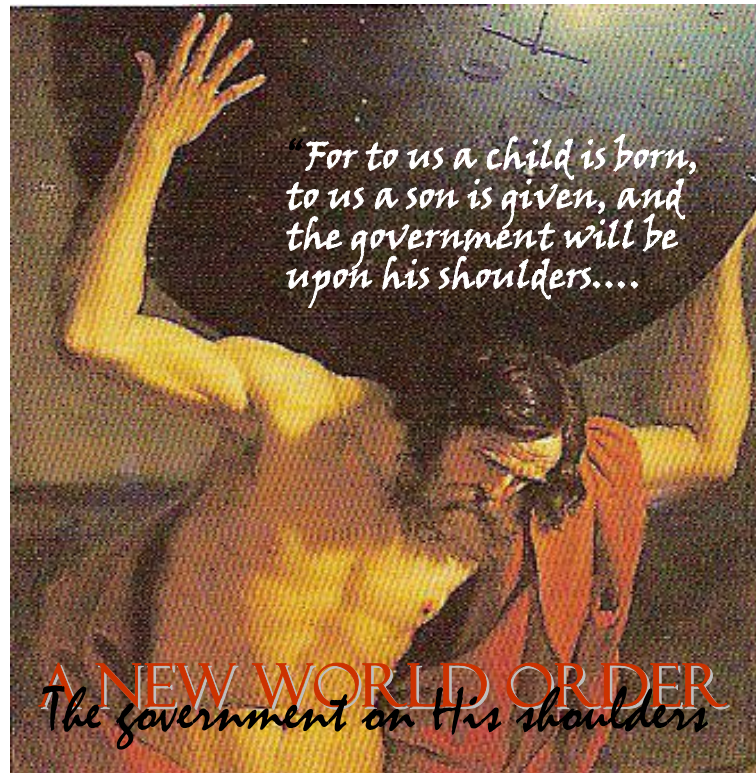


## The Covenant Pulpit



### **“JOY: Mighty God”**

Isaiah 9:1-7

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There's no more grueling test of strength and stamina than the *Ironman* Triathlon in Honolulu. Only elite triathletes are allowed to compete in this ultra marathon of swimming, biking, and running that reduces the best athletes in the world to tears. That's what makes the feat by two competitors in the 1997 *Ironman* so incredible.

These triathletes weren't among the elite. In fact, they competed by special exemption. They finished close to last place, but that wasn't the story line. It wasn't even that this father and son were the only tandem team ever to compete in the *Ironman*.

What amazed a worldwide television audience was 59 year-old retired Air Force Colonel, Dick Hoyt carrying his mute quadriplegic 37 year-old son into the Pacific. He then swam 2½ miles of open water, pulling his son Rick behind in a rubber raft attached to his wetsuit. After that, he completed the grueling 112 mile bicycle course with his cerebral palsied son strapped in a seat attached to his handlebars. Finally, he ran the 26.2 mile marathon pushing Rickie in a race chair. In the history of sports, there have been few moments as inspiring as when *Team Hoyt* crossed the finish line, Rick's paralyzed body contorting in spasms of unrestrained joy.

This spellbinding story began years before when doctors said that baby Rickie had the worst kind of cerebral palsy. They declared that he would be a vegetable for life, and then recommended that the Hoyts institutionalize their baby and get on with their lives. But Rickie's brothers, Rob and Russell defiantly responded, "We're going to bring our little brother home and treat him like a regular kid."

Judy Hoyt refused to surrender to her baby's handicap. She spent endless hours doing physical therapy with Rickie. She painstakingly taught him the alphabet, and then got the Massachusetts state laws changed so that her handicapped son could attend public school. A special computer was built, allowing Rick to communicate using a head motions to select letters and spell out words.

When he was 15 years old, Rick asked his dad if he could compete in a benefit race for an athlete paralyzed in an accident. Dick agreed, and pushed his son in a jerry-rigged chair that now resides in the Massachusetts Sport's Hall of Fame. As they crossed the finish line that day, Rickie flashed the biggest smile of his life. When he got home, he typed out a message to his dad: "Today I felt like I wasn't handicapped." That started them on an odyssey that has taken them around the world, averaging 50 races a year. The 2009 Boston Marathon marked the completion of 1,000 races for *Team Hoyt*.

The doctors said baby Rickie was a hopeless vegetable who should be warehoused in an institution. Today 47 year-old Rick Hoyt is a graduate of Boston University. With the help of caregivers, he lives in an apartment near his alma mater where he works developing computers to aid disabled people. He recently tapped out on his computer to a *Boston Globe* reporter: "When I am running, my disabilities disappear." The reporter turned to his father and asked, "But don't you do the running for your son?" Dick Hoyt answered, "No, Rick runs the races. I just loan him my arms and legs so that he can compete like everyone else." He added with a smile,

"There's nothing in the world that we can't conquer together."

The *YouTube* film of a paralyzed Rick racing on his father's arms and legs reminds me of the words of that ancient Jewish prophet:

"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)

Do you ever feel like it's impossible to run the race that God has set for you? We all wish that life was a hundred yard dash. Instead, it's an ultra-marathon. Worse than that, it's an *Ironman* that exhausts everything we possess. And, in our own way, each of us is as handicapped as Rick Hoyt. But Isaiah gives us a great Christmas promise. In the baby of Bethlehem is the *Everlasting Father* who puts his disabled children on his shoulders and carries them across the finish line. And he can do that because he is *Mighty God*. Here's a truth that gives wings to weary hearts:

**Carried by our Father's legs and arms, there's nothing in this world, we can't conquer together.**

Some 700 years before Christ's birth, Israel is being crushed by the superpowers of her day. On the eve of destruction, Isaiah delivers a prophecy that is both horrific and hopeful at the same time. On the one hand, he predicts dark years of distress for the Jews. On the other, he promises a Messiah who will liberate and carry them on his shoulders. Such are the conflicting messages of the Christmas story.

During this holiday season, you may want to hear only the positives of Isaiah's prophecy. Who doesn't prefer a Christmas story with singing angels, a virgin with hallo, sweet little Jesus boy, kings

bearing lavish gifts, cuddly barn yard animals in a sanitized nativity scene along with Santa and twelve reindeer?

But the real nativity wasn't a Hallmark Christmas card. It was also about brutality, betrayal, poverty, and oppression—a mixture of horror and hope. We will only discover the beauty of Christmas if we keep it real. Just as a diamond shines brightest when it is laid on a black cloth, so the child's birth in Bethlehem is most radiant when it is seen against the backdrop of its dark reality.

Isaiah begins his Christmas story with these words in Isaiah 9:2, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned." The Christmas story is about a peasant carpenter who doesn't have two shekels to rub together; an unwed teenage mother whose pregnancy scandalized her village; a helpless baby in a cow's feeding trough; ragtag, smelly shepherds; slobbering barnyard beasts; a petty king driven to paranoid rage. The unvarnished Christmas story is the narrative of incompetent governments and oppressed citizens. At its core, it's the story of disabled people like Rick Hoyt.

Against this backdrop of handicapped humanity, Isaiah presents a child who is the *Mighty God*. Fast forward from ancient Bethlehem to the 1997 *Ironman*. What makes Dick Hoyt so impressive? The other world-class triathletes in Honolulu are vastly superior to this 57 year-old retired Air Force Colonel. He is only competing because of a special exemption. What makes him so *mighty* is the utter weakness of the disabled son he carries on his shoulders. No one else that day will complete that grueling test of strength and stamina while carrying, pulling, and pushing another person.

Imagine the angels' amazement when our *Everlasting Father* picked up severely disabled people like you and me, giving us his arms and legs so that we could run an otherwise impossible race. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that his power is shown most perfectly in our weakness. Imagine also the applause of heaven when our *Everlasting Father* carries us across the finish line and into eternal glory. May I give you some reasons for joy this Christmas?

### **1. Our Everlasting Father is a Mighty God.**

The original Hebrew for *Mighty God* in Isaiah 9:6 is *El Gibbor*. The word *El* is a shortened form of the word *Elohim*, one of the many Hebrew words for God. *Elohim* means "the God of strength." The word *Gibbor* was used to describe mighty warriors in ancient Israel.

Putting these two words together, Isaiah is saying, "The God who has become a baby in Bethlehem is not only a strong God, he is a *mighty* strong God. He is strong to the infinite power. Early Christians used a Latin word to describe his strength: *omnipotent*, which means all-powerful. Let's connect the dots of all of Isaiah's titles for Jesus in verse six. He is also called *Wonderful Counselor*. To use the same Latin language, he is *omniscient* or all-knowing. He is also the *Everlasting Father*. That means he is *omnipresent* or ever-present at all times and in all places, with no beginning or end. Time and space cannot contain him. Isaiah is describing a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present. He is the *OMNI* God!

Wrap all those power words together, and they add up to the final title: *Prince of Peace*. Only the *OMNI* God can settle your heart when the weight of the world is crushing you. When you are wrapped in the arms of this *OMNI* God, you can you sleep like a baby when King Herod' is out to destroy you. Only when you trust in this *OMNI* God can you pick up your cross and say to him, "Not my will, but yours be done." Only an all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present God can bring "peace on earth" after all the failed governments of human invention are swept into the dustbins of forgotten history.

Don't be fooled by cheap imitations. No one else understands you like your *Wonderful Counselor*. No one loves you as much as your *Everlasting Father*. No one can carry the weight of your world on his shoulders like your *Mighty God*. And no one will ever calm you like your *Prince of Peace*. Look at that baby again. He is the *OMNI* God who brings the real joy of Christmas to all of us desperately in need of legs and arms. In Dick Hoyt's words about his disabled son, we hear an echo of our Father's words to us through Isaiah: "There's nothing in this world that we can't conquer together."

## **2. Jesus is worthy of our exclusive worship.**

There is no time exposes the multi-diversity of our postmodern culture than this season. It is no longer politically correct to say, "Merry Christmas." Smiling salespeople almost always greet you with, "Happy holidays." This is the season of Hanukah, Kwanzaa, Winter Solstice, "Dear Santa" or whatever else you want it to be. Traditionalists who used sport buttons saying, *Christ is a reason for the season* are now relieved just to get a crèche next to the Menorah and a carol squeezed in between *Frosty the Snowman* and *Deck the Halls*.

Postmoderns are okay with a nativity scene as part of the holiday decorations, as long as it isn't the central theme. The same goes for

year 'round religion. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) But every survey shows that Evangelicals increasingly believe that sincere Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and other nonbelievers will also get into heaven. All religions are equally-good as long as none of them tries to lay exclusive claim to God. The great anathema of our age is say that Jesus is the *only* way.

But the Jesus of Isaiah doesn't play the "Happy Holidays" game. C.S. Lewis, in his classic *Mere Christianity*, said that Jesus won't allow us to say that he was a good man or great prophet. His claims were too astounding for that. He is the only major religious leader ever to declare that he was God. Mohammed wouldn't dare make such a claim. Buddha and the sacred writers of Hinduism saw themselves as teachers. The Jewish religious leaders did not object to Jesus' claims that he was their Messiah. They engineered his crucifixion because he claimed to be God in the flesh.

C.S. Lewis says that Christ's claims are so scandalous that they must drive us to one of three conclusions: either he isn't God but thinks he is, making him a *lunatic*. Or he isn't God and knows it, making him a *liar*. Or he really is God and telling the *truth*. There are no other options. Jesus would say to us, "Either crucify me as a liar or lunatic, or crown me as your Lord, but don't compromise me as just another religious option."

In a sense, King Herod really wasn't so mad after all. He understood that there can only be one king in a kingdom. It was either Jesus or him. So tried to eliminate Jesus. We are much crazier than Herod when we try to serve Jesus and this world at the same time. When we read the words of Isaiah 9:6 we have only two choices: either we reject these titles for the baby as the demented lies of an ancient prophet or embrace them as describing a *Mighty God* that we must serve passionately and exclusively.

### **3. Jesus alone is worthy to be our King.**

The magi had to make a decision when they were in the court of King Herod. When he tried to suck them into his plot to kill the child of Isaiah 9:6, they stole away in the dark of night to find the only one worthy to be their king. They were truly *wise men* not to put their trust in the kings and kingdoms of this earth. These men understood government. Having spent their careers as counselors to the kings of the Orient, they knew from sad experience that no government can ever shoulder the weight of this world: not the governments of George Bush or Barak Obama, not those forged by Democrats or

Republicans, and not even those meeting in Copenhagen this week to deal with climate control. Malcolm Muggeridge was an atheist and communist who wrote for the British magazine, *Punch*. Eventually he became a born-again Catholic. After years of putting his hope in political solutions, he wrote, "Christ came neither from the right nor the left, but from above." For that reason alone, he is uncorrupted by this and sin-disabled world. Only he can carry the government on his shoulders. That's why verse seven can say, "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness." You can't get to the bank because verse seven says, "The zeal of the Lord *Almighty* will accomplish this."

#### **4. Jesus alone is able to carry you across the finish line.**

What does it mean for Jesus to be your *Mighty God*? In the opening lines of his gospel, St. John presents his Christmas story. I see five contrasts between Jesus' governance and governments of this world:

##### **1) As *Everlasting God*, he goes the distance.**

John 1:1 says of Jesus, "In the beginning was the Word..." When St. John uses this phrase, he is reminding us of Genesis 1:1—"In the beginning *God*..." Before a single atom or angel was created, Jesus already existed. He is the Creator, not a created being. He has no beginning or end. Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Rick Hoyt has never known a day without his father being there for him. For 32 years his father has carried him across 1,000 finish lines. Dick Hoyt is amazingly-faithful. But today he is 67 years-old. Eventually, he won't be able to shoulder the weight of his son. Governments last about 200 years on average. Systems collapse. Politicians disappoint. Those we love let us down. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Law of Thermodynamics says that everything in creation is wearing out and running down. Have you put your trust in the *Everlasting Father* who will go the distance for you?

##### **2) As *God*, he knows the End Line**

What is the finish line for everyone? It is to see God face to face. Hebrews 9:27 says, "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face the judgment." There is only one thing any of us will want to hear on that day: "Well, done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." (Matthew 25:21). How do we know what will please God? John 1:1&2 says of the pre-incarnate Christ: "... and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." The Greek language literally says that Jesus stood face

to face with God. He is the only one who has ever been able to look straight into his glorious face. He knows his Father's mind. He lived a life that perfectly pleased him. That's why, when I run the race of life, I want to keep my eyes on the only one who ever finished it successfully. More than that, I want to be filled with his presence so that he will be my legs and arms.

### **3) As *Creator*, there are no obstacles that can hinder.**

John 1:3 goes on to say, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." He created everything out of nothing. Out of chaos he created order. The governments of this world turn order into chaos. They take nothing and create something to be taxed. Sometimes I have nothing to overcome the obstacles of life. But Jesus always creates a way. He takes the "nothing" of my life and turns it into something.

### **4) As *Light*, he will see us through the dark.**

I John 1:4&5 says, "In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness..." We live in dark times, not unlike our spiritual ancestors before us. We grope in the dark to find answers. But there Jesus shows us the way because he is "...the way, the truth, and the life..." (John 14:6) Lots of luminaries rise up promising to be our guiding light, only to make us more lost than we were before. Jesus alone will see us home through the dark night.

### **5) As *God in the flesh*, he understands and cares.**

John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..." Literally, the Greek says, "He pitched his tent in our midst." He existentially experienced all of our sorrows, afflictions, and disabilities. Are you suffering pain today? No one ever suffered more than he did on the Cross. Are financial burdens weighing you down? He lived a life of abject poverty. Have you been misunderstood, rejected, or abandoned? So was he. Have you been so tempted that you wanted to turn your back on God's will? He was too. Is the load you are carrying so heavy that you are falling down under it? He couldn't even carry his Cross all the way to Golgotha. There's nothing you have faced that he doesn't understand. That's why he'll always be there for you. There is great joy in this truth: **Carried by our Father's arms and legs, there's nothing in this world that we can't conquer together.**