

ISAIAH 9:6.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us,
and the government will be on his shoulders—
and his name will be
Wonderful,
Counselor,
God the Champion,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

Last year on our Christmas observance we considered this same text, and we spent all our time just on the words, “And the government will be on his shoulders.” We considered how the Christ-child does government differently from all other earthly rulers. He came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Two years ago on Christmas Day we considered this same text, and we spent all our time just on the words, “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.” We considered how the Christ-child is God’s most precious gift to us—a gift he didn’t have to give us, a gift he should not have given us by rights, but a gift he freely, gladly, and generously gave to us anyway.

God gave this child *to us*. Isn’t that amazing? If someone were to ask you, “Whose child was Jesus?”, you would probably answer, “Mary’s,” or, “Mary’s and Joseph’s,” or, “Mary’s and God the Father’s.” But Isaiah tells us that this child is born *to us* and that this son is given *to us*. Even if you have never had a child in your life, you have at least one. Mary’s son is not just Mary’s; he is yours, and he is mine.

Which means that today, the day on which we celebrate his birth, we should figure out what we ought to call our son, this child who has been given to us. But if we only know that he is ours from God’s word, then we should also let God’s word instruct us as to what we should name this child.

Here God gives us a list of names to call him, through the prophet Isaiah. The EHV, NIV, and numerous other versions translate that list as four names—Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. But from ancient times the Jews have read this passage as a list of five names—Wonderful, Counselor, God the Champion, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This is the way we will take it, even though we would accurately name the child in the manger and get thoroughly familiar with him using either list.

We do not have time to consider all five of these names. Some of you would miss your Christmas dinner. But we do have time to consider the first name we have been instructed to give this child of ours—Wonderful.

1.

“His name will be Wonderful.”

We should call this Child whom God has given to us Wonderful, because when this Child acts, he acts in an extraordinary way beyond our understanding. He defies human reason and logic.

He does this first of all in his own life. All you have to do is look at him lying there in the manger. This is the Son of God who has descended to earth to redeem humankind from sins, in order that all mankind might believe in him and be saved.

So you tell me: How should he have descended to earth, if he wanted to accomplish this goal in the most logical way? Should he have been conceived in a virgin, thereby causing her to be viewed as an adulteress, to be considered insane, and to be shunned by family and friends? Should he have been conceived in a virgin who would have to make a difficult eighty- to ninety-mile journey so close to full term?

Should he have been given birth in Bethlehem, a relatively small country town where very few would know? Should he have been given birth to such a poor couple? Should he have been given birth in a dirty, unsterile stable? Should he have been wrapped in strips of cloth? Should his birth have been announced first and foremost to shepherds keeping watch at night in the fields nearby? Should he now be lying in a box stained with animal slobber?

Now in heaven, he wants all people to believe that he lived a holy life under God's law in their place, to redeem them from the curse of God's law. So should he really have only revealed to us the details of his birth, a few more details from his early life, one story from when he was twelve, and then jumped to his ministry at age thirty? If you want to convince people that you lived a perfectly holy life, shouldn't you at least include *a few* stories from your teenage years?

And what about the beginning of his ministry? The Son of God begins his ministry out in the wilderness with John the Baptist? And then spends most of his time in Galilee, going from one small town or village to another? He only makes occasional visits to Jerusalem?

And what about his selection of disciples? These are the men he expects to introduce Christianity, the gospel of salvation, to the entire world. Should he have picked a bunch of fishermen, a tax collector, a political activist, a man who would rob from their treasury and eventually betray him, and others, not one of whom was famous? Not to mention that they all would flee from him when he was arrested, when he needed them the most!

When he wants to return to the Father to glorious life in heaven, he goes into death and suffers hell. When he wants to take sin, death, and the devil captive, he lets them pounce on him, accuse, condemn, and kill him.

He acts in a wonderful way in his own life, and one gets the impression that the name Wonderful could be just as easily replaced with the name Strange or Bizarre or even Crazy.

2.

But that's not the end of it. He not only acts in a wonderful way in his own life; he also acts in a wonderful way with us, in our lives.

It is wonderful and extraordinary that he even interacts with us or any human in the first place. Why go through the bother? Sin was our fault. God didn't owe us anything. Why not just remain in heaven and punish the whole lot of us? Why not just sit in heaven and watch us destroy ourselves and say, "That's what happens when you don't listen to me! That's what happens when you think I'm the bad guy!" Jesus doesn't owe us one second of his gracious care and attention, but he's given us much more than that, and he has done so in a wonderful and extraordinary way.

First, the way he interacts with us is wonderful. He veils his glory, grace, and power behind—are you ready for this?—words, water, bread, wine. After seemingly going about everything backwards in his own life, you would think that if he wants the details of his life communicated to us, he would do it in a more flashy way that grabs our senses and attention. Instead, he expects that if people just talk about these backward events and details, just tell others about them, they will believe this message and be saved. He expects that if you just combine some of his words with water and wash a little on someone’s head, or maybe their hands if they’re older, the person’s heart will be changed and faith will either ignite within, or faith that has already been ignited by his Word will fan into flame. He expects that if you just combine some of his words with a bite of bread and a sip of wine, those who receive it will be strengthened in their conviction that this religion is the true one, and not only that, but they will be empowered to live more upright lives.

And look at the people that he interacts with in this way, the people that he chooses to be recipients of these means of grace! In the past, he picked people like the apostle Paul, once a persecutor of Christians, a man who himself later said that he was “ignorant” and “violent” before he became a Christian, a man whose sermon once dragged on for so long that a young man listening to it near a window fell asleep, fell out, and died.

He picked people like Martin Luther, a man who came from a miner’s family; a man who not only claimed he rediscovered the gospel during a visit to the bathroom, but even took pleasure in telling his friends about it; a man who definitely could let his emotions get the best of him and say some regrettable things both in person and on paper.

He picked people like me. If I took the time to tell you every reason Jesus should not have picked me to be one of his followers, much less one of his pastors, you would be here all morning and longer. One of my brothers in particular had to bear the brunt of my sinfulness and stupidity when I was young. First I chopped his fingers with a hatchet that I shouldn’t have been using in the first place. Later I hit him squarely in the forehead with a wooden baseball bat. It was an accident, but that almost makes it worse—who doesn’t watch out to make sure no one’s around when they’re swinging a baseball bat? Later I also threatened the same brother with a knife when I was angry at him, and thankfully, he ran away, otherwise who knows what I might have done and whether I would even be a free man today, much less standing in this pulpit.

I once got all my classmates to play tag with their eyes closed at recess, and when I was “it,” one of them stood in front of a garage adjacent to our recess yard and yelled his lungs out so that I rushed at him full bore with my eyes closed. He then stepped out of the way and watched me run straight into the garage. That was the only time I could actually look up and see my forehead. Once, while sitting in the classroom, I started cutting up my three-ring binder for fun—stupid enough already—and then the scissors slipped and out went a quarter-inch chunk of my index finger. Then when I went to the bathroom to stop the bleeding, do you think I took the chunk with me so that I could wash it and replace it and let the body’s healing processes do their thing? No, I picked it up and chucked it in the trash on the way out of the classroom.

Do I need to go on? There has been plenty of stupidity and sin to go around for all of you in my life alone. The point is, if you were Jesus in heaven and you saw that I was going to do all these things and everything else I left out, would you say, “I want that one. Make sure you get

that one baptized. Oh, and put him in the public ministry too; I want him to represent me publicly”?

But before you laugh too hard at me, what about you? Jesus picked you. Are you all laughing at me because you can't believe I did those things, or because you are appalled by them? Or are at least some of you laughing because they are reminding you of things you have done? Maybe you're not the kind of person who would have run into a garage with your eyes closed, but maybe you're the kind of person who would have yelled in front of the garage and then stepped to the side so that you could laugh at such a person.

Or to get to the point: If you were put in a line of all the people in the world right now, together with all the people in the past and all the people in the future, and you were all standing in front of Jesus so that Jesus could look you all over and choose his select minority to be his followers and inherit eternal life—if you were Jesus, would you even choose you? Sometimes unbelievers look like better candidates for Christianity than we Christians do! What lowliness, weakness, shame, and offense exists in the lives of those with whom Jesus chooses to interact!

And what about the places where Jesus has his means of grace distributed? If you lived in Tripp County and you knew nothing about religion, but you decided one day that religion might be right for you, where would you go looking to find the best church? Would this one be your first choice, the church in Winner, South Dakota, belonging to a church body with Wisconsin in its name? Would you look in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod or WELS, which some people say is actually an acronym for “We Enjoy Looking Serious”? *That's* where Jesus wants to deposit his pure gospel?

From the beginning of creation, Jesus has veiled his glory behind what is inglorious—behind inglorious circumstances, inglorious things, and above all, inglorious people. Does that make sense?

And what about how he treats those whom he makes his followers? Again, if he expects them to believe in the details of his own life, which seem so backwards sometimes, and to share them with others, you would expect him to make some kind of awesome deal with us: “Listen, if you believe and share this, I'll give you a nice house, a bunch of land, plenty of money, and a large, happy, and harmonious family”—or something like that.

But how does he treat them instead? Read the account of Job, where God himself makes clear he had no ostensible reason to let Satan treat Job that way. Yes, what does Jesus even promise us? He said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Paul and Barnabas preached, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Paul later wrote to Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” I'm not familiar with every last little religion on earth, but I'm pretty sure that Christianity is the only religion that promises you that, if you join it, your life will not get better from an outward point-of-view, but it is guaranteed to get worse. Only from the perspective of faith and spiritual blessings, and only after this life from a visible perspective, does your life get better as a Christian. Yes, it is precisely through suffering that Jesus draws his followers further into his religion and closer to himself!

So Jesus not only veils his glorious truth behind what is inglorious, he actually veils it behind suffering and struggle. No wonder his name is Wonderful!

But would any of you have it any other way? Jesus does things this way so that our salvation is certain, because it depends entirely on God and not on us or anyone or anything else. Jesus does things this way so that all the credit for our salvation must go where it belongs—to God and his holy Word, not to us. For it is only if God is real and powerful and gracious and if his Word is actually true that such a religion as we have just described could have lasted to the present. Jesus does things this way so that only those who are truly hungering and thirsting for the truth and for righteousness find it and remain with it, so that only those who are conscious of their sinful need find and treasure their salvation in him. Those who are in it for glory or status or reputation don't stick around for long.

Peer into the manger. There is your newborn. He is yours. What wonder is hidden there! A wonderful God with a wonderful plan, not only for his own life, but for yours and mine, for every generation. A wonderful God who provides a wonderful salvation from sins, who communicates it in a wonderful way through the means of grace, the good news of Jesus in word form and in the form of the two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. A wonderful God who wonderfully communicates it to undeserving people, who wonderfully veils this salvation behind hardship and suffering, but in the end leads his own to a wonderful and eternal life in heaven.

His name is Wonderful, and because it is, you all may have a wonderful Christmas!
Amen.