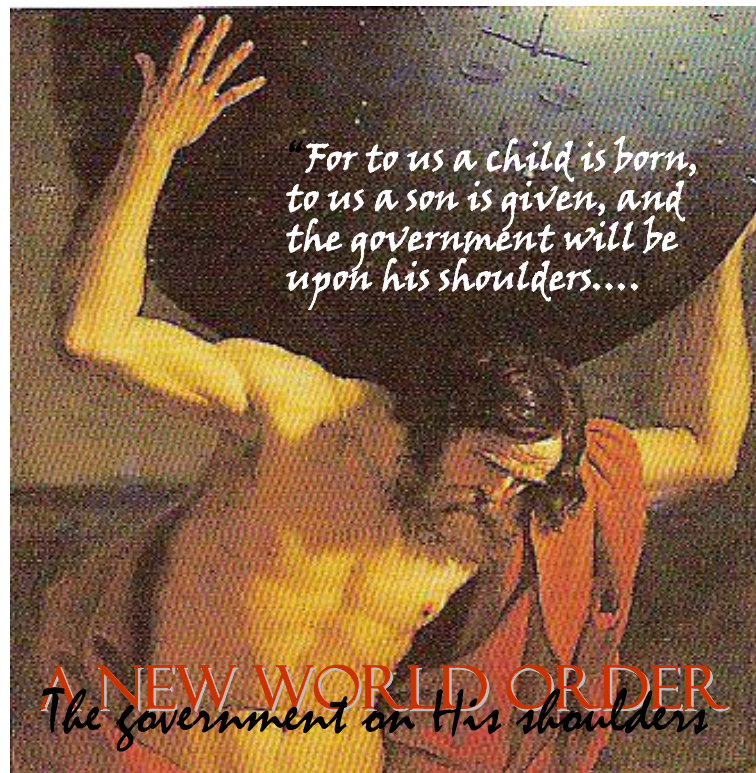


The Covenant Pulpit



“LOVE: Everlasting Father”

Isaiah 9:1-7

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George Washington summed up our founding fathers' cynicism toward government when he wrote,

"Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is a force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master."

Political satirist P.J. O'Rourke says the same thing with a bit more humor: "Giving money and power to government is like giving whiskey and car keys to teenage boys. If government were a product, selling it would be illegal."

Maurice is the poster boy for government incompetence. His parents moved from the hardscrabble poverty of rural Arkansas to the drug-infested projects of the east end of Little Rock. After his father died, he fell in with the wrong crowd. His uncle told a *Seattle Times* reporter, "Poverty ruined Maurice. He became a hustler. All about getting. All about having. All about money."

At age seventeen he brought a loaded gun to school, looking for someone to kill. The school psychiatrist said that he was a ticking time bomb, ready to explode. He was immediately expelled. A series of armed burglaries landed him in jail. In one of his heists he violently beat up a middle-aged woman when he stole her purse.

Before he turned eighteen, Maurice was facing a long list of felony counts for his crime spree. He made the front page of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* when he hid a ten-inch metal bar in his sock so that he could hurt someone during his pre-trial hearing. At another hearing, he grabbed a padlock on his lawyer's table and hurled it at the bailiff. He missed, hitting his own mother in the face. Convinced that Maurice was a sociopathic monster, the frightened judge sentenced the seventeen year-old to a whopping 108 years in prison.

After 13 years, Maurice wrote a letter to the governor of Arkansas, claiming that he had "found Jesus." Maybe the Baptist-preacher-turned-governor was a sucker for a jailhouse conversion story. Or he felt it was wrong for a 17 year-old to receive such a harsh sentence. So, in spite of the strenuous objections of prosecutors, Governor Huckabee commuted his sentence.

A year later Maurice was back in prison for aggravated robbery and theft. Inexplicably, within months he was again paroled. He then moved to Washington State where he continued to commit violent crimes. He repeatedly battered his wife. He forced her and other young relatives to undress while he held a knife on them,

incoherently screaming that the world was coming to an end and he was Jesus Christ. Later, when he was arrested for raping a child, he punched a police officer in the face during a profanity-laced tirade. He landed in jail on eight felony charges. But incredibly, a judge released him after he put up \$15,000 through something called *Jail Sucks Bail Bonds*.

Five nights later, Maurice said to friends, "Watch the news tomorrow. I'm going to kill some cops." The next morning he walked into a suburban Tacoma coffee shop and ambushed four police officers as they were working on their laptops. After a massive manhunt, Maurice Clemmons was finally shot to death by a state trooper this past Tuesday.

The widows and orphans of the dead police officers are left to wonder how a judge could have set this violent predator free. His political future in shambles, former Governor Huckabee told reporters, "Should Clemmons be found responsible for these horrible tragedies, it will be the result of a series of failures in the criminal justice systems of Arkansas and Washington State." The Pulaski County prosecutor, who put Maurice Clemmons away for 108 years only to see him walk free, said, "This is the day I have dreaded for years." And the rest of us shake our heads at yet another tragic example of the incompetence of government.

In the same week, we watched with both amusement and chagrin as a publicity-seeking couple crashed the White House state dinner for the Prime Minister of India. We wondered how Michael Salahi could walk past the Secret Service and White House staff, to pose with the Vice President and stand face-to-face with President Obama. Such utter incompetence would be humorous if it wasn't so scary.

During this holiday season, I am reminded of former Colorado governor, Richard Lamm's comment on yet another monument to government incompetence—a \$12 trillion federal deficit: "Christmas is a time when kids tell Santa what they want and adults pay for it. Deficits are what adults tell government what they want and their kids pay for it." But there is no greater statement about the failure of *human* government, and its need for *heavenly* intervention, than an ancient prophecy that has become the centerpiece of our Christmas:

"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)

Before he plunged 17th Century England into civil war, Oliver Cromwell bitterly complained, "No one's life, liberty, or possessions are safe when the parliament is in session." When he later headed the government, Cromwell repeatedly said that only "the babe in Bethlehem" could shoulder the weight of the British Commonwealth. How can a baby carry the weight of our world on his shoulders?

**The government is not shouldered
by the baby in the manger,
but the God in the baby.**

God in the flesh is a mystery that beggars human imagination. St. Paul writes of the Christ child in Colossians 1:19, "For God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him..." There was a split second when Jesus was a two-celled zygote in Mary's womb. Yet even at the first moment of conception, the fullness of a God infinitely bigger than the cosmos was in those two cells. A baby who can't form a single syllable is the *Wonderful Counselor*. A helpless infant is the *Mighty God*. A newborn is the *Everlasting Father*. And a child wrapped in rags in a cow's feeding trough is the *Prince of Peace*.

On Rockefeller plaza in New York City is a bronze statue of the ancient god, Atlas holding up the world. Stooped over, he grimaces in pain, barely holding up a globe that teeters precariously on his shoulders. Across the avenue, in St. Patrick's Cathedral, is a statue of Mary holding baby Jesus. He sleeps peacefully with outstretched arm, the world resting in his open hand. This juxtaposition of statues delivers a stunning illustration of Isaiah 9:6. Even the strong gods of human creation are not able to shoulder the overwhelming weight of this planet. But the weakest child filled with God can hold up the world in his sleep. As we light the Advent candle of LOVE today, I hope you know that there is only one Person who loves you enough to carry the burdens of your life. Because he is called the *Everlasting Father*, his government is superior for these reasons:

1. The role of all government is to protect the weakest.

In the 9th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet speaks to Israel on the eve of destruction. His country has already been raped by the Assyrian Empire. Now a new superpower, Babylon is ascending in the north. To the east, that slumbering giant Persia is awakening. In the south, Egypt is rising like a phoenix from her ashes. And Israel will be crushed by these global superpowers trying to enforce competing world orders on the Middle East. Isaiah uses words like "distress...darkness...death...defeat...the yoke of oppression..." to

describe what human governments do to people under the guise of bringing "peace on earth." Isaiah is stressing two points in his prophecy: 1) the surrounding superpowers are bent on pillaging and destroying the weaker peoples of the earth; and 2) the government of his nation, Israel is powerless to stop them.

When we read Isaiah's scathing critique, we might be tempted to conclude that government is evil. That's why we need to heed James Madison's words: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." But we aren't angels, so God ordained government. The first is the home. Historian Will Durant wrote, "Our children are born as little barbarians, and we have about eighteen years to civilize them." The Texas prison system is the largest in the world. Four out of five convicts in Texas were raised without fathers. Tonight millions of American children will go to sleep in homes without fathers. Children need the government of loving fathers, nations are desperate for good rulers, and churches flourish with godly elders.

But there is nothing sadder than civil rulers who oppress their weakest subjects, pastors who exploit their flocks or parents who abuse their children. Isaiah 9:6 says, "For to us a *child* is born, to us a *son* is given, and the government is on his shoulders..." Isaiah connects a *child* to government. Babies are the weakest and most vulnerable members of families, churches, and nations. Listen to the words of the late Minnesota Senator, Hubert Humphrey:

"The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped."

Yet, the Christmas story begins with a Roman emperor whose census forces a teenager to risk her life and baby on a dangerous journey in the last days of pregnancy. Then another paranoid king orders the slaughter of babies in a vain effort to kill her newborn son.

There is an inescapable horror in the Christmas story: rulers often lay the crushing weight of their governments on the shoulders of the weakest. In America, we have aborted some fifty million unborn, while abusing millions who were born. Herds of pigs slurp and burp at the troughs of government entitlement, consigning the future unborn to shoulder crushing debt. Bishops protect priests who abuse children. King Herod is alive and well in today's world, stalking the halls of congress, abusing babies in their homes, and preying on children in the sacred offices of the clergy. It ought to fill us with the

same anger that caused our Lord to drive the money-changers out of the temple. 1950s newsman, Edward R. Murrow warned passive Americans, "A nation of sheep will beget a government of wolves."

More importantly, in a world where rulers force the weakest to shoulder oppressive burdens, we need to remember what Isaiah 9:4 says about the King of kings: "...you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor." A child in a manger, who is filled with Almighty God, will lift our burdens because he is our *Everlasting Father*. In the two words of that title we see two things about godly government:

**1) Loving parents protect their children so they grow up strong.
Selfish parents make them dependent in order to control them.**

Jesus is called *Everlasting Father*. Though our only salvation is through Christ, there is a sense in which everyone in this world is a child of God. Our heavenly Father has given the care of his children to earthly fathers and mothers: parents in the home, pastors in the church, and princes in the civil realm. All leaders are called to see themselves as parents of a family. What is the primary role of parents? It is to protect their children, especially the weakest.

But there is a difference in protecting our children, and making them dependent on us. Healthy parents know that their job is to train their children to grow up strong and independent. Unhealthy parents produce dysfunctional children who grow up dependent on *them*. These parents may complain that their adult children are still on the dole, but secretly they are glad because it allows them to exercise power over them. Pastors, who spoon feed baby food to perpetually-immature parishioners, are cruel clergy. Benjamin Franklin wrote, "The worst thing we can do is to make the poor comfortable in their poverty." He said that politicians love to make the poor dependent on government handouts so that they can keep getting elected. That's why Thomas Paine wrote in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, "That government is best which governs least." Thomas Jefferson put it another way: "A government that gives you everything you want will take everything you have."

**2) Government tries to be everlasting
by selling out to the rich and powerful.**

Jesus is called *Everlasting Father*. He not only loves us as a father, he will be with us forever. Isaiah goes on to say, "...of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end." No other

government can ever say that. Alexander Tytler, an 18th Century member of the British Parliament, said that the average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been about 200 years. He noted that these nations have gone through this same sequence:

“...from bondage to spiritual faith; from faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; from dependence back to bondage.”

Human governments never last. Whenever people are in bondage they turn to a warrior to liberate them. When they are in anarchy they turn to a dictator to bring order. When they get lazy, they turn to big government to care for them. But what government gives, it first takes away.” Aesop wrote, “We hang petty thieves and appoint the big ones to public office.” Honest politicians get into government to help the poor and weak, but they soon discover that they stay in office by doing the bidding of the rich and powerful. They head to Washington with idealistic dreams. Yet, to get the job done, they have to be reelected. But political campaigns cost millions. So, most sell out to lobbyists and special interest groups to stay in power. In the end, the rich and powerful own government.

The British Lord Acton summed up the tragedy of all human government: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men” To put it another way: there are almost no *real* fathers in families, churches, or civil governments; and none of them ever lasts. There is only one *Everlasting Father* who can shoulder the weight of your world.

2. The *Everlasting*...only his government has no end.

Isaiah 9:7 says, “Of the increase of his government...there will be no end.” He goes on to add, “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.” King David’s government couldn’t survive his own weaknesses. David could slay giants, but he couldn’t control his own sexual lusts. There was no *righteousness* in a king who used his power to steal another man’s wife and commit adultery with her. There was no *justice* when David used his political power to have her husband murdered to cover up his sins. Israel was scandalized by *Bathsheba-gate*, David never regained his moral authority, his family disintegrated, and his country descended into civil war. Isaiah wants us to remember King David, and all the other government leaders who have been

corrupted by power, and have lost the ability to govern with righteousness and justice—whether they be in the home, church, or civil realm. He wants us to know that only Jesus can keep the promise he makes to his followers in Matthew 28:20, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” If you are looking for a Father who is *Everlasting* and a government that lasts *Forever*, Jesus is the only one. Of him, Revelation 11:15 declares, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and he will reign forever and ever.” Do you know this King? Have you bowed your knee to him as your Savior and Lord?

3. ...Father...only his peace has no end.

Isaiah 9:7 also says, “Of the increase of...of his peace there will be no end.” He is the only Father that ever truly loved his children. My biggest hero in the nativity scene is Joseph. That carpenter never says a word. Jesus wasn’t the son of his flesh. He never asked for the assignment he got. It cost him everything to love his wife’s son. But he goes the distance for Jesus. Our Lord left his heavenly Father to be raised by one of the greatest earthly fathers the world has ever known. I never knew my birth dad. He bailed out on my unwed mother before I was ever born. I had other temporary dads in the eight foster homes I lived in. Most were abusive, or absent, and then abandoned me. The father who adopted me was a great dad, but even he never made me feel unconditionally loved. Only one Father has ever knew all my flaws and still loved me. He came to earth to experience my pain, died in my place on the Cross, and came out of the grave so that I would never have to stay in it. He will never give up on me or stop loving me. No wonder he fills me with peace that knows no end. Dearly beloved, do you know that peace?

4. If you want to sleep like a baby, let him shoulder your world.

Maybe you are distressed today. The economy is in the tank, America is getting more deeply entangled in yet another war, the social fabric of our Republic is unraveling. Only God knows what keeps you awake at night. Surely, you must know by now that Atlas can’t hold up your world. Nor can any politician, political party, new world order, psychologist, philosopher, medical doctor, or new age guru. Working, worrying, or scheming won’t help you shoulder the weight of your world. By, like that baby in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, you can sleep peacefully at night, the world resting in your hand because the *Everlasting Father* in you is holding up its weight.