

To Us A Child Is Born: Everlasting Father

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

December 17, 2017 – AM Sermon

Rev. Peter Jonker

Isaiah 9:2-7, Matthew 11:27-30

One of the things I find as I study scripture, and I think this is common experience when you dig into the Word, is that really familiar Bible passages have bits of strangeness in them. You think that a passage has nothing left to teach you, but then you really listen to it and all of a sudden you're scratching your head. So it is with Isaiah 9. "To us a child is born, to us a Son is given, the government will be upon his shoulders and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." We all know these words are about Jesus. Isaiah is looking forward to the Messiah. Jesus is the Messiah. If you've grown up in the church your whole life you immediately think, this is a prophecy of Jesus. But as we preach through the four titles given to the Messiah in verse 6, the third Sunday of Advent brings us to the third title, and we come to that bit of strangeness. Everlasting Father? How can Jesus' name be called Everlasting Father? We know our Trinitarian theology. We believe in one God, a God with one will and one purpose and one substance. We believe that this God reveals himself in three distinct persons God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God the Son, not God the Father. So how can Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus say, 'His name shall be called Everlasting Father?'

Well, to help us make sense of this, here's something about the nature of prophesy that I learned from my professors in seminary. When an Old Testament prophet makes a prophecy about the future, He does not see the future in HD. God does not reveal the future in ultra-clear 1080 High definition so that every detail of the future is laid out with brilliant clarity. Prophets see the future in the misty distance. Prophets see the future like a person sees a mountain range from a long way off. If you are driving down I-70 toward Denver, and you are still an hour out of town, you will see the mountains in the distance. You know that mountains are coming, but the mountains will appear as distant blue-gray hills. Their details will be, as yet, indistinct. It's not until you are among the mountains that you will see the details. 'O that mountain has snow on the top of it. And those two mountains are further apart than I realized. And look there is a gorgeous cascade running down the side of that mountain over there.'

From a distance Isaiah looks at the mountain of the coming Messiah and he can see a child, and he can see justice and righteousness, and he can see a wonderful counselor, and he can see something about an Everlasting Father. But the fine distinction of these things are not given to him. He doesn't see, precisely, a baby in a manger. He doesn't see, precisely, a cross. It's only of us who are on the other side of the events who can see these finer distinctions. So, from a distance Isaiah looks and says, "I see an Everlasting Father." But then when the future actually arrives – and that's where we find ourselves when we read Matthew 11 – the finer distinctions reveal themselves. The Messiah is not the Everlasting Father, but he is the one who reveals the Father. God the Father has committed all things to the Son. The Son alone knows the heart of the Father. And the Son is the one who reveals the heart of the Father. So it turns out that the Everlasting Father Isaiah saw from a distance was the Son making known the Father's heart in a new way.

And Jesus certainly does that. We are used to calling God our Father. It's arguably our favorite title for him. I know that when I write my longer pastoral prayers for church, my

favorite way to address God is to call him Father. ‘Father, thank you! Father, help your people!’ In our imaginations, the picture of God as our Father is prominent. Jesus is the reason for that. Without Jesus, we probably wouldn’t think of God as a loving Father so much. Did you know that the image of God as Father is seldom used in the Old Testament? It’s there, but it’s relatively rare. According to a study I read this week, God is directly referred to as Father only 15 times in the entire Old Testament. He’s called by the Holy name of Yahweh over 6000 times. He’s called Lord Sabbaoth – the Lord of angel hosts, a military image – 278 times. He’s called Adonai – Lord – over 400 times. So the picture of God as a Father is tiny compared to the images of holiness and power and strength. In the New Testament that totally changes. ‘Father’ is Jesus’ favorite image for the first person of the Trinity. In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – Jesus refers to God as Father 65 times. In the gospel of John, Jesus refers to God as his Father over 100 times! The Letters of Paul refer to God as Father over 40 times. The Father image explodes in the New Testament. And, as most of you know, in the New Testament God is not just called Father; he is called Abba. Both Jesus and Paul refer to the first person of the Trinity as Abba. Abba is an Aramaic word and it basically means Dad. If you spoke Aramaic, you’d call your Mom and Dad Imma and Abba. It’s really personal. So Jesus reveals that God doesn’t just want us to think of him as a Father, God wants us to call him Dad.

What difference does it make to think of God as our everlasting Father to call him Dad? Let me try to answer that with a scene from classic literature. It’s a scene from Homer’s the Illiad. Hector, the King of Troy, Lord of an Empire, mighty warrior – has been off fighting a great war. As he returns home from the battlefield he sees his young son Astyanax outside his home and he strides towards him, happy to see his son. The boy looks up and starts to scream and cry. All he sees coming toward him is a huge man wearing scary armor, covered in the dirt and blood of war, a mask of iron covering his face. Hector sees the child’s fear, so he takes off his helmet and smiles at his beloved Son. He picks his child up, and takes him in his arms. ‘Don’t be afraid my child. It’s your dad.’ In a flash, in a twinkling of an eye the boy’s fear is turned to joy.

The world is a big scary place. We are small creatures. And the world seems indifferent. Years roll by, tectonic plates grind against each other beneath the surface of the earth, history slouches forward covered in dirt and blood. And all this seems to happen with no regard to our existence. On the surface it can all look pretty terrifying to us children. But when Jesus teaches us to call God our Father, it’s like the scary mask of history and circumstance is torn off and we see the deep truth of things. The Maker of the universe knows our name, and he loves us, and he wants us to call him ‘Dad.’ When the Jesus came to the world, when Mary wrapped her son in bands of cloth and laid him in the manger, God revealed many things to his people through that boy, but one of the most amazing of all those things is the fact that the Lord of the history is our loving Father.

So that warmth and that intimacy is one of the things Jesus reveals to us when he teaches us to call God ‘Father’, and that warmth and intimacy is definitely our favorite thing about calling God ‘Abba Father’, but it’s not the only implication of this title. There is another implication to a Father’s love. Imagine you are a parent, and you are chaperoning a church event in which your daughter is involved. Say it’s a GEMS outing and you are all going to Sky Zone to bounce on trampolines. As a chaperone you watch all the kids at the event to make sure they’re safe, but because she is your child, you watch your daughter in a special way. You aren’t just watching her to make sure she’s safe, you are watching her to see how she behaves. Is she being cliquy with some of her friends? Is she showing off? Is she noticing the kids who are on the

margins and trying to bring them in? Is she thinking of others besides herself? You watch and if you think that your child is being cliquy or mean, you take her aside and you say something. ‘Stop that!’ ‘You can do better!’ Parents love their children and their love has disciplinary weight. Yes, it’s wonderful to know that the Lord of the universe is your Father, but guess what? That means you get extra attention. The love of the Everlasting Father comes with disciplinary weight. The everlasting love of the everlasting Father means that He has an everlasting determination to make you everlastingly new.

All this can help us get a better understanding of what the love of the everlasting Father feels like as we roll through life. For our imaginary girl on the GEMS outing at sky zone, experiencing the love of her parent can feel like a warm embrace full of acceptance and affection – ‘I love you honey’. But parental love can also feel like a lecture, a disciplinary rebuke reminding her of what’s expected from her – ‘Honey! You know better than that.’ I’m sure children much prefer the former to the latter, but both feelings are signs that the parental love is flowing. And so it is with God. It’s not just in your moments of contentment and joy that you are feeling the love of God pouring into your life; the love of God is also surrounding you in those moments of restlessness when you have this overwhelming feeling that you can do better, that something is missing, that you are meant for something more.

Thinking about Fathers this week inevitably led me to think of my own Dad. It was actually his birthday this week. 76 years old. He was and is a great Dad. It struck me how much of my Dad’s love for me, how much of what I love about my dad has a formative push to it. My dad is a reader and he always told me how important it was to read widely and to stay informed. I can still feel that love, that value, pushing me as I make my daily life choices. My dad loved good sermons and I remember when I was quite young my dad said to me, “A sermon ought to give some comfort. People’s lives are hard; they need good news.” I still hear that voice as I write my sermons. My dad hated pumped up piety – piety for show, festooned with clichés. That’s still in me too. That’s how it goes with the love of parents; it’s not just the embrace it’s a push, it’s an expectation. The stronger the love, the stronger the push. And the love of our Father is very strong. Strong enough to send his one and only son to this world in a manger, strong enough to endure that son’s death for us, strong enough for our everlasting Father could give us everlasting life.

© Rev. Peter Jonker