

# Wonder Counselor

The Rev. Dr.  
Peter G. James

Isaiah 9:2-7

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*The danger is allowing the grandeur of this music to overshadow its message.*

Every time I hear the words, “His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” Handel’s Messiah explodes in my mind. This music never fails to stir me. The danger, I suppose, is allowing the grandeur of this music to overshadow its message.

The Messiah is a musical composition called an oratorio for voices and orchestra, telling a sacred story without costumes, scenery or dramatic action. Christian composers like Handel set major themes of the Bible to music. Bibles were too expensive in the 1700s to be individually owned, so oratorios taught the Bible through music. The music helps us recall the words of Isaiah’s prophecy.

George Frideric Handel aspired to become a musician. His father, a successful surgeon, wanted his son to become a lawyer. Musicians, his father said, are nothing more than vagabonds. His father allowed his son to take music lessons, and it wasn’t long before Handel demonstrated prodigious talent. Handel attended law school until his dad died, and afterward devoted himself full-time to music.

Handel wrote the libretto and score of The Messiah within a span of 24 days. He deprived himself of sleep and food in this burst

of creative genius. He seldom left his room, sliding finished copies of his music under the bedroom door. His valet often remembers finding Handel weeping at his desk, overcome by the beauty and majesty of these Biblical texts set to music

The Messiah made its debut at the New Music Hall in Dublin in 1742. At its conclusion, a friend complimented Handel: “I must congratulate you upon such a marvelous piece of entertainment.”

“Entertainment,” Handel exclaimed, “It was not written for entertainment. It was written for education.”

This 3½ hour oratorio divides into three parts. Part 1 dramatizes, with great expectancy, the coming of the promised Messiah, including the words read earlier as our Scripture lesson. Part 2 exalts Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Part 3 celebrates Jesus’ return to earth at the culmination of human history.

We’ve been exploring God’s Big Story in worship this year. We’ve created, Genesis tells us, to live in relationship with God and each other. Sin, however, destroys the relationship. So God seeks to restore the relationship by means of the covenant, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” The Ten Commandments specify what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. The role of prophets like Isaiah, as we said last Sunday,

***... Isaiah is writing about the future as though it has already happened.***

is to call people back into covenant relationship with God. If this is too much to remember, the abridged version reduces God's Big Story to just three words: creation, fall and redemption.

The prophet Isaiah speaks God's Word during a particularly bleak period in Israel's history. In Isaiah 9, two of its 12 tribes, Zebulun and Naphthali, have been overrun by Tiglath Pileser of Assyria in 733 BC. The Assyrians decimate the land and deport its people, carving northern Israel into three Assyrian provinces. It's a time of unrelenting darkness!

A dramatic shift occurs in verse 2. Isaiah fast-forwards to a time when "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (9:2). There will be light at the end of this dark tunnel. The yoke, bar and rod, symbols of Assyrian slavery, will be destroyed and its implements of war obliterated (9:4-5).

Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, as I said last Sunday, most often address immediate, near-term events in Israel's history. This portion of Isaiah's prophecy, however, leaps over the centuries to a day when "a child will be born for us and a son will be given to us." The burdens laid on the shoulders of the oppressed (9:4) will ultimately rest on his broad shoulders (9:6).

Isaiah writes about these future events in perfect tense. In other words, Isaiah is writing about the future as though it has already

happened. His prophecy expresses the absolute certainty of future events.

This child born for us and son given to us is identified with four names (some count five names, if the words "Wonderful Counselor" are broken into two). "His name shall be called Wonderful Counselor." I submitted my sermon title, Wonder Counselor, to those who print and proofread the bulletin this week. Several of them asked whether I meant to title it, "Wonderful Counselor." The Hebrew words literally read "Wonder Counselor." Wonderful is not an adjective serving to modify and qualify the noun "counselor." Wonder is itself a noun. God's miracles might be called "wonders." God's parting of the Red Sea, God's providing manna in the wilderness and God's leading with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night are all acts of wonder.

The fictional character Wonder Woman helps us understand the difference. Wonder Woman was the first great female superhero. DC Comics introduced her as a male counterpart to Superman in 1941. In the 1970s, there was a TV series called Wonder Woman. Warner Brothers is preparing an animated film by the same name scheduled for release early next year. You will notice Wonder Woman wasn't called Wonderful Woman, for that would make her comparable to all the other wonderful women of the world. Her title, Wonder Woman, sets her apart from all other women. She possesses special powers and abilities that make her a one-of-a-kind Wonder Woman.

***“God Almighty has set before me two great objectives, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.”***

- William Wilberforce

God isn't merely a Wonderful Counselor. God is a Wonder Counselor (Isaiah 28:29). And the wonder of God as counselor will be transferred to this child born for us and son given to us.

Counselor doesn't equate to our word therapist, although God's presence is wonderfully therapeutic. A counselor is able to govern other people. President-elect Obama is currently assembling his cabinet to advise him on domestic and foreign policy. Our Wonder Counselor does not need any other advisors. He is perfectly capable of serving as His own counselor. As Paul asks rhetorically in his letter to the Romans, "Who has been the Lord's counselor?" (11:34).

"His name shall be called... Mighty God." We began with a child and son in verse 6. But this one to come is not only described in terms of his humanity but his divinity, as well. His name shall be called Mighty God (Hebrew--El gibbor). This title, Mighty God (10:21), has now been transferred to the child born for us and the son given to us.

"His name shall be called... Everlasting Father." Keep in mind when we use the designation "Father" for both, we are referring to the character, not the gender, of God. The designation Father in connection with God may be problematic for some of you. There are those among us who don't have positive associations with their earthly fathers. But the quality of this father is defined by its adjective everlasting. The role

of this child born for us and son given to us is eternally like a loving father. He will be an enduring, endearing father, embodying all the qualities of what God intends for earthly fathers.

"His name shall be called... Prince of Peace." The Hebrew word for peace, "shalom," doesn't refer merely to the absence of conflict, it expresses well-being and wholeness. His rule will result in wholeness and well-being for people.

We are making a big turn today in God's Big Story. During this season of Advent, we are turning our attention from the Old Testament to the New Testament. The name of this child born for us and son given to us shall be called "Wonder Counselor, mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace." His rule brings wholeness and well-being to people. "Peace, I leave with you," he said. "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). "Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus said, "for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

I just finished reading a biography of William Wilberforce, one of my heroes. Wilberforce became a member of English Parliament in 1784 at the tender age of 21. A year later, he underwent a conversion to Christ. He became increasingly convinced through prayer and Scripture study that "God Almighty has set before me two great objectives, the suppression of the slave trade and the reformation of manners" (by which he meant the moral reformation of England). Wilberforce became passionate about the inter-

***God's kingdom  
for which we  
pray, we work  
to establish  
here on earth.***

play between faith and real life. He devoted his life to translating Christian principles into political action.

Wilberforce first brought a motion forward to outlaw slavery in 1786. Africans by the thousands were being conscripted to work on sugar plantations in the West Indies. Wilberforce brought bill after bill to Parliament, only to see them defeated. Every year, in every conceivable manner, he brought the abolition of slavery to Parliament. His life serves as a monument to his tireless resolve. He used every legitimate means to shift the tide of public opinion. The man, I tell you, was relentless. He didn't do it alone, but he persevered to keep the cause alive when many others forgot it. He won a preliminary victory in 1807, 20 years after introducing his first bill. But the scourge of slavery was not eliminated from the British Empire until May 14, 1833. On that day, in the House of Commons, Lord Stanley announced passage of the motion to finally abolish slavery. He did so with a glowing salute to Wilberforce: "Wilberforce still remains to see, I trust, the final consummation of the great and glorious work which he was one of the first to commence; and to exclaim, like the last of the prophets.... Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace." Indeed, three days later, Wilberforce died.

Isaiah's prophecy doesn't offer an escape from this real world. Isaiah declares that God addresses our problems by coming into this

world to deal with evil and oppression in all its horrible forms. The coming of the Messiah is about God acting in the real world. God comes into an arena seemingly dominated by wicked despots and oppressive regimes, but they will not have the last word. The Christmas Carol "Away in the Manger" concludes with the words, "And fit us for heaven to live with thee there." While these words may be true, we also read in verse 7, "of the increase of his kingdom there will be no end." God's kingdom for which we pray, we work to establish here on earth. We seek God's reign in human hearts—in the hearts of all who open to this child born for us and this son given to us.

