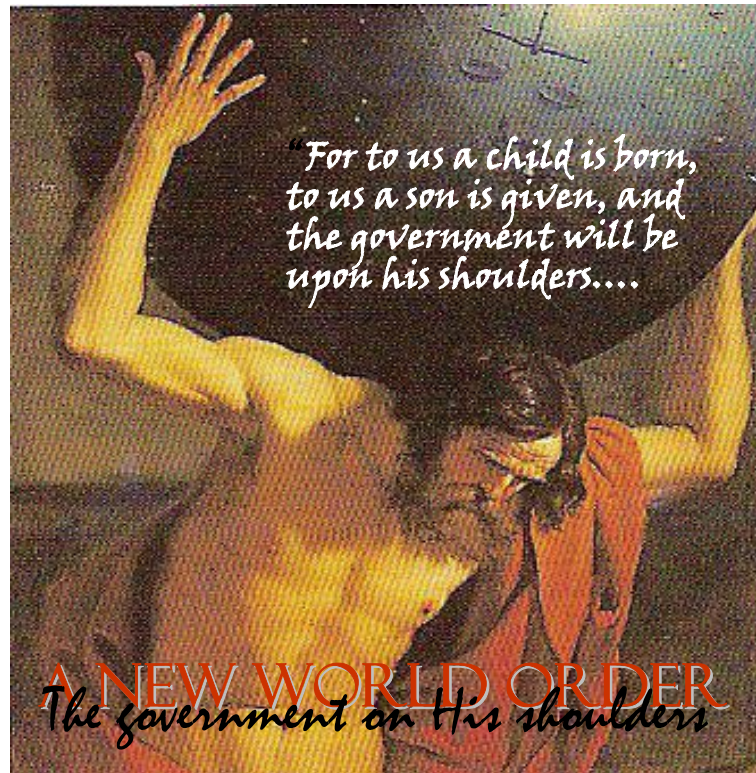


The Covenant Pulpit



“HOPE: Wonderful Counselor”

Isaiah 9:1-7

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The Roman philosopher Seneca must have been thinking about him when he wrote, “The foremost art of a king is to endure hatred.”

Few kings have suffered the hatred he endured for almost forty years. Because his father was a mid-level political hack and his mother an Arab nomad, the elite dismissed him as a social climber lacking a proper pedigree. The political establishment resented him as an outsider. Patriots despised him for being a puppet king who slavishly did the bidding of a foreign superpower. Religious leaders condemned him from their pulpits as a hedonist and heretic.

It wasn't that he didn't try hard to win the hearts of his subjects. From his earliest days as an insecure little boy, he had been a compulsive people pleaser. He almost bankrupted his treasury to build them the most magnificent temple in history. Then he pulled off an unparalleled engineering feat by constructing the greatest seaport the world had ever seen. After that, he did the impossible by erecting a city atop towering cliffs in the desert. With manic energy he built highways, public buildings, and sports arenas for his people.

His efforts earned him the most coveted title in the ancient world: *Philokaisar*—“The One Caesar Loves.” His tiny country gained favored nation status and unprecedented prosperity. Yet all of that mattered little to his ungrateful subjects. Almost daily the king uncovered plots to seize his throne.

A man can only take so much before his soul begins to shrivel up and die. In the face of ingratitude, he became resentful. Engulfed by political intrigue, he became paranoid. He married ten wives to shore up his political base, and then had his favorite wife executed on trumped up charges. He tortured his mother-in-law, forcing her to testify against her own daughter. He later killed her too, along with his brother-in-law. He even executed three of his sons.

In the end, he descended into madness. People who looked at him the wrong way disappeared in the night. Holy men who spoke out against him were burned alive. In his last days, his mind was eaten by syphilis and his body infested by worms. Certain that his subjects would rejoice at the news of his death, he had 300 leading citizens imprisoned. He left orders that they were to be slaughtered when he died so that there would be weeping in the land.

History calls him Herod the Great. But his Israeli subjects called him, “Hordos the Madman.” Despite his amazing accomplishments, Herod is remembered today for a single act of brutality recorded in Matthew's Christmas story. To eliminate a potential rival to his throne, he ordered his soldiers to butcher every newborn baby boy in the region of Bethlehem. In a festive holiday season, it is the one jarring note—the horror that mars the happiness of Christmas.

Two kings figure prominently in the Christmas story. Joseph and Mary wouldn't have been in Bethlehem if Caesar Augustus hadn't ordered a worldwide census as the first step in his dream to build the *Pax Romana*—a new world order to bring peace on earth. And they wouldn't have fled to Egypt in the darkness of night if King Herod wasn't shoring up his own world order by trying to kill their baby.

At the heart of Christmas is the neverending story of strongmen creating new world orders. Some 700 years before Christ's birth, the prophet Isaiah spoke to a nation racked by international conflict. A few years earlier, the Assyrian Empire had brutally enforced their new world order on the nations of the world. The ten northern tribes of Israel had been dragged off into Assyrian captivity, never to be seen again. Now Babylon was ascending to world supremacy in the north. In the south, Egypt was rising again. And Israel was trapped between superpowers imposing competing world orders on the Middle East. In a world out of control, Isaiah looked into the future and saw the only king who can ever bring peace on earth. His words have become the centerpiece of our Christmas celebration:

“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 increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” (Isaiah 9:6&7)

Isaiah reminds us that kings and kingdoms will all fade away. In our age of global terrorism, economic chaos, and ecological crises, politicians work feverishly to construct yet another *new* world order to solve unsolvable problems. We might be tempted to put our trust in political saviors, parties, and ideologies. But history is littered with the wreckage of utopian dreams. Our only hope is a child who carries the world on his shoulders. Today we will focus on the first name given to him by Isaiah: **Wonderful Counselor**. This is the initial thing we learn about his government:

**Only the Wonderful Counselor can give counsel
tested by yesterday, yet still relevant for tomorrow.**

The opening lines of Isaiah's Christmas story are about gloom and distress. You almost want to say, “Bah, humbug!” But he does us a favor by reminding us of the inevitable misery when rulers impose world orders in the name of peace. William Morris said, “History only remembers kings and warriors for what they destroyed.” After a trip to Europe, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “There is scarcely an evil in their countries that cannot be traced to their kings.” Lest you think that kings are a relic of the past, listen to the words of the late British Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan: “We have not overthrown the divine right of kings to fall down to the divine right of experts.” The

ancient warning of Psalm 118:9 is still relevant today: "It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes."

Herod started out with so much promise. He wanted to build a government that would bring peace and prosperity to Israel. He claimed Proverbs 29:4 as his credo: "By justice a king gives a country stability." But, in the same way Richard Nixon had his *Watergate* and Bill Clinton his *Monica Lewinski* and King David his *Bathsheba*, Herod also proved the truth of Thomas Jefferson's words to John Adams: "If men cannot be trusted to govern themselves, how can they be trusted with the government of others?"

The other king in the Christmas story, Caesar Augustus went on to build his *Pax Romana*, only for it to crumble under the tyranny of later Caesars like Caligula and Nero. I want to believe that the builders of today's new world order have our best interests at heart. I wish that I could be optimistic and put my trust in the princes of our day. But there is only one King of kings who can carry the government on his shoulders; only one about whom it can be said, "...of his government and peace there will be no end..." My hope is in our Lord's first title in Isaiah 9:6—"And he will be called *Wonderful Counselor*..." There are two reasons why I can invite you to put your trust in this King:

1. The Testimony of Yesterday: Every world order has failed by turning its back on the *Wonderful Counselor*.

Look at these two words in verse six, starting with *counselor*. The ancient Greek sage, Diogenes wrote, "Wise kings surround themselves with wise counselors; and he must be wise himself who can distinguish between good and bad counsel." Barak Obama once boasted that he has the brightest team of experts ever to surround a U.S. President. I hope so, because he faces the greatest challenges in the history of our Republic. But the brightest "experts" in the past have not altered the fact that the average lifespan of nations and empires has only been about 250 years. The reason is painfully simple: both princes and people put their trust in human counsel rather than the *Wonderful Counselor*. My prayer for President Obama is that he would search the Scriptures and seek the face of the *Wonderful Counselor*. That's my hope for all leaders, whether they are in the White House, senate house, court house, state house, school house, church house, banking house, or your house.

Now let's focus on that word *wonderful*. Jesus is not just a wise counselor, he's a *Wonderful Counselor*. The Bible connects the word *wonder* with miracles. Our Lord's counsel is supernatural, unlocking mysteries that baffle the brightest experts. When we discover it, we are filled with wonder. That's why those renowned counselors of ancient kings, the Magi traveled from the distant East to find this baby in Bethlehem. Wise men still seek, for he alone is the *Wonderful*

Counselor who heals wounded hearts, mends broken marriages, fixes fractured families, and fills the deepest longings of an aching world.

We trust too much in our expertise and technologies. I worry about our increasingly-secular culture. I am alarmed when an employee is fired from a *Home Depot* for wearing a button that says, "In God we trust!" or that the Salvation Army is prohibited from collecting money for the needy outside *Target* stores because holiday shoppers might be offended. I am concerned when Christians put their hope in the Republican or Democrat party, and spend more hours listening to radio talk and exchanging politically-charged emails than they do with the *Wonderful* Counselor. Our only hope is this:

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and *seek my face* and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 8:14)

The only government that lasts is the one sitting on the shoulders of the *Wonderful* Counselor. The yesterdays of history have proven that all other counselors have failed to shape lasting governments.

2. Our hope for tomorrow: The heaviest burdens of this world are light enough to be shouldered by this *small* child.

The words of Isaiah 9:6 are mystifying: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders." I see the government resting on the shoulders of the resurrected, glorified Jesus. But how can it rest on the shoulders of the man who couldn't carry his cross all the way to Golgotha, or the baby in Mary's lap?

But that's precisely Isaiah's point. We think that government can only be shouldered by strongmen. We trust princes who exude confidence and strength. But Isaiah turns our thinking on its head. God's government rests on a child in a feeding trough. Jesus said in Matthew 18:2, "Unless you become like a little child you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." Jesus chose social outcasts and dimwitted misfits to be his disciples. He bypassed the powerful to save prostitutes, beggars, and cripples. He didn't build cathedrals, raise armies, organize protest movements, or play power politics. His only earthly possessions were a worn robe and a pair of dusty sandals. Yet all the kings, armies, and parliaments in history have not affected life on this earth as much as this one suffering servant.

When Isaiah says that a *small* child will shoulder the government, he is reminding us that the world is changed by little people like Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, and millions of humble servants living out their faith in ordinary places. God entrusts his Son to a carpenter and teenage mother. He is born in a stable, not a palace.

The *Magi* were wise men not to be fooled by the illusionary power of Herod. Truly wise men know that real power and wisdom is found in a small baby filled with the fullness of Almighty God.

The word *counselor* is used in Scriptures to describe a lawyer? The first people in history to practice law were the Magi. At first they were stargazers who prepared horoscopes of ancient kings. From Magi we get our word *magic*. Later, the first codified laws in the world were developed in Mesopotamia. The Magi were the interpreters of those laws, advising kings on legal matters. They became the judges of the ancient East, dispensing justice to the people. From the word Magi we get our word *magistrate*. Even today we call our lawyers *counselors*. The Hebrew word for *counselor* is literally "a burden bearer." A counselor is one who is called to represent those under heavy burdens; to bring justice to the oppressed. This is how the Bible describes a *wonderful* counselor:

1) One who is *compassionate* about burdens

At the end of verse seven, Isaiah says that Jesus will rule his government by "...establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness..." When you read the Bible's prophets you are struck by how often they condemn leaders of government for their lack of justice and compassion for the poor and oppressed. Jesus got most angry when he saw rulers mistreat the weak and handicapped.

When the *Wonderful Counselor* is in us, we should feel compassion toward those who are most distressed. God said to Moses in Exodus 3:7&8, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." Matthew 9:36 says of Jesus, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." James 1:27 says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..."

The *Wonderful Counselor* knows the pain you are suffering, and he feels compassion. Sometimes we get so fixated on our own needs that we don't feel the pain of those around us. But, even when he was enduring his agony on the cross, our *Wonderful Counselor* saw his grieving widowed mother, Mary and called out to his disciple John to take care of her. We learn from him that our own burdens should never keep us from feeling pain of others.

2) One who *comforts* the burdened

It's not enough just to *feel* the pain of others. The *Wonderful Counselor* does something about it. His name is also *Immanuel*, which means "God with us." He cared enough to leave heaven. The One

who was bigger than the cosmos became a tiny baby. He who dug the oceans and filled the night skies with stars became dependent on a carpenter and his teenage wife for his very survival. He not only saw our pain and distress, he came among us and shared it. He touched the untouchables, wept with the distressed, fellowshipped with the outcasts of society, and wrapped his arms around the lonely.

At the Last Supper, his disciples were distressed that he was about to leave them. He comforted them in John 14:16 by promising a new *Comforter*—the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for *Comforter* is *Parakletos*—an ancient word for a counselor or attorney. It literally means “to walk beside someone.” Counselors at law walk alongside their clients through the legal process, holding their hands, calming and their fears. They sit by them during the trial, intercede for them before jury and judge, stand up beside them when the verdict is rendered, and then appeal for them if they lose. *Wonderful* counselors are not in it for the fee, personal prestige, or career. Jesus is the *Wonderful Counselor* who walks beside the sort people we run from and the governments of the world ignore, oppress, or cast aside. If you and I are filled with the Spirit of this *Wonderful Counselor* we too will walk beside the distressed of this world.

3) One who carries other's burdens

My daughter, Rachael is in her final year at the George Washington University Law School. While most of her classmates are angling to get into prestigious law firms, she wants to defend immigrants. She is most concerned about those who steal across our borders to escape governments that oppress their weakest citizens. Recently, she represented a woman from El Salvador who was kidnapped as a child by a terrorist guerilla group. After years of abuse, she escaped to America. Though her life is forfeit if she returns to her country, the U.S. government is trying to deport her.

Rachael was her counselor, walking beside her all the way. Before the trial she went to a jewelry store and purchased a necklace for her client to wear at the trial. It was engraved with the words *HOPE*. Her law professor commented to the class about that necklace: “I would never do something like that.” He went on to tell the class that lawyers should not get emotionally involved with their clients. Yet, he admitted that Rachel had done something wonderful.

It was wonderful because it captured the spirit of the *Wonderful Counselor*. Lawyers can refuse to be emotionally involved. After all, they can walk away after the trial. Ultimately, only the client bears the full brunt of a case lost. But our *Wonderful Counselor* chose to get emotionally involved with our case. He didn't just walk beside us, he took our burdens upon himself. When our case before heaven's bar was hopeless, he paid our penalty and endured our suffering. When

he put that cross on his shoulders he earned the right to shoulder the government of our lives. Even now, he still bears our burdens by interceding for us before the throne of our heavenly Father.

How does his government work in this world? It doesn't build a welfare state, making folks dependent on politicians who hand out entitlements to build their own power bases. Instead it calls his citizens to go out and give drink to the thirsty, feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the prisoner, take in the homeless, and care for the sick. How can we bring the government of the *Wonderful Counselor* this Christmas? Why not reevaluate how much you lavish on your family this year, and give the time and money you save to charity. Maybe you could adopt a needy family and help them make it through this tough season. Let your children take an active part in what you do so that they will learn how to be *wonderful* counselors.

4) One who *counsels* burden bears

Isaiah 9:2 says of our *Wonderful Counselor's* government, "The people living in darkness have seen a great light." Jesus not only bears our burdens, he counsels us on how to deal with our burdens, and even how to keep from getting into trouble in the future. His Word is a light in the darkness, a compass that sets us in the right direction, a guidebook that keeps us out of trouble. The more our governments turn away from the wisdom of the *Wonderful Counselor* the worse things will become for us. So I challenge you with a question this first Sunday of Advent: Where are you going to turn for your comfort and hope for life? Will it be to the *human* governments and counselors, or to the *Wonderful Counselor* who is full of compassion toward your burdens, who comes to walk beside you, who goes all the way by carrying your burdens, and gives you the wisdom to avoid unnecessary burdens in the future?

To me, the greatest picture of Christmas is on Fifth Avenue in New York. It's not the wonderfully-decorated stores and plazas along the avenue. Instead it's that bronze statue on Rockefeller Center: the ancient god Atlas is bent over and grimacing in pain as he attempts to carry the world on his shoulders. Like Caesar Augustus, Herod the Great, and every other strongman who ever lived, he finds the task overwhelming. But across the avenue in St. Patrick's Cathedral is another bronze statue: Mary holds the sleeping baby Jesus, and nestled in the tiny child's outstretched hand rests the globe of the world. What a contrast: even while he is sleeping, a small child filled with the fullness of God can do what the lesser gods created by men can never do. That's why I'm pinning my hopes on this government. I hope you will too.