

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Isaiah 9:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25
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Wonderful Counselor

This Christmas, I've been struck by the wildfire devastation in California. To date, the Camp Fire in northern California has destroyed 13,972 residences, 528 commercial buildings and burned 153,336 acres. At least 85 people have been killed and an additional 49 people still remain unaccounted for. The Woesley Fire in southern California has destroyed 1,500 structures and killed three people.

We can't even grasp the depth of despair that they must feel. They are literally walking in darkness, in the valley of the shadow of death.

The Prophet Isaiah described a similar time when God's people walked in such darkness. Israel had been ransacked multiple times by neighboring nations. Their homes had been destroyed. Their businesses erased. Their brightest and most promising citizens carried away into exile. And to make matters worse, there had been no word from God for some four hundred years. Just silence.

Talk about feeling abandoned by God.

What they needed most...was hope. Hope that no matter how terrible things got, hope that someday God would show up and lift them out of the hell they'd come to dwell.

Hope that light would return to their eyes, their darkness would lift, and a path forward would be revealed.

In our scripture this morning, we hear God's word of hope spoken through the Prophet Isaiah how the Light of the World, the Messiah, would come to bring an end to their warfare, expand their borders, increase their joy, bless them with abundance, and shatter the things that bound them.

It's a word that also would have spoken to a young man named Joseph who had just been told that his fiancé would give birth to a child that wasn't his own. And we will see how the Holy Spirit, the Wonderful Counselor, whispers peace to Joseph and provides light to his uncertain path with Mary as his wife.

Please join me as we read from Isaiah 9:1-7 and Matthew 1:18-25.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

An article in this week's Columbian Newspaper was titled, "Suicides, Overdoses lowering U.S. life expectancy." It said, "The suicide death rate last year was the highest it's been in at least 50 years, according to U.S. government records. There were more than 47,000 suicides, up from a little under 45,000 the year before."

What's driving it?

“Disease prevention experts at George Washington University, see a sense of hopelessness. Financial struggles, a widening income gap and divisive politics are all casting a pall over many Americans. People are increasingly hopeless, and that leads to drug use, it leads potentially to suicide.”¹

Hopelessness can feel like walking in sheer darkness or as if you're trying to navigate through the thickest fog bank of one's life. I know because I've been there. And yet, as difficult as those times were time, somehow, I knew that I was not alone and that God was working in ways I couldn't see.

That somehow, I believe, was the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Wonderful Counselor that Isaiah promised. Pele Yo etz in Hebrew. Wonder. Hard to understand. Extraordinary. Consultant. Planner. Purposer. Deviser. The Wonderful Counselor shows up several times in the Old Testament as the king's trusted advisor. His counselor. The one who provides guidance.

Joseph was walking through similar hopelessness. We are told that he was a righteous man. One who wanted to whatever was right in the eyes of God. Interesting that even the best of God's people can experience depression, hopelessness, and despair. None of us are immune to it.

But as for Joseph, his predicament was tricky. The woman he was engaged to, was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. What do you do? He had made a pledge. Given his word. For better or for worse. Richer or poorer. Sick and in health. Till death do us part.

Who would ever expected that the worse would come before they even took their vows? Certainly not Joseph! We see that Joseph is confused, lonely, angry, in shock, uncertain and scared.

He would have been completely justified to have divorced Mary quietly. Saying that her end of the deal wasn't kept. Their covenant was broken. That's human logic. Right? Certainly understandable.

And yet we can see that there was another force at work tugging at his heart. The promised Holy Spirit. The Wonderful Counselor was guiding Joseph to do what was right, maybe not for his sake but for God's. To stay true to God's plan even if he didn't understand it himself.

The Wonderful Counselor says, “Trust me, Joseph, with all of your heart. Stop trying to figure this out on your own. You'll drive yourself crazy. But bring every decision to me. Stop, breathe, and ask me for wisdom, and I'll light your way. Your paths will be straight.”²

¹ Mike Stobbe, Associated Press, “Suicides, Overdoses Lowering U.S. Life Expectancy,” *The Columbian Newspaper*, November 29, 2018, A4.

² Proverbs 3:5-6

“Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. It’s going to be ok Joseph! Not only is it going to be ok, you will be blessed. You’re going to be part of something that people will talk about for the rest of time because this son of yours will save his people from their sins.”

The Wonderful Counselor comes to Joseph and casts out his fear. Because that’s the Spirit of Truth.

Eugene Peterson paraphrased John’s words saying, “God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. There is no room in love for fear. Well formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life - fear of death, fear of judgement - is one not yet fully formed in love.

My friends, how is the Wonderful Counselor inviting us to leave behind a spirit of fear and instead choose to follow love this Advent?

Joseph chose to follow love and left behind the spirit of fear. And his choice blesses us today!

Toward the end of his son’s ministry, Jesus told his disciples that The Wonderful Counselor would be left behind after his death. Jesus said, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives in you and will be in you. The Counselor will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said.”

“Peace I leave you; my peace I give you. I don’t give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”³

The Wonderful Counselor brings peace, or shalom, which is more than just an internal calmness. True shalom brings a sense deep down in our hearts that all will be well with us and God...all will be well with us and others...and all will be well with us and creation...despite the fact that we may not know how it will all turn out. Shalom is a peace that surpasses human understanding.⁴

A few other characteristics that scripture tells us about the Wonderful Counselor are:

The Wonderful Counselor goes out from the Father.

The Wonderful Counselor speaks truth and guides us in the truth.

The Wonderful Counselor testifies about Jesus in the same way the Holy Spirit testified about God through Prophets.

The Wonderful Counselor teaches us all things and reminds us everything that Jesus spoke when he was with us.

³ John 14:27

⁴ Philippians 4:8

The Wonderful Counselor lives in us and acts as a deposit guaranteeing that what belongs to God returns to God one day.

The Wonderful Counselor convicts the world of sin and reminds us that Jesus forgives us of that sin.

The Wonderful Counselor tells us what is to come. Keeps us on track. So that we arrive safely at home with God.

The Wonderful Counselor brings glory to God the Father by pointing people to Jesus, his beloved Son.

The Wonderful Counselor reminds us that God is with us. “Immanuel.” And Jesus will never leave us or forsake us no matter how dark, or long, or hopeless our days may seem. His light is always at the end of the tunnel!

As for the people in California. I couldn’t think of a better word to offer them in this time. The Wonderful Counselor is with them to remind them that God hasn’t forsaken them. I believe that Jesus has been there in their need through the many kindnesses they have experienced through one another. An old friend of mine, Anthony Salcido, is a pastor in Thousand Oaks, California just outside of Woosley. Twenty years ago as a high school student, he served as part of my Outdoor Work Crew team at a Young Life Camp not far from Paradise, California.

Anthony is the guy in the middle. This is a post on Instagram that he made a few weeks ago that really struck me. They are standing in the ashen rubble of a friend’s home which was completely destroyed by the fires. Do we see despair and darkness on their faces? No! Only joy!

Because through Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor, showed up in the flesh through these friends to remind people that the God of the Universe is walking this journey with them. They are not alone.

How are we feeling this morning? Are we feeling a little dark, fearful or overwhelmed? Do we seem alone? Are we uncertain about our path forward?

Guess what? The Wonderful Counselor is with us!

He will right everything that is wronged. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. And he will destroy death, despair, and darkness once and for all. And he shall reign for ever and ever.

For the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Let us pray.

“Jesus come. Jesus come. Jesus come down and rescue us.

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