

Everlasting Father

Isaiah 9:6 & 7; Luke 2:1-20

December 18, 2022

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Merry Christmas, and welcome to the fourth and final Sunday of Advent! During Advent, we look back with thanksgiving in our hearts to the birth of Jesus, and we look forward to the time when Jesus will return for his Church as it's described in Revelation 21:3-5.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

Immanuel—God with us—has come, and when Jesus comes again, there will be no more death, grieving, crying or pain. He will make everything new. In the meantime, we've been given the opportunity to walk with Jesus, to receive his forgiveness for our sins and to be restored to relationship with Him. As Pastor Cody shared last week, those of us who walk with Jesus have his Holy Spirit living inside us, comforting, counseling, and leading us. If you've not taken the step of inviting Jesus into your heart, I encourage you as we walk through the sermon this morning to receive the life, hope and joy Jesus brings, which is available to every one of us. At the conclusion of our service, you are welcome to talk and pray with me or one of our other pastors, or to go to one of our prayer partners along the sides of the room. We'd love for every person to know the reality of a relationship with Jesus.

I'd like to read what may be the best-known Christmas passage from the Old Testaments—Isaiah 9:6–7.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

I'd also like you to assist me in reading the Christmas story from Luke chapter 2.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:1-20)

In hindsight—2,000 years after Jesus’ birth—we’re able to see the clear connection between these scriptures, but when Jesus was born, people didn’t immediately make the connection, and many failed to see that Jesus’ birth was the fulfillment of the prophecy Isaiah made 700 years earlier.

We’ll be focusing this morning on Jesus as our Everlasting Father, but before we do that, I want to revisit the theme we’ve been focused on throughout Advent: the light Jesus’ coming brought to our dark world. I began our Advent series by sharing a quote from Pastor Tim Keller, in which he pointed out that the practice of decorating with lights at Christmas is symbolic of the light Jesus brought when He came into our world as a baby. In his book, “Hidden Christmas,” Keller writes:

One of the first indications of the Christmas season is the appearance of lights. Lights on trees, candles in windows, radiance everywhere. The Christmas lights of New York City delight even blasé residents. Everything seems to be wrapped in millions and millions of stars. This is appropriate, because December 25 follows the darkest time of the year in the Mediterranean world and Europe, where Christmas celebrations took shape. But the lights are not just decorative; they are symbolic. – Tim Keller

Keller goes on to say:

The emphasis on light in darkness comes from the Christian belief that the world’s hope comes from outside of it. Jesus comes as the light because we are too spiritually blind to find our own way. Christmas contains many spiritual truths, but it will be hard to grasp the others unless we grasp this one first. That is, that the world is a dark place, and we will never find our way or see reality unless Jesus is our Light.

Keller’s statements about the relationship between light and Jesus’ coming echo the words of the Apostle John in his Gospel chapter 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. (John 1:1–5, 9–10)

Listen again to these words from Isaiah’s famous prophecy as we turn now to consider Jesus as our Everlasting Father:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

Into the darkness, Jesus came as light. Where there was sickness, Jesus brought healing. Where death reigned, Jesus brought life. And in a world where many carry wounds from their parents, Jesus came as our Everlasting Father. My intent this morning is not to disparage any of us as parents—many of you are doing and have done a great job parenting—but the reality is that no matter how good of a parent we might be, we all fall short of providing everything our children need. Nor do I want to discourage those of us who lack or lacked positive parental influence in our lives as a child. Jesus came as our Everlasting Father to fill the void left by the shortcomings of our earthly parents.

Social scientists point to the instability in families, and specifically the absence of fathers, as one of the greatest problems of our era. As I was thinking about Jesus as our Everlasting Father, I asked the question, “What does a good father bring to his children?” These characteristics quickly came to mind: love and encouragement; safety, security and stability; wisdom and direction; confidence and strength; and peace and hope. Some of us have been blessed to receive much of that from the father we’ve had. Others of us haven’t been so fortunate, but no earthly father can supply everything their child needs, because we’re flawed people, and that is where Jesus comes in. “Father” is one of the most common designations for God in the Old and New Testaments, and in Isaiah 9, it was prophesied that the child who was born would be called Everlasting Father.

Two Scriptures immediately came to mind for me when I thought about the reality that so many of us have “father holes” in our hearts. In Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 9, we read about the ministry Jesus was doing. He was teaching and preaching powerfully about the Kingdom of God. He was healing many sick people, casting demons out of the oppressed and performing signs and wonders, like calming the wind and waves in the midst of a storm and feeding 5,000 people with a few small loaves and fish. Toward the end of Matthew 9, we’re told Jesus was going through all the towns and villages proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. And then we read these words: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Jesus used the picture of sheep without the guidance and protection of a shepherd to describe the crowds of people, but the words “harassed and helpless” remind me of people all around us of all ages, who lack the love, stability, wisdom and strength a good father provides.

There is another passage of scripture in Matthew where we see Jesus’ parental heart of compassion for people who were struggling and appeared lost. In Matthew 23, toward the end of Jesus’ ministry, He said these words about the people of Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37). He identified the crowds of people as children and said He longed to gather them to Himself as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings as danger approaches or as the chicks need comfort. Jesus longs to be our Everlasting Father—the parent every one of us craves.

The strength and security Jesus provides as our Everlasting Father is especially needed in a world where our enemy, Satan, is actively and effectively leading so many astray. Listen to the words of the Apostle John in John 10:10–15.

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf

coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

I’m guessing that few of us are familiar with the nature and habits of sheep, but in Jesus’ day and in the place He lived, everyone would have been familiar with sheep. Most of us do have some basic understanding about these woolly creatures. We know **sheep are very dependent on their shepherds**. The shepherds provide food, rest and protection for the animals under their care. We know **sheep are prone to follow other sheep without much forethought for their own safety**. This is why it’s essential for them to be led well by a shepherd. And finally, we are aware that **sheep are extremely vulnerable** to starvation, sickness and attacks from enemies without the protection of a shepherd. Those traits of sheep aren’t very flattering, but the Bible often refers to people as sheep. We need someone watching out for us, we need to be led well, and we need to be protected from the attacks of predators.

Whether we view ourselves as children or sheep, the reality is that you and I desperately need to be cared for. In spite of our overinflated view of ourselves and our capacity to live life on our own, we’re incapable of making it on our own. Jesus came as Immanuel, God with us, because we couldn’t thrive on our own. Jesus lived a sinless life, and He died on the cross for our sins, that we might be forgiven of our sins, know the freedom from sin and death, and experience the life that only comes from Him. In another prophecy, Isaiah foretold Jesus’ suffering on the cross for us with these words:

“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:5–6)

We walk in darkness, and we're in desperate need of the light only Jesus can provide. As Matthew's Gospel quotes Isaiah the prophet, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned." At Christmas, we're reminded that the light has dawned in the darkness, and his name is Jesus. This morning, I challenge each of us to recognize that the light Jesus brought and still brings isn't truth that is impersonal and out there somewhere. The light Jesus brings is personal and available to each of us. Our Immanuel—God with us—has come, and his name is Jesus. Jesus is our Prince of Peace. He is our Mighty God. He is our Wonderful Counselor. And Jesus is our Everlasting Father. I encourage each of us to receive Him with childlike wonder, faith and joy today. If God is stirring your heart this morning, feel free to reach out to me or one of our pastors, or to one of the prayer partners along the sides of the church.