

**Names for the Messiah: Wonderful Counselor**  
**Isaiah 9:2-7 and Mark 7:31-37**  
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**M. Michelle Fincher**  
**Calvary Presbyterian Church**

The oracle of Isaiah 9:2-7 is a well-known and cherished part of the season of Advent due in large part to Handel's *Messiah*. When Isaiah wrote these words in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, he was not anticipating or *predicting* Jesus of Nazareth, *per se*. Instead, it is likely that the oracle pertained to the coronation of a new king at the time Isaiah was writing, possibly Hezekiah. Just as with the arrival of a new U.S. president, the coronation of the new king in Jerusalem was an occasion for anticipating a new wave of well-being, peace and prosperity. The liturgical articulation of such high and regal expectations would have been as extravagant and excessive as such occasions always are, not unlike the political speeches of promise that occur every four years when a new Commander-in-Chief is inaugurated. Included in such flowery language would have been a traditional inventory of slogans or mantras about the new king.

Isaiah 9 anticipates a new regime of peace and prosperity in Jerusalem, a season of "great light" that is contrasted with the "darkness" of imperial exploitation under the Assyrian Empire. It is quite naturally expected that the coming king will release Judah from that oppressive empire and this oracle anticipates a new regime of "endless peace" with "justice and righteousness" forever. (9:7)

Our focus over the four Sundays of Advent will be to consider the four extravagant royal titles assigned to the new king in verse 6. The first of these is "wonderful counselor." At the outset it must be said that Handel, in his famous oratorio, mistakenly put a comma after "wonderful," thus dividing the phrase into two parts. His error doesn't take away from our enjoyment and appreciation of the music, with its power to lift us up and inspire us, but in the biblical text it's important to note that the two terms are to be taken together as "wonderful counselor" or "counselor of wonders." So what is Isaiah communicating by calling the new and coming king a "wonderful counselor"?

The term "counselor" refers to the exercise of governance, the capacity to administer, to plan, and to execute policy. God is praised for assigning a new human king who is expected to devise plans and policies for the benefit of the entire realm. The term "wonderful" might possibly suggest that the new king will

have extraordinary wisdom and foresight about planning. Or, it may suggest that the royal plans and policies themselves will be of exceptional quality, so much so that they will go beyond all the usual conventions of political power and practice. Either way it is expected that the new king will initiate policy and practice that will dazzle in its effectiveness and in its practical benefit for the subjects of the king.

In actuality the reign of Hezekiah at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE did enact some remarkable policies in Jerusalem, most notably withstanding the assault of the Assyrian army. In the end, however, the rule of Hezekiah proved to be a disappointment. The glorious anticipation did not work out, with Hezekiah ultimately capitulating to the rising power of Babylon. Perhaps it is inevitable that such high expectations could not be realized in the real events of life and history, and what was true then is still true today. Still, even knowing that our ambitious expectations are likely to be dashed, there is always new hope when leadership changes.

Isaiah's oracle with its four honorific titles for the king—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—was embedded in the heart and mind of the early church when it began to bear witness to Jesus and to tell the story of how he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy for a Messiah. The expected messiah would be received as a king, and so our Christmas carols abound with royal imagery:

- ❖ Come thou long expected Jesus, born a child and yet a king;
- ❖ Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king.";
- ❖ O come, all ye faithful, come and behold him, born the King of angels!
- ❖ Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her king;
- ❖ What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping? This, this is Christ the king

You may never have noticed it or thought about it before, but our carols tell the story. They articulate the faith of a church who recognized Jesus as the "long-expected" king who would set his people free. As ancient King Hezekiah had to face the Assyrian Empire with its threat, so Jesus also came into an ominous political situation that was dominated by the Roman Empire, with its coercive military presence and its equally coercive tax system. The royal power of Caesar was to be challenged by the new Jewish king who would, in Jewish expectation, defeat the power of Rome. Thus, Luke's Christmas story is situated amid the power and command of the Roman Emperor:

“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.” (Luke 2:1-3)

The larger drama of the Gospels exhibits the way in which King Jesus takes issue with the royal power of Rome and subsequently with every regime of power that imagines it is ultimate and absolute. The power of King Jesus is intrinsically revolutionary and subversive against every repressive regime.

This left the early church and the church through the ages to define what kind of king Jesus is. How will he oppose the royal power of Rome? The claim of Isaiah’s oracle is that the new king will inaugurate a new kingdom of peace and well-being which will displace the old Roman order of violence and extortion.

The new king, as “wonderful counselor” will be wise, and so he will devise wise plans that have the capacity to penetrate beyond conventional assumptions and which have peculiar discernment about how the world works and what the consequences of such policies will be. Jesus astonishes his contemporaries by his capacity to see and act beyond conventional wisdom. As they observed his work, people asked, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? Look what deeds of power are being done by his hands!” (Mk 6:2)

Even from his childhood Jesus was celebrated for his uncommon wisdom: “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him...And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” (Luke 2:40, 52)

In addition to his wisdom, Jesus is also extraordinary, or “wonderful”, in his teaching. He exhibited an authority that was unlike that of the scribes who were the shrewdest and more learned of his contemporaries. (Mark 1:22) His teaching contradicted all the usual expectations. It confounded the religious leaders, yet engaged the powerless crowds, as he spoke of a world under “alternative governance,” a kingdom that did not conform to old patterns of abuse and exploitation. His teaching turned upside down what was thought to be “possible” and “impossible,” since, according to him, “nothing is impossible with God.” With talk like that he became, not surprisingly, a threat to conventional learning and conventional power. His story of the Good Samaritan or of the prodigal son or of the workers who came late and received equal pay contradicted common practice in unmistakable ways. He is wise and wonderful in his teaching because he opens up new possibilities that were thought to be beyond reach. The rulers of

the age, of course, did not want such impossibilities to become possible, for such possibilities would override and displace the present power arrangement and the current distribution of resources that were all skewed in their favor.

Not only was Jesus' teaching wise and wonderful, so were his actions. He accomplished deeds of rescue and restoration that ordinary reason had declared impossible. In Mark 7 he encounters a deaf man with a speech problem. Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears and spat and touched his tongue, and the man was healed. The response from the crowd was, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."

And, of course, not only the deaf hear and the mute speak but also the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised. The old limits of the possible are exposed as fraudulent inventions designed to keep the powerless in their places. Jesus violates such invented limitations and opens the world to the remarkable possibilities in the kingdom of God.

And, before he finishes, this wise, transformative king, this wonderful counselor, will summon his followers to continue his way of subversive astonishment and transformation in the world. He anticipates that his followers, those who will sign on for his alternative kingdom, will be seen as troublemakers who seek alternatives to conventional power arrangements. They will be people who side with the poor and weak, who visit the sick and the imprisoned, who count among their friends the "undesirables," who pursue peace and justice, even at personal risk or cost.

It turns out that recognition of this new king is not just a Christmastime lark. It constitutes a new vocation. It is not only an acknowledgment of his new rule in the world but a recruitment for action congruent with his new reign. The "increase of his government" will not be by supernatural imposition or by royal decree. Instead, it will come about through the daily, intentional engagement of his subjects, followers who are so astonished by his wonder that they no longer subscribe to the old order of power and truth that turns out to be, in the long run, only debilitating lies. It requires an uncommon wisdom to interrupt the foolish to follow Jesus which leaves us with a question: During this Advent time of waiting and preparation, what do *you* need to do in your own heart and life to receive Jesus as Wonderful Counselor and as King?

Amen.