



Sermon Transcript December 13, 2020

Hindsight is 20/20
Looking Forward
Isaiah 9:6; 2 Chron. 32:9-10

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on December 13, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by David Rucquoi. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text

Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

2 Chronicles 32:9-10

After this, Sennacherib king of Assyria, who was besieging Lachish with all his forces, sent his servants to Jerusalem to Hezekiah king of Judah and to all the people of Judah who were in Jerusalem, saying, ¹⁰“Thus says Sennacherib king of Assyria, ‘On what are you trusting, that you endure the siege in Jerusalem?’”

Introduction

The title of our Advent series is "Hindsight 20/20," where we reflect on this year through the lens of Scripture in Isaiah 9:6, acknowledging the incarnation of Jesus, and learning how He answers the challenges we have faced. Last week we looked forward to our "Wonderful Counselor" who is wise, and renews us. This week we will be looking upward to our "Mighty God," who is powerful and gives us courage.

Looking Back: Challenges of The Past

Every year the Oxford Dictionary chooses a new word that evolved during that year which captures the unique mood or character of that time. In 1999 the phrase was "Y2K" – preparing for the new millennium. In 2000 the phrase was "chad" – responding to the Florida voting controversy. In 2006 the new word was "Plutoed" – reflecting a small planet being downgraded. But, 2020 has so rocked our world that the transformation of the English language caused the Oxford English Dictionary to publish a whole list of words, with everything from "anti-vaxxer" to "zoombombing."

Museum curators are urging people to preserve and submit personal materials for the museum archives. The director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History states, "Our cultural seismology is being revealed...the confluence is unlike most anything we've seen," noting the impact in the most dramatic and mundane of our daily routines.

Regardless of the topic (Covid-19, racial tension, riots, tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, economy, political tensions, biased media reports, or – dare I mention - toilette paper) we have lived the impact.

In 1933, at a previous low point in history, Franklin Roosevelt confronted the ills of the Great Depression in his inaugural address. In his speech two points resounded above the rest: First, that "the greatest fear is fear itself", discounting concerns over "common difficulties" as "only material things;" and, second, he stated, "With this pledge taken, I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to a disciplined attack upon our common problems." In this, he echoed two familiar elements of Is. 9:6 that became glaringly clear as I prepared today's message: fear, and a militaristic charge to attack it. And, I should mention (given this week's commemoration of the attack on Pearl Harbor), President Roosevelt proclaimed this "disciplined attack upon our common problems," by our "great army" about 8 years

before his speech proclaiming that "day of infamy," on December 7, 1941. In this inaugural address, the common enemy was the invisible force of fear.

You may recall, Isaiah was a prophet of the Southern kingdom of Judah about 700 years before the events of the New Testament. He lived about 8 generations after Solomon, and 4 generations before Nebuchadnezzar took the Southern Kingdom to captivity in Babylon. Fearing annihilation from Assyria (from the North), and struggling with wars from Edom and Philistia (in the South) the king of Judah (Ahaz) tried to make an alliance with the Assyrians, offering them gold. You can read about this in 2 Chronicles 28-33, and how Ahaz's plan backfired. Under the next King, Hezekiah, there was revival, but Assyria was now invading Judah (they had already conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel). King Hezekiah worked to prepare Jerusalem for an Assyrian Siege, telling the people, *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or dismayed before the king of Assyria and all the horde that is with him, for there are more with us than with him. With him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles"* (2 Chron. 32:7-8).

If you're ever in Jerusalem, be sure to visit "Hezekiah's Tunnel," a conduit carved under the Eastern part of Jerusalem, connecting the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam. The tunnel is longer than 5 football fields, about 2.5' wide and 6' high. Built in haste, the workers dug through the rock from both ends, meeting in the middle, leaving evidence of where they changed directions; however, what was guiding their subterranean efforts is unknown. This much is clear, history confirms the siege, the tunnel exists, and walking knee deep in the cool water is most refreshing, after sightseeing in that hot area.

The Northern armies of Assyria were besieging Lachish (2 Chron. 32), a city South of Jerusalem, indicating that Jerusalem was surrounded. Sennacherib (King of Assyria) sent an envoy to Jerusalem to demoralize the people with lies and threats, to undermine their allegiance to King Hezekiah and erode their confidence in God (2 Kings 18). The Assyrians shouted in Hebrew, accusing Hezekiah of deception, ensuring the people would understand. Just to be clear, nearly 3,000 years ago the people were in a life-threatening situation, the political forces were at odds with each other, the city was a war zone (with everyone locked in place), sources of information were conflicting, and the whole community was likely debating who to believe and what to do. Sound familiar? And then the Assyrian ambassador asks, ***"On what are you trusting that you endure the siege in Jerusalem?"*** (2 Chron. 32:10 cp. 2 Kings 18:19). It is as though Isaiah is responding to this question when he tells the people (Is. 8:12), *"You are not to say, 'It is a conspiracy'...you are not to fear..."*

Isaiah also provides a familiar but unusual reference saying, "*the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel*" (Is. 7:14, cp. Matt. 1:23), meaning "*God with us.*" Here we turn to our main text (Is. 9:6), to learn more about this son "Immanuel." After which, I'd like to come back to a very serious question this begs for each of us.

A Response to Past Challenges: A Reason Not to Fear

Isaiah describes 3 very different aspects of this child's nature that coexist as a unified whole: first, "A child is born" – This speaks to his mortality, his humanity. Second, "a son is given" – This speaks to his deity, affirmed by calling Him "God with us". And third, "The government shall be on His shoulder" – speaking to his responsibility and domain of authority.

Then Isaiah provides four titles, which we are discussing each of the four Sundays of Advent, providing individual focus; but, I urge you to meditate on the notion that these titles are simultaneous and overlapping. Each aspect of the child's nature (humanity, deity and authority) is unique to each corresponding name. So, for example, as humanity, we see the Mighty God providing protection and celebration (defensive and offense strength), while as Deity this title reveals omnipotence. The four titles represent distinct yet interrelated roles such that the name, "Wonderful Counselor" clearly provides guidance, often political, and frequently in the context of warfare. The name, "Mighty God" has clear military overtones, yet is also authoritative. "Everlasting Father" is clearly authoritative, yet also tender and intimate; while "Prince of Peace" is clearly tender and intimate, yet reflects what we are seeking guidance for. We will discuss how this applies to His authority a bit later.

	"A child is born"	"A son is given"
Title	Humanity	Deity
"Wonderful Counselor"	Direction	Miraculous
"Mighty God"	Protection/Celebration	Omnipotent
"Everlasting Father"	Affection	Soveriegn/eternal
"Prince of Peace"	Perfection (justification, sanctification)	Complete

Today, we note that the Hebrew word for "mighty" typically refers to warriors, champions. We would reserve this for our "Special Forces," the most lethal of the fighting force, or most lethal in a specific discipline. In Deut. 10:17 God describes Himself to Moses saying, "*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the*

great God, mighty and awesome ..." In Joshua (6:2) we see the Lord telling *Joshua*: "See! I have given Jericho into your hand, its king, and the mighty men of valor," compelling Joshua to be brave, and that Jericho's best warriors will be no problem. Over and over we see this word "mighty" used in a military context, including the description of Goliath as the "*champion*" of the Philistines. He was their best. Once he was defeated, the army fled (1 Sam. 17:51). Then, as so often happens in this study, we come across familiar passages to let us know we are walking a path traveled by devout believers of the past as we read (Ps. 24:8) "*Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, The Lord mighty in battle,*" a text brother George Frideric Handel used for his oratorio, *The Messiah*, which debuted in 1742, capturing the military component of the "son that is given." **Have courage, He is our Mighty God!**

This brings us to the second term used in this title, "God." This son given is not just a mighty champion. He is the champion-God. In Isaiah's society of many gods, where Israel's greatest fault is worshipping other gods, and they are facing consequences for such worship, there is only one logical interpretation of this use of "el." Notice how Isaiah repeats this expression (Isaiah 10:21), making his usage clear, "*And it shall come to pass in that day that the remnant of Israel [the Northern Kingdom], and such as have escaped of the house of Jacob, will never again depend on him who defeated them [they had relied on Assyria], but will depend on the Lord [YHWH], the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the Mighty God.*" **He is the Mighty God!**

Understand also, the title "Mighty God" exists with the other titles. He gives His miraculous counsel, in light of His might. The Psalmist tells us, "*The counsel of the LORD stands forever ... The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love*" (Psalm 33:11-18). As Everlasting Father He never ceases to care for the welfare of His children. And it is as Mighty God that He establishes and sustains His role as Prince of Peace. Have courage, **He is our Mighty God!**

Looking up to Our Mighty God: A Source for Courage

In advent we focus on the precious child born. Did Isaiah intend for people to embrace this concept of a mighty military leader? Am I taking this military metaphor too far? Surely the Magi saw Him as King of the Jews, to be worshipped (Matt. 2:1-2). Herod so perceived the child as a threat he took violent action to destroy him (Matt. 2:3-18).

Simeon viewed Jesus as "God's salvation" (Luke 2:29-35). Anna viewed Jesus as "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38). Throughout the gospels we see people anticipating the Messiah as the solution to the Roman occupation, thus increasing political tensions. At His trial, the high priest asked if He was Christ (Mark 14:61). He wasn't asking if Jesus was the baby in the manger; rather, if he claimed to be king. Pilate referred to him as "King of the Jews" (Mark 15). Understand, each reference to Him being "king" was with the outlandish assumption that Jesus intended to usurp the Roman occupation. So the Roman guards tormented him to prove he was no threat (Mark 15). What none of them realized is that His demonstration of power was not through opposing their efforts; rather, He let them give their best shot. And they had no idea that their efforts were a pitiful representation of the much greater invisible, spiritual warfare going on, to which John (fitting for this season of celebrating His first coming) latter portrays this Christ as a conquering military leader (Rev. 19:11-ff), at His second coming. That this child would be a powerful leader, was clearly intended and understood.

Why portray this child as a military leader? The answer can be seen throughout Isaiah's prophecy, and in the nativity story itself. Isaiah wrote, "*Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; **fear not!** Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you'*" (35:4). "***Fear not**, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand'*" (41:10). "*For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, '**Fear not**, I am the one who helps you'*" (41:13).

As much as this was the message to the people of Judah 700 years before the events of the New Testament period, the message carried into the nativity story as the angel encourages Joseph, "*do not fear*" (Matt 1:20); and says to Zacharias, "*do not be afraid*" (Luke 1:13); and assures the young Mary saying, "*do not be afraid*" (Luke 1:30); and shouts to the shepherds, "*fear not*" (Luke 2:10)! The message, that we should not fear, is so intertwined in redemptive history, is it any wonder that Paul taught his own timid "intern", that God hasn't given us a spirit of fear, "*but of power and love and self-control*" (2 Tim. 1:7). **Take courage, you are under the care of a "Mighty God!"**

Such combative language may not seem fitting for a pastoral advent message; but, in preparing others for pastoral service, in his book "The Care of Souls," the veteran pastor writes, "it's delusional to think that real pastoral work can be accomplished in perpetual peace and tranquility. If we're serious about the ministry, we'll need to man up for battle." He goes on to say, "most of our work involves things that are invisible, yet very

real."

We don't typically equate the Christmas story with Paul's teaching that *"we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"* (Eph. 6:12); but when the son that was given became the child that was born, a pivotal spiritual battle was inaugurated in the course of history, **to prove our Mighty God!**

If we have any Marines here, you might hear someone shout, "OohRah" in this next section... Retired US Marine Corps four-star general, Jim Mattis, served 44 years leading hundreds of thousands of troops, from over 28 countries, commanding forces in the Persian Gulf War, the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq war, before serving as the U.S. secretary of defense. Mattis wrote in his memoir that war is characterized by "the trinity of chance, uncertainty, and friction". Later adding "ambiguity" to the mix, he explains, "nothing ever goes according to plan" and that our enemies never take a holiday. In reference to fear, Mattis quotes a letter George Washington wrote to the congress, early in the U.S. war for independence, saying, "[People] who are familiarized to danger meet it without shrinking; whereas troops unused to service often apprehend danger where no danger is". In this he adds, quoting popular U.S. Marine axioms, "The most important six inches on the battlefield are between your ears," and "Only the dead have seen the last of war." In his informative memoir General Mattis portrays an image of warfare that is eerily similar to the ambiguous barrage of invisible elements we have all been confronted with, as we look back on 2020: danger, uncertainty, chaos, deception, loss, loneliness and fear. This is what we see when we look back. In his descriptions of both brutal warfare and sacrificial humanitarian aid, the general explains how the U.S. Marines strive to create the "perfect warrior," repeating the mantra, "No better friend, no worse enemy," Mattis describes the perfect warrior as the greatest threat to our enemies, and the greatest hope to our allies. In our present battle against the invisible, take courage. **This is our Mighty God!**

Nearly 3,000 years ago a general and his army stood around Jerusalem, taunting the question, (2 Chron. 32:9-11) "***On what are you trusting that you endure ... ?***" The response then, through the prophet Isaiah, was the same as our response should be today. **We take courage in our "Mighty God."**

This brings us to the question we all must answer: Isaiah has introduced us to this child, so we know who He is; but, who are you? Or, as the Assyrian general stated, "On what

are you trusting that you endure?"

Having discussed this child's humanity and deity, this is where we discuss how the government is on His shoulder. Is this a reference to Him being "King of Kings" or prophecy of the cross he bore? At a time when we loathe our government's quarantine restrictions, yet hold them responsible for our safety, this discussion couldn't be more relevant. Authority and responsibility must always go together. We cannot hold someone responsible when we do not grant them authority. This is why Harry Truman had a sign on his desk reading, "The buck stops here." He had the authority, and therefore accepted responsibility. He bore the responsibility; and, therefore, demanded authority. As this church moves from having an Executive Board to Elders and Deacons, we are acknowledging (as a congregational church) that the spiritual responsibility for this church does not rest solely on the Pastor's shoulders. It is shared by all of us. Similarly, have you noticed how often people neglect acknowledging God for our blessings, yet blame him when things go wrong? If we so blame Him, the implication is that we have granted Him authority and He has failed; when, in truth, we never gave Him authority.

Now look to how these names intersect with the government being on His shoulder, a reference indicating both the responsibility and authority (dominion) of this child's reign. As "Wonderful Counselor" His responsibility is strategic, and his domain is political (at least, this is how the term for Counselor is typically used). As "Mighty God" His responsibility is defensive and offensive, and his domain is Military. As "Everlasting Father" his responsibility is a very intimate availability, while His dominion is over all eternity. And as "Prince of Peace" His responsibility is one of completion, achievement, and His domain is over heaven itself.

	"the government shall be upon His shoulder"
Title	Responsibility/Dominion
"Wonderful Counselor"	Strategic/Political
"Mighty God"	Offense & defense/Military
"Everlasting Father"	Availability/Eternity
"Prince of Peace"	Achievement/Heaven

If the child that was born and the son that was given has dominion over all sovereignties, if He has dominion over every battle, if He has dominion over eternity, and over heaven itself, the question that remains is whether that child has dominion over the realm of your heart? Last week Pastor Scott showed us how God can use the challenges of 2020 to bring about something new. In the same way, 2,000 years ago this child transformed the cruelest symbol of death, a cross, to being the greatest symbol of hope. And that is what the cross is, for those who place their trust in the son that was given. We are promised, "*to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*" (John 1:12). The cross and resurrection represent the ultimate battle. And because of His victory over the grave, we can be courageous even in the face of death; for, He has defeated it. Yet, to those who do not trust in him, the cross is still a symbol of death. Yes, it's been a challenging year. And as you look back on 2020, what have you relied on to get through it? News media? Social media? Medical protocol? Your home or yourself? A candidate or political party? A vaccine? Unfortunately, we may have the hardest months ahead of us; but, Isaiah reminds us we should look beyond the earthly distractions and **look up, with courage, placing our trust in the Mighty God.**

Conclusion

In college I traveled with a singing group that represented my university in churches throughout the country, and around the world. The group had the unfortunate acronym "S.M.I.T.E.", which stood for Student Missionary Intern Training for Evangelism. Yes, I've been an intern for a long time. Each year the SMITE teams would represent our school at missions conferences around the country, and spend the summer supporting mission work overseas. I traveled with them to Haiti, Costa Rica and the Philippines. A few years earlier another SMITE group served in Botswana, one of the least populated and poorest countries of the world, located in South Africa. After that team ended one of their services, the local African pastor stood up and sang a hymn of benediction, like an anthem representing the congregation's core identity, as he sang simple words to a simple tune:

What a mighty God we serve,
What a mighty God we serve,
What a mighty God we serve,
What a mighty God we serve.

The team thought it was a nice way to end the service; but, they were wrong. It was not

the end, it was just the beginning of the end, as the whole congregation began to sing it again. Repeating the song over-and-over, they occasionally changed the words, but always came back to the central theme, eventually standing, then dancing, getting louder and louder, with deeper, richer harmonies and percussion. When it seemed there was nothing more that could be added the pastor sang out, "Let us go and tell the world!" and the congregation sang that theme, as they slowly made their way out the doors, all the while singing, dancing and clapping, then returning to their central theme, "What a mighty God we serve." Their voices could be heard fading down the paths and roadways in every direction as they went back to their homes, into their community singing, dancing and proclaiming, "What a mighty God we serve." And that is Isaiah's hope and message to us today, as we look back on 2020, and look forward to the months ahead. **We can look upward with confidence, and show our community courage, that there is hope in this child, our Mighty God.**

"2020 is so wild that Oxford English Dictionary couldn't come up with one "word of the year," Daily News, Nov. 23, 2020, accessed Dec. 6, 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/ny-oxford-english-dictionary-reveals-words-of-the-year-20201123-ebkbotogncqpb3hxredy3spba-story.html>.

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. How is your Christmas celebration going to be different this year? How are you feeling about that?
2. What is one thing you took from the sermon this past Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

3. Read 2 Chronicles 32:1-19. Describe the situation that King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem were facing?
4. What issues in your life are calling on you to demonstrate courage? How does 2 Chronicles 32:7-8 illustrate what biblical courage looks like?
5. Read 2 Chronicles 32:20-23. How does Hezekiah demonstrate what it looks like to “look up” to God in his time of need? How does this encourage you?
6. Red Luke 2:8-14. What is it about the birth of Jesus that should calm our fears?
7. Read Ephesians 6:10-20. In looking at the armor of God, describe how Jesus is the source of courage and strength.

Taking It Home

8. Where do you need to display courage? How will you “look up” to the Mighty God for strength?
9. What encouragement are you taking from this conversation?