

Names of the Messiah: Wonderful Counselor

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Prayer of Illumination

Shine your light upon us, O God, as we seek to be enlightened. By your Spirit, open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts as we prepare for the coming of your Son. Amen.

Introduction

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the love-struck Montague asks the enchanting Capulet, "*What's in a name?*"

Nothing defines us more in our lives than our name. When we name a child, we name them according to how we want to see the child in the future. Sometimes we name them after a close relative, sometimes a name from scripture, or maybe a name we revere or a virtue we cherish. Names define us in ways that are deeply personal and meaningful—right down to the core of our being.

In Scripture, God sometimes gives a new name to indicate a new identity, a new promise, or a new purpose. In our passage, Israel was down to nothing, but God was up to something. It was a dark chapter in Israel's history—Assyrian rule had been oppressive.

But God in his creative power was bringing about a new situation for his people:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

A dramatic shift was about to take place—
from sorrow to joy—
from slavery to freedom—
from gloom to hope—
all brought about by a newborn king—
who wasn't heavy-handed or oppressive.

A child king would be born FOR US—for the people. He would be a gift—a blessing—a light our darkness.

It was common in the ancient world when a king ascended to his throne to be given additional names—throne names. Their names would describe the mission, values, and flavor of the new king's rule. Throughout history, kings have been given nicknames to describe the personality or style of their rule:

Ivan the Terrible of Russia
Bloody Mary, Queen of England

William the Bad of Sicily
Charles the Mad of France
Ragnar the Hairy Pants of the Vikings
Alfonso the Slobberer, king of Leon
Ivaylo The Cabbage, king of Bulgaria

But the king we're looking at this morning has a very different name and a very different reputation and style of leadership from any of these rulers. He's both principled and passionate. Two chapters earlier, this newborn king has already been given a throne name when Isaiah said,

"the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel, which means God with us." Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

And here in Isaiah 9, each of the four titles has two parts—

Wonderful Counselor
Mighty God
Everlasting Father
Prince of Peace

This king from the lineage of David will be a totally different kind of king from all previous kings. He will succeed where all others failed. He will be the Messiah, the Anointed One—the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Scripture: Isaiah 9: 6-7 (NRSV)

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.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Names of the Messiah: Wonderful Counselor

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the Hobbit Frodo and his companions had gone through so much already: the dark caves of Moria and the Dwarvish mines that went deep into the belly of the mountains. There's a scene where Frodo is entirely overwhelmed, and the great wizard guide Gandalf sat quietly on a rock consoling the beleaguered Frodo.

My dear Frodo, Hobbits really are amazing creatures. You can learn all there is to know about their ways in a month and yet, after a hundred years, they still can surprise you.

Frodo was still despondent. The burden of the ring's immense power was just too much. Evil dogged his every step. He sustained a terrible shoulder injury. He was dubious about completing his chosen path.

"Gandalf, I wish the ring had never come to me," bemoaned Frodo, "I wish none of this ever happened."

And then the wise Gandalf said these words:

"... So do all who live to see such times; but that is not for them to decide. All we have to do is decide what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil. Your uncle Bilbo was meant to find the ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought."

The counsel of Gandalf was wise: he didn't dismiss Frodo's words, but he also didn't let them define his life. Gandalf was able to help Frodo see his situation and his life with new eyes. He was freed to read his circumstances differently and to see the larger scheme of things. The mission to destroy the ring of power could continue.

The first name for the Messiah is *Wonderful Counselor*. The image isn't so much as a divine psychotherapist listening to a patient reclined on a couch, but as a trusted counselor that advises the king in his governing and policies.

Two chapters later, Isaiah tells us more about the role of this *Wonderful Counselor*:

*The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him,
The Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit of counsel and might ...
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
Or decide by what he hears with his ears,
But with justice he will judge the needy.* Isaiah 11:2-4 (NIV)

The message this Advent for us is this:

- Put yourself under the tutelage of the Wonderful Counselor.
- Receive his constructive criticism.
- Heed the Messiah's trustworthy advice and guidance.

- Let him advise you on your blind spots, errant paths, decisions you're pondering, and how to exercise your authority.
- As God says to us of his beloved Son: *Listen to him!*

When the word "wonderful" is used in the Bible, it usually speaks of God and his works. So there's something divine, something supernatural, something otherworldly about this king.

Earthly rulers are sometimes wise and sometimes fools. Their insights are sometimes penetrating, and sometimes tragically misguided.

But this—this is a King who needs no counselors, for he himself is the *Wonderful Counselor*. He has the wisdom and the power to make the impossible, possible. And he is here for us! The gift that keeps giving.

"In Him," says the Apostle Paul in Colossians, *"are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* You can trust this King.

Have you ever been betrayed? He has.
 Have you ever been wrongly accused? He has.
 Have people ever gossiped about you?
 Have you ever suffered physical pain?
 Been in physical need?
 Felt lonely?
 Suffered loss?
 Been afraid?

He's been there. He gets it. And he'll get you through.

Our *Wonderful Counselor* not only consoles us, he also takes us to new places. He stretches us. He goes beyond business as usual and religion as usual. He used his authority to shake things up:

"You have it heard it said ... but I say unto you." Matthew 5
"You know that those who are regarded as rulers lord it over [others] ... but not so with you."
 (Mark 10:42-43)

Jesus wasn't predictable—he was different. In fact, he often left people scratching their heads.

"Where did this man get all this?" the people exclaimed, "What is this wisdom given to him? What deeds of power are done by his hands?" Mark 6:2 (NRSV)

This Wonderful Counselor not only healed on the Sabbath, raised the dead, and proclaimed good news to the poor. He also shows us the surprising wisdom that:

*"in weakness there's strength,
 in surrender is victory, and
 in death is life."*

He's always with us:

Counseling, comforting, challenging us
to serve God's kingdom and not our own kingdom.

So whether you turn to the right or to the left, if you listen closely, the Wonderful Counselor will whisper over your shoulder,

"This is the way; walk in it." Isaiah 30:21 (NRSV)

Amen.

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