

A Small Baby with a Big Name

On Monday morning five year old Johnny announced to his kindergarten class that he had gotten a baby sister over the weekend. “Johnny,” inquired the teacher, “What is your sister’s name?” “Well,” replied Johnny with a sense of confusion, “She is called pumpkin face, adorable angel, bundle of joy, cutie pie, perfect princess, little lady and gift from God, but I just call her Sally!”

Long ago another baby was born who was called by several names. Through the prophet Isaiah, God named this baby: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Though Isaiah wrote his prophecy seven hundred years before the Christ Child was born, the four names given to him fit perfectly and take on new significance when describing the Savior born in a Bethlehem barn, especially in this turbulent year.

The name, “Wonderful Counselor,” tells the world that Jesus is wonderfully wise and his words filled the world with eternal truths about how we should live and treat each other. Clever lawyers tried to match wits with him but failed. Religious leaders tried to refute his truths but could not. Even the king and governor attempted to get the best of him, but his words of love and compassion have stood the test of time.

On this Holy night, God came to earth to illuminate human minds and hearts that can so easily descend into dark places. This is why the wisdom and truth Jesus brings is symbolized by light. The prophet Isaiah begins his prophecy with these glorious words: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on them light has shined.” In the beginning of creation God said, “Let there be light,” and the physical light appeared. At the second creation God again said, “Let there be light,” and a small baby appeared bringing spiritual light into the darkness, pain and confusion of our fragile world.

However, if God was only able to reveal his wisdom and truth but didn’t have the power to enforce his words through his death and resurrection, what a helpless God he would be. This is not the case, because Isaiah gives Jesus the name “Mighty God.”

Just as the infant Jesus was wrapped in bands of cloth, or as the King James Version says, “swaddling clothes,” at his birth, so too, the events of this sacred story were wrapped in cloths of oppression. The place and circumstances of Jesus birth paid tribute to the oppressor. But this infant grew up to face an oppressor much more powerful than Emperor Augustus. This small baby grew up to confront and defeat the evil of this world by the power of sacrificial love on the cross. No wonder this baby is called “Mighty God.”

This leads to the third name Jesus was given: “Everlasting Father.” At Christmas God sent into our midst his Son because he chose to love us rather than condemn us and because he chose to free us from the things that oppress us. The role of any loving parent is to reassure his or her children that their love is forever and at the same time instill the necessary attributes to live a healthy, holy and compassionate life.

Raising two rough and tumble boys has been one of my greatest blessings, but not without its challenges. When my sons were seven and ten they spent the month of December teasing each other that they were going to get a Barbie doll for Christmas. So for Christmas I got each of them a Barbie doll, which I made them open at the same time. My ten year old burst out laughing, but my seven year old burst into tears and ran out of the room. After consoling and reassuring him of our love and that we were just having fun, we walked together back into the den. Suddenly he stopped and pointed to a very large, wrapped box in the corner of the room and said, "If that is a Barbie doll house, I'm leaving forever." We may want to leave God when life engulfs us and our world with pain and disappointment. The Prophet Isaiah reminds us that in Christ, God's love is with us forever. This is why the name "Everlasting Father" is so important, especially right now when our world is dealing with so many challenges.

The result of the first three names is the fourth name: "Prince of Peace." Peace is the outgrowth of believing in this small baby who is a wise counselor, a mighty protector and an eternal companion. I have often been asked, especially this time of year: "Why is there so much hatred, so much discontent, so much chaos in the world? Why can't there be Peace on Earth?" My response is simple: "In order to have peace on earth, there must first be peace in the human heart." At Christmas, God sent his gift of peace into a world filled with turmoil. As we gaze into the miracle of the manger this night and see the face of God, we can experience God's peace which does pass all understanding.

On December 24, 1914, British and German soldiers faced each other across the Flanders "No Man's Land" that experienced so much pain and suffering. Suddenly around midnight, British soldiers heard the music of Silent Night coming from across the battlefield. Within minutes the soldiers began singing. When they finished, the German troops cheered and began singing a carol of their own.

Just before dawn, after much singing on both sides, a German soldier did the unthinkable. He crossed the "No Man's Land" carrying a small tree graced with bright candles illuminating the darkness. Across the barbed wire he shouted in English, "Merry Christmas!" As dawn broke, soldiers on both sides came together, shook hands, embraced and exchanged small tokens as gifts. On that Christmas Eve, in the midst of war, there was, in the hearts of these soldiers, PEACE!

On Christmas God does the unthinkable, he crosses from heaven to earth. In the midst of the wars we battle in our lives, God calls out to us through this small baby, offering us a peace that transcends human wants and desires, our egos and processions, our pain and grief. We may never make sense of all that happens in our lives or this world, but through the Babe of Bethlehem we can find peace in the midst of it.

Tonight, we celebrate once again the greatest gift the world has ever known. Christmas is the embodiment of God's love manifested in a baby who imparts to us the eternal gifts of wisdom, power, fidelity and peace so we may never be alone or lost or forgotten. By living into these prophetic and profound names, Christ will be born each day by our words and actions.

Readings

Isaiah 9:2-7

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. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. 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.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”