

Names for the Messiah: Everlasting Father
Ezekiel 34:2b-6, 11-17 and Isaiah 9:2-7
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Over the last couple of weeks we have looked at the first two names assigned to the newly coronated king in Isaiah 9: Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. Today we come to the third liturgical title for the king: “Everlasting Father.” As with the first two names, the context of the oracle is important for understanding what Isaiah had in mind when he referred to the king as “everlasting father.” The prophet wrote at a time in which the father was the head of the family. The father exercised the most power and had the most responsibility in the clan or tribe. To designate the king as “father”, then, was to transfer the patriarchal imagery of the family to the state, which likewise operated with a hierarchical, patriarchal notion of power and authority.

To say that this father is “everlasting” conveys a reliable steadfastness over time. The “everlasting father” is expected to exercise care, protection and leadership on behalf of the family through the generations. Within this familial domain, there are three things we can say about the interpretation of this figure of faith in our text. First, it is not surprising that in a patriarchal society, father imagery would come to be a compelling way to speak about God. Second, it is not surprising that the fatherly tasks of God were assigned to the king who was seen to be the “son of God.” Third, it is not surprising that this fatherly language can get a bit awkward when connected to Jesus as the fulfillment and embodiment of this new king, since in the church’s Trinitarian theology, Jesus is the “Son” and not the “Father.” Let’s delve a bit into each of these.

First, it makes perfect sense that in the context of a patriarchal society, the image of “father” would be used as an image for God. In this way of thinking, God is the creator, the progenitor, the supreme father of all that is. The Hebrew tradition is full of speaking about God in this way. In Exodus (4:22) God speaks of Israel as “my firstborn son” and later in Hosea God says, “out of Egypt I called my son.” (11:1) In Isaiah 63 and 64 Israel is in exile and in their grief and lament, they address God as father: “For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name.” (63:16) They go on to say, “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.” (64:8-9)

The Hebrews’ father is likened to a potter, the one who decisively shapes Israel. In this particular instance, this father God is seen to be exceedingly angry, punishing Israel for their disobedience by sending them into exile, but at the same time Israel assumes and affirms a kinship with their father that gives them hope that anger is not the last word. They anticipate that God’s love will win out, that God’s compassion and mercy will prompt God to act on their behalf. We do the same thing when we trust that our own parents’ love will move them to maintain relationship with us, even when we do something that disappoints, angers or grieves them.

You can see this presumption of parental love at work in the words of Psalm 103 which anticipates God’s readiness to let go of anger for the sake of love: “He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.” (103:9-14)

While there is no doubt that father language dominates the Hebrew scriptures, even Israel acknowledges that a one-dimensional patriarchal image of God is inadequate. So there are also maternal images of birth, the womb, and a nursing mother that come into play. The maternal instinct to protect the young, the orphan, the widow and the most vulnerable in society also is ascribed to God, and ancient Israel was called to care for and protect precisely these vulnerable ones that God, as loving parent, is attentive to.

Using father language for God has been viewed by some people as problematic in the past few decades. For those who have suffered at the hands of a human father or a church priest, the image evoked by calling God “father” is not a positive one, and understandably so. The church has a dual calling, I think. On the one hand we must be sensitive to the needs of those who have been hurt by abuse, and we need to respond to those wounds by speaking the truth about abuse whenever we encounter it and by being a place of healing and hope. Let it never be said that we diminish, much less deny, the pain inflicted by fathers—and mothers, for that matter—who do not epitomize the love and compassion of our

Everlasting Father. At the same time, rather than ditch the language of father altogether, I believe there is a place to reclaim it, by practicing the traits of loving parentage of both genders, mother and father. We never push someone to accept the parenthood of God before they are ready or able, but we don't abandon it either. We endeavor, instead, to model the love and compassion of the true Everlasting Father.

Secondly, in Isaiah's world, it would have been routine to view an earthly king as a regent or surrogate for God, and thus, the king would be expected to perform the role of God in society. In the same way that God, as "everlasting Father", cared for the needs of the human family, the king was charged with the duty of pastoral justice toward the poor and needy. Protection of the whole tribe is the work of God, and like God, like king! The newly coronated king of Isaiah's oracle is to be the one who guarantees the well-being of the family, the clan, the tribe and eventually the state. Society cannot prosper and flourish unless there is responsible attention to and care of the needy and the vulnerable. In the worldview of ancient Israel, the failure of kings to perform this fatherly, shepherding responsibility can only end in trouble for everybody. That's why the prophet Ezekiel issues such a severe reprimand for the kings whose failure in this regard led to the exile of Israel.

The shepherd kings are rebuked for engaging in self-indulgence to the neglect of the realm. They have failed to act as fathers and that dereliction of duty has resulted in the scattering of the nation. Ezekiel makes a condemning list of the king's failures: he has not fed the sheep or strengthened the weak; healed the sick or bound up the injured; brought back the strays or sought the sheep who were lost.

After this critical indictment, God declares that God himself will now do those things the shepherd kings have failed to do. Now the language turns positive: I will seek out my sheep...they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ez. 34:12-16)

It's crystal clear: in a patriarchal society these are the functions of a true father. Because the father-king has reneged on his responsibility, now the father-God will step in and do what must be done. Later on in Ezekiel's oracle, the prophet voices the promise that a new king will come to fulfill the fatherly work of kingship:

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord have spoken. (34:23-34)

Too often the reality of Israel's kings was that they were self-indulgent to the neglect of the most vulnerable and needy under their care. Nevertheless, the liturgy expressed through the psalms and the prophets continued to hope and to function as a reminder of what is possible and what is expected from the royal office. When we hear Isaiah identifying the new king as "Everlasting Father," it anticipates that the royal office will again be reliable over the course of generations in order to assure the well-being of all. The "Everlasting Father" as king is the guarantor of *shalom* for the entire community.

Finally, throughout Jesus' ministry it is clear that Jesus addresses God as Father and does not take the title of Father for himself, so why was he seen as the fulfillment of this royal title? While he doesn't take the title, what Jesus does do is take up the tasks that belong to the Father. The everlasting Father is responsible for orphans and outcasts, the vulnerable and the least—and that's exactly the people Jesus' ministry was about.

But there is also another sense in which Jesus takes up the task of fatherhood. Time and again Jesus takes a protective, family-making, family-forming function. He welcomes children into the family circle. He makes sure to leave his mother cared for after his death. He calls his followers, "his children" and promises that he will not leave them orphaned. Finally, it is to his newly formed family that he gives his most radical commandment which was to be lived out in the midst of intimate community: Love one another as I have loved you."

With Jesus' birth, he came as the carrier of the family promises, and when he died he passed that responsibility on to us, the church. We are to embody the traits of the Eternal Parent. We are to bear the burdens, hopes, the joys and the sorrows of God's tribe, which is to say, for all people of the earth. We are to love others with the same family love with which Christ loves us. We are to care for the least, the lost, the disenfranchised, the angry, the sick, the hopeless. It is not a job we can do by ourselves, and indeed, Jesus promised to leave us with the same power that raised him from the dead to enable us to carry out the fatherly tasks he was leaving us to do. This third title that Isaiah assigns to the king is one that invites us to ponder how we relate to God as a loving parent and to examine how

we need to make Advent preparations to both give and receive the love of God.
Amen.