

Names for the Messiah

An Advent Study of Isaiah 9: 2 – 7 by Walter Bruggemann

Advent Expectations

11 a.m., December 18, 2016

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. NRSV

For unto us a child is born, KJV
unto us a son is given:
and the government shall be upon his shoulder:
and his name shall be called
Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God,
The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

EVERLASTING FATHER – The third “liturgical title assigned to the newly coronated King in Isaiah 9:6 is “Everlasting Father.” This oracle is situated in a patriarchal society in which the father is at the head of the family, clan, or tribe; exercises the most power; and has the most responsibility. To designate the king as “father” is to transfer the imagery of the family to the state, which of course suggests a hierarchical, patriarchal notion of power and authority. “Everlasting” signifies a reliable steadfastness through time and over the generations so that the phrase anticipates a reliable oversight of care, protection, and leadership. Such fatherly usage is awkward when connected to Jesus, who is the “Son” and not the “Father.”

God is viewed by Israel as the supreme father and therefore the progenitor (creator) of all that is. God speaks to and makes covenant with his “children” and expects them to be obedient. The father is likened to a potter (Ps. 64) who decisively shapes Israel. God as father is ready to relinquish anger for the sake of love. (Ps 103) Compassionate imagery is not restricted to a one-dimensional patriarchal image. Thus in Numbers 11:12 there are maternal images of birth, bosom, and suckling, and Isaiah 49:15 uses terms for compassion and womb marking a motherly propensity on God’s part. God as Father protects widows and orphans, the most vulnerable in society, as well as prisoners. (Ps 68)

The king is to perform the fatherly role of God in society as a regent or surrogate for God. (Ps 72) So the king guarantees the well-being of the family, clan, or tribe, and eventually the state, and must refrain from self-indulgence to the neglect of the realm. (Ez 34) God as king has in principle retained initiative and responsibility, calling for a shepherd king like David to do the fatherly work of restoration. Though kings failed in their duties to care for the least of those, the “Everlasting Father” imagery anticipates that the royal office will be reliable over the course of generations as the king is guarantor of *shalom* (*well-being and wholeness*) for the community.

Though we identify Jesus as the king who will restore well-being, he addresses God as Father, and thus this title does not work very well for Jesus, especially as the church embraced the idea of the Trinity. In John 14:18 as Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure, he assures them “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” Jesus thus becomes “Father” in an “orphaned” world, protecting the family, inviting the “little children to come to me.” (Luke 18: 15-17) So though it is a stretch to connect Isaiah’s title, “Everlasting Father,” to the person of Jesus, he becomes the carrier of the family promises. Jesus is in such close identity with the Father (John 14:23) that “they will make our home with them.” Jesus’ love commandment is to enact the solidarity of Father, Son, and community. The ‘everlasting’ part of it is that the church, over generations, has found the abiding presence of this fatherly God to be grounds for joy, for assurance, and for missional energy.

PRINCE OF PEACE – The king was responsible for social order and for economic prosperity. But fame and fortune come to kings who wage successful wars, not work for peace. Remember that *shalom* is not just an absence of hostility, but the maintenance of a prosperous social system: to promote the general welfare. The premise of peace is the practice of justice for the poor and needy, and prosperity for all, not

just the urban elites clustered around the king. Disarmament is a prelude to peace (Ps 46), but as practiced by the victorious kings, arms were eliminated from the losing adversary, an act of violent imposition (Is 9:5) This is not a peace made by negotiation or reconciliation; it is rather an imposition by the winner. (Joshua 9:15) Peace has a grand liturgical sound to it, but in reality, peace makes a better political slogan than a credible political reality. (Jer 6: 13-14) The rhetoric of peace serves an important function in keeping available a vision of an alternative society in an alternative world. (Jer 33) Ezekiel (34:37) anticipates a “covenant of peace” that will be counter to the conventional exploitative coercion. These visions look beyond shabby historical reality to the hope of faith that will transform reality and the beguiling dishonesty of propagandistic speeches will be overcome.

Jesus resists titles, and his notion of governance clearly contradicted the power of Rome. Jesus will not impose peace. His peace that passes understanding will be a peace that is wrought in vulnerability that does not seek to impose its own way. Peace via vulnerability confounds the empire. His peace cannot be received, interpreted, or understood in any “normal” category, that is, the categories of the empire. Yet the angels announce a “royal birth,” inaugurating peace on earth (Luke 2:14), and immediately recognized as inherently subversive and a threat to Rome.

Jesus does not simply utter “*shalom*” as a simple good-bye. It is his announcement that the shalom-order of creation is being restored, and his disciples are charged to carry on this peacemaking. (Luke 10: 5-6) It must include the capacity to forgive; a readiness to share generously; and the violation of strict class stratification. Peace requires attentiveness to the vulnerable; humility in the face of exaltation (the last shall be first); and denying self in the interest of the neighbor. The empire, in its refusal of the things that make for peace, generates a society of hostility, aggression, greed, conflict, and violence. “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) is not “otherworldly,” but is not derived from fearful aggression. The Risen Christ greets his disciples with peace – not some conventional greeting, but the mission he is now passing on to the disciples. It is no normal peace; the peace Jesus brings is dangerous, subversive, and a contradiction of all that is usual.

ADVENT is a freighted time in which to acknowledge that what we anticipate in the prophetic oracle of Isaiah deeply contradicts the expectation of ancient Israel. It deeply contradicts the expectation of those who trusted the Roman Empire, Jews, and others. And it overrides the expectations of our society, which awaits a peacemaker who will ensure our advantage in the world. The Christ child who is born, coronated, and worshiped is innocent, but he is not innocuous.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Read the list of royal responsibilities in Ezekiel 34: 2 – 6. How do our political leaders measure up to this list?
2. Exile and estrangement from God were the consequences for not taking care of the weaker members of society, including foreigners. How is our society paying the consequences for neglecting these groups of people? Will this improve under our President-elect?
3. How do you experience the abiding presence of a Father/Mother God in church?
4. How are our current leaders working for social justice and peace?
5. Why was King Solomon’s name ironic? Is Jerusalem (city of shalom) living up to its name?
6. Will being coerced to beat your swords into plowshares bring about true peace?
7. How was Jesus unlike a prince in his time? Describe a world organized by peace.
8. As a peacemaker resisting empire, how does the church live out the following:
 forgiveness generosity breaking class stratification
 attending to the weak and vulnerable denying self for neighbor
 last in a world of aggressive “firstness” humility