

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
November 27, 2011 – First Sunday of Advent

Everlasting Father
Isaiah 9:2-7; Matt. 7:7-11

For Advent and Christmas this year, we're going to focus on the great messianic names that are found in Is. 9. The passage begins: 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*. Today, we'll actually start with the title "Everlasting Father".

The reason I'd like to start here is because this is the name that tells us that God is profoundly personal. Advent is a little bit of a bittersweet time for me: I love the anticipation of Christmas: lighting the Advent wreath, preparing to see family and friends, and seeing Christmas lights go up around the city. But at the same time, at this time of year I always acutely feel the absence of my own father, who passed away almost 13 years ago. I miss him greatly because I had a very close relationship with him.

And that's why the messianic title "Everlasting Father" is so important to me. It reminds me that God desires to have the same type of close, personal relationship with us as I had with my own father. Advent is

about the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. God loves us so much that he actually became one of us. It's interesting that the other three terms in Is. 9 can be thought of as being a bit more abstract: Wonderful Counselor (truth, wisdom), Mighty God (power), Prince of Peace (peace as a concept). But Everlasting Father? Loving Mother? There's no mistaking that the title of a loving parent is concrete and personal.

Addressing God as "Father" is something we see in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For instance, here in Isaiah 9. And then Jesus, when praying, also addressed God as "Abba, Father," and taught his disciples the prayer that starts, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." The Apostles' Creed continued to use this personal title in its first article: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." "Father" is a relationship word. God as Father means we're his children.

However, God as Father is a metaphor – metaphors help us to see what God is like, but they also have limitations. For instance, God is like a father, but God is not male. God is not female, either. God is spirit, beyond male and female. While God is infinite, our language is finite and limited, and therefore the best we can do is to use metaphors to describe a God who is indescribable. And there are other metaphors we use for God. One of the most helpful books I've found is a children's book titled "God is like a

Mother Hen.” It says that God is like a Mother Hen, and much, much more. God is like a Best Friend, God is like the Air you can’t see...and much, much more.

One problem with using metaphors is that we can forget they’re metaphors, and suddenly our language is used to limit God and put him in a box. If the *only* metaphor ever used for God is Father, then it’s logical you might start thinking and believing that God is male. Also, unlike me, some people unfortunately have had bad experiences with their own fathers, and it’s difficult for them to exclusively use that term for God.

That’s why some theologians have encouraged us to only use gender-neutral titles in addressing God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Counselor, the Rock, etc. Those are all valid ways to address God, but I want to make the case that we should not abolish any metaphors for God. That’s why we sing the doxology with both traditional and newer lyrics in our church – both ways are valid ways to sing praise to God.

I believe we should always expand on the metaphors we use for God, not eliminate them, as long as we remember that the terms we use are metaphors and can only capture a glimmer of what God is like. God is like the Everlasting Father, *and much, much, more*. God is like the Wonderful Counselor, *and much, much, more*. God is like the Prince of Peace, *and*

much, much, more. God is like a Mother Hen, *and much, much more.* It's important to remember that God is *much, much more.*

When we take away personal titles like "Father" in describing God, we lose a sense of the close relationship that God desires to have with us. It reminds me of an old Saturday Night Live skit from the 1970's. Remember "The Coneheads?" They were supposed to be a family of aliens from the planet Remulak who found themselves stranded on Earth. When questioned by humans about their strange behavior (like consuming mass quantities of food and drink), they would simply explain that they were from France. The Coneheads' most distinguishing feature was that the tops of their heads were shaped like large cones.

One of the funniest features of the skit was that instead of being called Mom or Dad, the parents were called parental units. When Beldar the father scolded his child, he would say, "Use a lower tone of voice when speaking to your parental unit, young one!" Now, besides the times when we're joking, how often do we address our mothers and fathers as "parental units?" Why don't we do that? Because it's so impersonal. It's an accurate description, but it doesn't capture the special relationship between parents and their children.

Obviously, words are not enough by themselves to establish a close, personal relationship. But there is something special about a loving, caring family bond. Sportswriter Steve Rushin recalls his graduation from college:

For my commencement, my mom and dad drove over from the Twin Cities and stayed in a Howard Johnson's near here. Three years later, my mother was gone. And soon after, come to think of it, so was the Howard Johnson's. When my mom called me in New York in the summer of 1991 to say she was dying, she said - just before hanging up the phone - "I love you." And I remember thinking, 'Well, of course you do.' A few months later, I flew home for her funeral and my dad met me in the driveway and he said, "I love you." In both cases, never were three words more unnecessary. My parents' love was obvious and demonstrated daily. Ours was not the kind of family who ended every phone conversation with, "I love you," "I love you, too," "I love you more," "No, I love you more, don't forget to pick up bread . . ."

If love is blind, it is certainly entitled to be mute. And in our family it was at the very least tongue-tied. I didn't need to hear that my parents loved me, for I saw and felt - still see and feel - my parents' love every day.

<http://www.steverushin.com/news.htm>

One final reflection: God's the *Good* Father. There are unfortunately too many bad fathers and mothers in this world, but God is the everlasting good Father, and when you ask for a fish you will not get a serpent, and when you ask for bread you will not get a rock (Matthew 7:7-11). And

that's the messianic hope. God loves us enough that he wants to be in a close relationship with us. Thanks be to God that he is our Everlasting Father, and much, much more; that God is like a Mother Hen, and much, much more. Thanks be to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

11/27/11 WPC Announcements:

Welcome, Visitors, Prayer cards, Coffee Hour.

VISITOR / PRAYER CARDS IN THE PEWS:

- Invite any guests with us this morning to take just a moment to fill out a visitor card, and then simply drop it in the offering plate when it is passed around later in the service this morning. Another function for these same pew cards – anyone, guest or member, who has a prayer request that they may not feel comfortable saying out loud during our prayer time, but for which they'd like the congregation to pray, may jot down your request on the other side of one of these same cards, again just drop it in the offering plate, and we'll be sure we include your particular request during prayers of people this morning. May, if you prefer, simply indicate that the request is to be shared with pastors only.
- Draw your attention to announcements and activities listed in bulletin
- Ken will be collecting \$ & memorials/dedications for poinsettias.
- Christmas Joy offering will be collected on the last Sunday of Advent – Dec. 18
- Dec. 25 Christmas Carol jamboree & worship w/KGPC
- Other announcements this morning?
- Our worship leader this morning is _____.

Prayers of the People 11/27/2011

Invited to respond to each of the petitions w/words “Lord, hear our prayer” – both those I raise and those I’ll invite from the congregation in just a few moments.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. We wait, we hope, we yearn. Come, find a people who wander in the wilderness. Come, bring hope to folk who have given up hoping. Come, be light to our darkness. Come, speak a work into our deadly silence. Come, Lord Jesus. We yearn for you, even when we don’t know it is you for whom we are yearning. Come to us....[**God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

We pray for our world... God of hope and mercy, smile upon your creation. Look with compassion on the less advantaged and ill people of your world. Strengthen those who devote their resources and their lives to bringing the healing of your Son, Jesus Christ, to them....[**God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

We pray for your many blessings... Thank you for the new life we can know through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Help us to trust in the promise of the resurrection, and teach us to always hold on to hope....[**God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

We pray for those in need... Lord, we ask you to heal those known to us today who suffer from illness of any kind. Soothe those whose bodies ache, and calm those with fevered minds. Help us to proclaim the message of wholeness and salvation that you have taught us....[**God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

Lord - hear us now as we approach you with our petitions and concerns, the prayers of our hearts...[**God, in your mercy**, hear our prayer]

...and for those things for which we are thankful this day.
[**Gracious God**, we thank you]...

Lord, we lift all our prayers, both spoken and unspoken, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying ‘Our Father...’

God is not male, but God is personal, so use our language to describe him. Always better to add on rather than to cut back. Only using words “God, God” makes it less personal.

I’d like to make three reflections on this profoundly personal title. First, as I’ve noted, the title tells us we’re in a personal relationship with God. If God is Father, then we are children. Our generation is yearning for something personal, and yet our generation is so impersonal.

Secondly, it also personalizes God. See Matt. 7:7-11 where Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray. Notice the word that Jesus uses to describe God: Father. Call God by personal names: Father, Mother, because he’s like a parent. God is a person. He’s the Father to whom we can ask, knock, seek. We can ask him anything. We don’t embarrass him – we’re his children. Everlasting Dad. Is. 55:1 Buy without money – where can you buy anything without money? Home. You can open up the fridge and take something right out of it. And God is your everlasting Father and Mother (like a mother hen gather under your wings).

Last thing: he’s also the Good Father. Lots of bad fathers/mothers in this world, but God is the good Father. He’s the everlasting good Father, and when you ask for a fish you will not get a serpent, and when you ask for

bread you will not get a rock. And that's the messianic hope, and what we're celebrating this Christmas. I hope this Advent/Christmas season you'll barge right in, asking, seeking, and knocking, knowing that God is your Father. What's holding you back? Amazing grace...saved a wretch like them? No, like me.

Advent a bittersweet time for me: love the anticipation of Christmas, family and friends, but always feeling the absence of my own father. Prince of Peace (Shalom)

Interesting about other three terms: truth, wisdom, power, peace can be thought of as abstract, impersonal terms. Everlasting Father/Mother/Parent – no mistaking that it's profoundly personal.

Title – we are children – it personalizes us.

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Relationship word. Bill Moyers documentary Amazing Grace.

Beloved song all over the world. John Newton – sailor, rough man, slave ship to transport slaves, then converted, became leader w/Wilberforce in anti-slavery movement. Then Moyers interviews singers. One singer sang before a big rock concert. Crowd stilled and became quiet. Song is totally

without guile, no pompous words, comes from your soul (Johnny Cash).

People like it because it makes them feel personal. It goes to their souls.

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