

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Advent Series, 2020

Hello, My Name is... Wonderful Counselor

Sunday, November 29, 2020

Rev. Mark Hovermale

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Welcome and Announcements

God morning! Today is Sunday, November 29, 2020. I just am so excited you're joining us online today. A special thank-you right up front to Susan Underhill for working her videotaping magic to make this happen, for Jim and Kathy Bernard, and also to Kylie Phillips for helping us with music, along with Sharon Smith.

We just want to say hello and welcome to worship. We have something very special coming in December. Yes, Advent and Christmas, but Reverend Ashley Ashley is joining us as Associate Pastor. We are so excited to welcome her and I ask that you welcome her with open arms as she comes in. You'll get to hear from her soon in these services.

This is our new sermon series. It is our Advent series, our Christmas series, "Hello, My Name is... We're looking at different ideas of Jesus, descriptions of the Messiah, a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Today we're looking at *Wonderful Counselor*, but specifically we're going to look at an overview of Isaiah, Chapter 9.

Rev. Mark Hovermale, with Lily – Lighting of the Advent Candle

Today, my daughter Lily is going to light the first advent candle, as a reminder that Jesus Christ is our hope.

(Lighting of Advent Candle by Lily)

Listen to these words of hope from the Prophet Isaiah:

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders
and he will be called Wonderful Counselor.”

We're going to explore the hope offered us by God through the scripture passage that we view today and we will focus on the promise that Christ today is our Wonderful Counselor.

Let us pray. Dear God, in a year that has challenged us unlike any other we recognize our need for your hope and your wise counsel. Please lead us forward in faith today and throughout this pandemic. Remind us that you bring light into our every experience of darkness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Kathy Bernard – Opening Prayer

Please join me in the opening prayer. Almighty God, in many ways it is hard to recognize our lives in our world right now, but we rejoice in knowing that you are the same yesterday, today, and always. We come before you in this season of Thanksgiving, on this first Sunday of Advent, filled with gratitude and praise for who you are. We also confess there are times when we act or speak in ways that distance us from you, or we allow our daily lives to take priority over you, and for this we ask your forgiveness. May we center our hearts and minds on you during this time of worship with a fresh desire to know you better and draw even closer to you. Amen.

Jim Bernard — Scripture Reading, Isaiah 9:1-5, NIV

Our first scripture reading this morning is from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 9, verses 1 through 5. I'll be reading from the NIV version, so let's listen to God's word together.

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.
In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations,
by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.
For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.
Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

This is the word of Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — The Sermon Series Theme

Are you ready for the hustle and bustle of Christmas? How many of you have already started your Christmas shopping? Be honest!

By the way, here's a few statistics. Back in 2019, the world looked a lot different. Christmas shoppers around the country said they were going to spend about \$970 on their presents last year. Last year, sales surpassed the trillion-dollar mark! Yes, that is twelve zeros! A trillion dollars spent on Christmas! Households spent over \$1500; but here we go, spouses only got about \$125. We'll figure that out later! 32.8 million Christmas trees were bought. Sixty percent of consumers decided to buy online. Smart phone usage was up eleven percent.

Twenty-two percent of Americans believe their Christmas spending will leave them in debt. More than 60 percent of all Americans buy their gifts—get this, guys, a week before Christmas! So you're in good company with all the buying and shopping and the craziness.

Jesus is what we would call “the reason for the season.” As hokey as that phrase might be to you, it kind of gets lost in the shuffle, to be honest. I don't think people mean this to happen, but with all the craziness and all of what I just described, all the millions of dollars

being spent, billions, actually trillions, Jesus kind of gets swept to the side and I thought about this.

I ask myself this question and I want to ask it of you: How much different is my Christmas and your Christmas from people who don't believe in Jesus Christ? To be honest, other than going to church, maybe, how much different do our Christmases look? Is the way we celebrate, what we spend our time and money on, that much different from someone who doesn't believe at all?

That's why I love the fact that Reverend Emily picked Isaiah 9, verses 1 through 7 for the series, but specifically for this first sermon of the series, because it's a very famous passage and you're going to recognize it when it is read. What we're going to do is we're going to learn a little bit more about it. We have heard Isaiah so many times before, so we're going to remind ourselves and learn more about it, maybe in a new way. Then we're going to look at applying it to our lives today.

Jim Bernard — Second Scripture Reading, Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV

Our second reading continues from our first and it's a familiar passage. Again, I'll be reading from Isaiah Chapter 9, beginning at verse 6.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Mark Hovermale — Sermon

When I read this passage from Isaiah 9, 1 through 7, I have some great memories of this passage, I think it was shared and used in my home church, but that's not where my memories come from. I remember and think of Christmas Eve here at First Presbyterian Church in Plymouth. I was actually picked to read this passage all the time in the Christmas Eve services. It was great, I remember Christmas Eve, and the services. It's utter chaos for the staff, but it's really a lot of fun! We would get here at 2:00 p.m.; we stayed until 12:30 a.m. It was a crazy number of services, a lot of fun, and a little exhausting, too. We would have dinner as a staff. I loved driving home about 12:30 at night, it's Christmas morning, the Christmas lights are out, and I would think to myself, my kids are getting up in four hours!

So this is one of the most famous and well-known passages of scripture. I want to take a few minutes and just reflect on it and then learn some new things about it and see how we can apply it to our lives.

Now, if you know me, I have odd side notes in sermons. This scripture passage talks about the geography and then it says it's actually a poem, which is really interesting. I didn't know it was a poem. It actually talks about a particular time and place. In verse 2

you saw the people walking in darkness, who then saw a great light and then it kind of goes a little bit different. We know the great light is Jesus and his salvation that's offered as a Messiah. It's referenced in the New Testament when Jesus is ministering. That's a great obvious point, and then it gives an account of trouble and salvation and talks about being praised in the time of celebration.

Then it gets to the part we all know, Isaiah 9:6: *For to us a child born, unto us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders, and here is the part we will always remember--Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Let's look through those really quick. Wonderful Counselor--it points to the Messiah as a King. Mighty God--he's a divine power; he's a warrior. Their Everlasting Father, he will be an enduring but compassionate provider and protector.

I just want to pause here to see if you've had a bad experience with fathers. I had a great father. If you're looking at, and you struggle with that language, just remember, my friend Doug told me once that God is our *ultimate* father. He is the perfect example of a father even if we didn't have a good earthly example. The Prince of Peace--there's going to be well-being to individuals and society, something we can definitely use a lot of today.

All right, so that part was really easy, But I have got to warn you right now, up front, this is where it gets really confusing, at least for me. As I look at the original language just to make sure I'm on the right track, I'm thinking this is going to be an easy one to do. And then I read the *original* language and I bang my head against the wall, because I realized everything I understood about this passage was not correct, or a lot of my understanding was incorrect. I want to tell you a little bit. I got this from theologians, but basically I'm going to just summarize it. The words they used, the tenses they used in Hebrew for that prediction, that prophecy that we know so well, is actually reporting from a past tense, as opposed to the future! Instead of predicting, by saying, in the future this is going to happen, the words in Hebrew actually mean a present tense, but more than likely past tense. This means it had already happened, and so I'm thinking to myself what would it mean? How could something that's been predicted in the future, which we know is being referenced with language that means it is in the past and it's already happened? That's very confusing-- predicting something in the future that's already happened in the past. As I tried to figure it out, I was stuck.

Then one thing came to my mind: Dr. Tony Campolo, brilliant but a little quirky, I think. He was the spiritual mentor for Bill Clinton, during his time in office. He was lecturing about singing and obedience when I heard him at a conference for youth workers. They would not let him talk about youth ministry, but instead insisted he talk about theological issues. He was talking about sin and obedience. He said this, which was really amazing. He said that we understand time is linear--past, present, and future. God, not so much! In fact, not at all! With God, what's happened in the past, what's happening in the present and what's happening in the future is all the same. So, in the Old Testament it is being predicted that He's the Messiah, Jesus is Messiah, and when Jesus is hanging on the cross and when Jesus comes again, separated by thousands of years, they are all happening at the same time, because God's understanding of time is different than ours.

I came across this in 2 Peter with the high school students, just the other day, in Bible Study. It says this, years is a day to God, and a day is 1000 years. So based on God's understanding and he speaks to the Prophet, right? This is God speaking through the Prophet. He is saying, "Yes, this is going to happen but in *my timing*."

The point is that sounds really cool and that might be something you might hear in seminary theology, but what is the point to you and me today? I told you that to God's perspective when he's predicting that in the future, Jesus is going to be the Messiah, be born, but it's already happened in the past, the prophets were given this language from Isaiah with complete confidence because it already happened, Now you're saying, "Well that's great for back then, but all this stuff happened in the past, Mark! All this stuff happened in the past, and so how does that apply to us today?"

Here is the application, and then we're going to get to the implication of all we need to do. If the prophet back then could give this prophecy in complete confidence, knowing that it already happened in God's time, and he could say, "Yes, this is going to happen", and I can see him doing that, then all the promises in God's Word, even the ones that we read haven't happened yet, we can take in complete confidence, because in God's timing they've already happened! The promise of all the different things that we hang on to, maybe hoping they come true we don't just have to hope, because in God's timing they have already happened! That's the *application*.

So what is the *implication*? What are you going to take from this and practically do? Well, we're going through tough times. Are you really struggling, even this Christmas time? Are you really, just really, struggling here, or do you know someone who is? God promises to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with us. It's not that you're hoping, he's right there beside you, in His timing! If your life is a mess, you're haunted by mistakes, you look all fine, but when you lay your head down on your pillow at night you are thinking of all the things you have done. You have made mistakes in your life and you feel like there's no way God can forgive you, but in His timing he already has! Our hope for eternity, salvation through Jesus Christ, or Messiah, if we have a relationship with Him, we don't have to hope that maybe that will come true. We know he's coming back and if we have personal relations with him we get to go to Heaven; not hoping, we know with complete confidence because in God's timing it already has happened! You can "bank" on it, and thanks be to God.

Kathy Bernard — Prayers of the People

Let's pray. Wonderful Counselor, we humbly bow to you, grateful for your character, your word, your promises and your ears that hear the deepest longings of our hearts. We lift up to you our family, friends, and our church family. This year we have been isolated from one another, and our holiday celebrations may look very different, but we are thankful that we are able to maintain community when we are challenged to think of creative ways to do so. It is a blessing, a reminder that nothing can separate us from your love.

We thank you for the diversity you've intentionally built into your creation from the changing seasons to the unique design of each of your children. Father, help us to celebrate this diversity whether it be racial, cultural, geographic, or political. When we are overwhelmed by the stress of conflict, please remind us that you intend for us to be unified in your Son, in spite of our differences. Help us to be generous with kindness, gentleness, forgiveness and grace in our words and actions, because as your followers we want to be a loving reflection of you, the Prince of Peace.

Father, we ask you to guide the new leaders of our country. May the leaders called possess the commitment to rely on your leadership and abide by your call to love your neighbor as yourself. May we, as citizens of the United States, respectfully and supportively accept our new government.

We lift up to you our church leadership. We are grateful to all who heard your call to bring the Reverend Ashley Smith Ashley and her husband Brendan to us. We pray that she will bring new teaching and wisdom to our church and allow our church leadership team to reorganize and strengthen so that we can live into all that you have called our church to be, in Plymouth and to the ends of the earth.

God, you are the great physician. Please provide wisdom, endurance and compassion to all health care professionals who are caring for their patients' physical and mental needs. We ask for your peace and comfort for all who are caring for those with health needs or facing their own health struggles and for those who mourn the loss of loved ones. Please be with the first responders, essential workers, and researchers around the world who need your strength and support.

We offer prayers for our mission partners in Detroit, Jackson, Mexico, and Malawi. Through these partnerships you are teaching us what it means to be the body of Christ, by showing us how to embrace one another with a love that overcomes the barriers of distance, language and culture. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. As we enter into this season of Advent we remember the first appearance of you in the form of an infant, born in a stable, and we look forward with great anticipation to Christ's return. We do not take for granted the love and sacrifice your Son made for us, and may we fill the coming days of Advent with continued praise and gratitude. Finally we add to this our innermost petitions and lift all these prayers heavenward with the words Jesus taught us to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Benediction and Blessing

May we go from here and remember the blessings that God gives us and the promises that will be fulfilled that we can count on. And may the Father, Son and Holy Ghost bless you and your family, this Advent season, today and through the rest of the month, and for the rest of your lives. Amen.