID 19 vaccine. He’ll get to get out again. A sprout of hope! No, we are a people who desperately need hope.

This week Houston Methodist and MD Anderson Hospitals received their first shipment of the Pfizer vaccine. I know at Houston Methodist, the Director of Spiritual Care – the Head Chaplain – met the shipment at the door and had a prayer with all those gathered around thanking God for those who had created it and manufactured it and transported it and administered it. And also, for those who receive it. Just in this tub of frozen vaccine is hope. Just

a sprout of hope. Friends, we need hope. And this Jesus, who comes to us, reminds us that we can believe that God will save us.

Jesus came as a child because a child is a human being, and a child is vulnerable, and a child is a sign of hope.

I remember back when we used to have a gathering time out here in the Gathering Room after church. Do you remember those days? We would gather, and we'd have coffee and cookies, and those granitas – you remember those? We'd visit, and we'd hug and talk up close. Those were good days. We will not take those for granted once we get back to those again, I will tell you that.

One time when that was happening a lady brought her brand-new baby. I mean we're talking a week or two old – just so tiny to the church in one of those carriers that snaps onto a stroller. We were all gathered around, and we were all hunched over – poor child, just saw all these faces! And we were all hunched over oohing and awwing, and there was a little boy, maybe five years old, and he elbowed his way in, and he looked into the carrier. As soon he saw the baby, he just stood back up, and he walked away. Then he said to his brother, "It's *just* a baby." It was as if he was expecting something awesome, but it was "just a baby."

But here's what I would tell you. A child to be born is not just a baby. Though this baby is God himself. This baby is God who came as a human being to save us, vulnerable, a sign of hope, and God's promise that he would save his people from their sins. We will celebrate this baby.

Let's pray together. *O gracious and loving God, how can we thank you enough for coming to be with us to be one of us to save us not with a mighty sword but with the strength of vulnerability. To be for us the hope of the world. And we pray that this little child will lead us. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*