

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
December 4, 2011 – Second Sunday of Advent

Wonderful Counselor
Isaiah 9:2-7; John 14: 15-17, 25-27

For Advent and Christmas this year, we're focusing on the great messianic names that are found in Is. 9: 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*. Last week, we looked at the name "Everlasting Father." We saw that God is powerful and true, but he's also personal. Today, we'll look at the title "Wonderful Counselor." The Messiah is the source of truth and wisdom, and also, as we'll see, encouragement. We see a foreshadowing of the concept of the trinity in these names from Is. 9. The Messiah, who we believe is Jesus, is the Son of God. He's also the Everlasting Father and the Wonderful Counselor, which is another name for the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said his followers must take up their cross (Mark 8:34). Life is often tough, even, and sometimes especially, for Christians. As one pastor noted, "We've heard this call to discipleship so many times I'm afraid we don't hear it anymore. But for a first century person a cross meant only one thing: it was an instrument of death, it symbolized capital punishment.

People didn't wear decorative crosses around their necks back then! It would be like Jesus saying to us: If you're going to follow me you'd better pick up a noose...or a gallows...or an electric chair. It's a shocking image. But it means that people who follow Jesus must be prepared to die – sometimes literally, physically.” (Heidi Husted)

In today's passage from John, we see the disciples are beginning to realize the cost of discipleship. John chapters 13-17 contain the Thursday night discourse, when Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure and for life in his absence. Throughout his ministry, Jesus had walked alongside his disciples, teaching and encouraging them. As one commentator observes, “Jesus' announcement of his imminent departure (13:33) leaves his disciples anxious and distressed” (Frances Taylor Gench).

The blow of this announcement, however, is softened by extraordinary words of assurance and promise – “Do not let your hearts be troubled; In my Father's house there are many dwelling places; I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Certainly, these were words of comfort for frightened disciples.

But chief among these comforting words are these: “I will not leave you orphaned” (14:18) – a promise that refers to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples get a glimpse of the hope Christians have in following

Jesus. As Jesus had come alongside his disciples during their journey together, so another companion, the Holy Spirit which comes from God the Father and Jesus the Son, will journey alongside them when Jesus is no longer with them.

Life may be just as tough for Christians as it is for non-Christians, but we know that we don't ever have to face life's struggles alone. "Disciples will not be abandoned or left to fend for themselves. After Jesus' return to God, the Holy Spirit will be sent in his name and will accompany them in their continued life and mission in this world" (Gench).

The Greek word used for the Holy Spirit is a word I've shared with you in the past. The word is *parakletos*, or *paraclete*. The word bears multiple meanings, including that of Advocate, Intercessor, Comforter, Companion, Helper, and **Counselor**. Now we see the connection to Isaiah 9 – Wonderful Counselor. The word is made up of two parts: first, the prefix *para*, which means alongside, and *kaleo*, which means to call. Literally, then, the Holy Spirit, who is also known as the Paraclete, is the one who is called to one's side, the one who comes alongside of us.

And that is also the definition of encouragement. Encouragement is coming alongside someone who needs help. The advantage of following Christ is not that he raises us above the problems of the world, but that when

we follow Christ, we're promised the presence of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, who comes alongside of us in our time of need. The Spirit helps us to deal with life's problems and encourages us in the midst of life's turmoils.

Christ has not only given us the Holy Spirit to encourage us, but he also surrounds us with members of his body, the church. We are to encourage one another. That's why the church is so important – the journey of faith is not a solo voyage. We're to build each other up, encourage and support one another.

Now it's clear that encouragement is coming alongside of someone to do that person good. A pickpocket also wants to come close to your side, but a pickpocket's intention is to do harm, not good. When we encourage, we want what is best for the other. This doesn't mean that the Paraclete or any other encourager will always agree with you. Sometimes, the best encouragement is when someone challenges you to do the right thing instead of the easiest thing.

Can you recall some *parakeleo* experiences in your life? When I was in high school, I ran cross country. I never ran my best times when I trained on my own. It was only when I trained with my teammates, who would literally run by my side, who would challenge and encourage me to push

myself, that I ran my best. They didn't carry me, but they came alongside of me.

As you may know, the famous authors J.R.R. Tolkien (of *The Hobbit* & *Lord of the Rings*) and C.S. Lewis were very good friends. At one point, Tolkien would read aloud to Lewis from the book he was working on, and Lewis urged him to press on and finish writing it. Tolkien later said of this: "The unpayable debt that I owe to him was not 'influence' as it is ordinarily understood, but sheer encouragement. He was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby." That's exactly what *parakaleo* is.

Jesus comforts his disciples by telling them the Holy Spirit will always be close by their side, giving words of encouragement. The Spirit stays close to us, and if we will just listen, we can hear words of life and encouragement.

Tom Long tells a story which illustrates this point. He recalls listening to old records of the great bluesmaster Jimmy Reed when he was a teen. A sharecropper's son, Reed brought the throbbing harmonica-and-guitar-driven black rhythm-and-blues of the Mississippi Delta into the popular rock-and-roll mainstream.

In listening to Jimmy Reed's records over and over again, Long and his friends began to notice something curious. "If one listened very carefully, there could sometimes be heard, ever so faintly in the background, a soft woman's voice murmuring in advance the next verse of the song. The story that grew up around this – and perhaps is true – was that Jimmy Reed was so absorbed in the bluesy beat and the throbbing guitar riffs of his music that he simply could not remember the words of his own songs.

He needed help with the lyrics, and the woman's voice was none other than that of his wife, devotedly coaching her husband through the recording session by whispering the upcoming stanzas into his ear as he sang. Jesus tells his followers that the role of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, to whisper the lyrics of the gospel song in the ears of the faithful." (Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*)

Advent and Christmas is the announcement of the good news that God himself has decided to take on human flesh. When we're reminded of what the good news of Jesus Christ means to our lives, and that the Holy Spirit is close at hand, we, like the first disciples, can stay encouraged in the midst of turbulence. "When, in situations of challenge and stress, we remember the comfort and demand of the gospel, it is because the voice of the Holy Spirit whispers the lyrics of the saving gospel in our ears." (Long) Thanks be to

God for the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, the Wonderful Counselor, the one who encourages us, comforts us, and refreshes our memories about who we are and to whom we belong. Amen.