

What Child Is This?

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. The Old Testament reading for tonight, a reading from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 2 through 7.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone.

You have multiplied the nation. You have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken, as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire.

[1 : 3 0] 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.

Of the increase of his government and peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. The grass withers and the flowers fade. But the word of our God stands forever. This is a reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1 through 12.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

[2 : 5 2] When he had called together all the people's chief priests and the teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, For this is what the prophet has written.

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him.

[4 : 01] Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Merry Christmas to you all. It's very good to see you tonight.

If you are coming tonight with a family member or a friend as a guest, I want you to know that you are very warmly welcomed here. This is a mixed crowd spiritually in that some of us are exploring Christianity and the claims about Jesus Christ or by Jesus Christ for the first time.

Some of us are reengaging with the church and with Christian faith after a season away because of the pandemic or because of a move or some other challenge in your life.

Some of us are here tonight to worship Christ. We have settled Christian beliefs and values. Some of you are here tonight because a family member or a friend invited you and your being here tonight is the main Christmas present you're giving to them.

[5 : 17] And so we want to say that we're truly glad that you've come. Whether you identify as a skeptic or were raised in another faith, you're a spiritual seeker or someone who's exploring Christianity, it's important, I think, for all of us to know why it is that 2.3 billion people around the world are celebrating the birth of Christ tonight.

To know what those people believe and why. So at a minimum, we can be culturally literate and have some intelligible conversations over this holiday season.

That's my minimal goal, but I do hope to do more than that tonight to perhaps awaken faith and kindle some hope and love in you as well.

This past month at Christ Church, we've been exploring various carols of Christmas, some of which we just sang. And our final carol tonight, you can see printed just after the gospel text, it opens with this question, What child is this?

What child is this? And the answer in the first stanza is this, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. And what that tells us is that the real meaning of Christmas is about a royal birth.

[6 : 38] It's about a coming monarch. It's about the arrival of a sovereign. And I want to draw our attention back to that Old Testament lesson we just read from the prophet Isaiah, who's speaking and writing 700 years before this birth, and he's foretelling the coming of the Messiah, this anointed king.

And he says there in Isaiah 9, 6, I encourage you to look at it again, he says, For unto us a child is born, and to us a son is given. He says there will be a child that's born from a human mother, and who will also be a son given from God.

So who is this human-born child? Who is this God-given son? And what will he come to do? And I want to just explore that question tonight through this Christmas carol and through this scripture that inspired the carol.

So allow me to read this carol once again. If it's not fresh for us, I'll read it for us. What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping, whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?

This, this is Christ the King whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary. Why lies he in such mean estate where ox and lamb are feeding?

[8 : 08] Good Christian fear for sinners here the silent word is pleading. Nails, spears shall pierce him through. The cross be born for me, for you.

Hail, hail, the word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary. So bring him incense, gold and myrrh. Come, peasant king, to own him.

The king of kings salvation brings. Let loving hearts enthrone him. Raise, raise a song on high. The virgin sings her lullaby. Joy, joy, for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary.

I just want to explore this carol and reflect on it for a moment. Going through these three stanzas, I want to just say that the child is a king, the king is lowly, and his kingdom is forever.

The child is a king, the king is lowly, and his kingdom is forever. First of all, the child is a king. The prophet Isaiah says there in 9 verse 6, he says the government will be on his shoulders.

[9 : 13] This child that's coming is going to bear executive authority and power. He's going to exercise sovereignty and supremacy. And we all know, you know, if you've seen the crown, you have to, when you enter a royal court, you have to abide by protocol protocol for her majesty or his majesty.

And so what is the throne name of this king who's coming? How does this, what should we be calling him? And how does this indicate the nature of his coming rule and his reign?

And so the prophet Isaiah answers that question for us. He says, his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His name stands for who he is and what he does. And so first of all, we learn here that the coming king will be a wonderful counselor.

Wonderful here in Hebrew, it has a sense of supernatural or wonder working. In the Bible, God and God alone is the wonderful counselor because he sees the end from the beginning.

[10 : 24] He created the world after all and he has a supernatural plan to save it. He's got a wonder working program of redemption for all the nations of the world.

And so it seems here that God, the wonderful counselor, is entrusting his eternal counsel to his Messiah. And this Messiah will come and he will bring this supernatural plan.

He will bring this wonder working program to the world. And when he does that, he will be the wisest, the greatest, the final word that God has ever given to humanity.

He'll come and he'll teach authoritative truth about God and about the human heart and about the deepest problem of our world. And it will be said of him, in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge.

He'll be the wonderful counselor. But in this coming king, we not only have a wonderful counselor, we have the mighty God. This child born of a woman will also be like the God of Israel.

[11 : 33] He'll be as mighty as the one who created the universe with a word saying, let there be light and bang, there was light. He will be so powerful.

He'll be as powerful as the one who delivered his people from slavery and oppression in Egypt. Right? Because that's what mighty means. Mighty refers to this strong warrior, this champion who fights and wins battles on behalf of and in place of his people to set them free from bondage and from their enemies.

So in the Messiah, this mighty God will come and he will have power to put this wonder-working counsel of God into effect. He will have an authority to execute God's eternal plan of salvation, this program of redemption to set people free.

This coming king is the wonderful counselor. He's the mighty God and it says he's also the everlasting father. When the Messiah comes as the wonderful counselor with plans for the whole wide world and when he comes as the mighty God with divine power to set human beings free from their bondage, he will make us God's children and he will exercise God the Father's goodness and care for his family.

He'll protect and provide for his people as a father protects and provides for his children. This coming king will be the wonderful counselor, the mighty God, the everlasting father, and he'll also be the prince of peace.

[13 : 13] He's a monarch, he's a sovereign who is able to bring peace and prosperity to his dominion and in particular this Messiah will bring shalom between God and human beings.

Though we ignore God, though we disregard God, though we resist God, though we oppose God, though sometimes we're even hostile to God as an enemy, this prince of peace is coming to reconcile us to God.

Question, what child is this? Answer, this, this is Christ, the king, this child born of a woman, the son given from God, the one who will bear the government of the universe on his shoulders, this king with four names.

Ultimately, every knee is going to bow before him and every tongue is going to confess that he, the wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace, is the Lord of all.

And that's why this carol says, haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary. In other words, don't hold back. Don't hold back in bringing him your praise and your worship tonight and in this Christmas season and the rest of the short time that God gives you on this earth.

[14 : 45] The child is a king. And more than that, the child is a king but the king is lowly. The king is lowly. Stanza two of our carols says, why lies he in such mean estate where ox and lamb are feeding?

In other words, why is this child who's born, this son who's given, this king with four names, why in the world is he in a manger? Why is he in an animal feed trough?

Why is he not in a palace on a grand estate encircled by magistrates and military generals and world class scholars? Why isn't he in a place that's more fitting for a king of this stature and of this nature?

Why is he born here in obscurity among the working class? Now, on the way over here tonight, I saw a car with a bumper sticker that said, elections matter.

And, as I think you know, there's an election coming up in 2024. And I'm sure that's why you came tonight to hear me talk about politics, right?

[15 : 57] Right? Politicians over the course of this next year on the left and the right are going to present themselves with great fanfare as the answer to all of our problems and as the key to all of our prosperity.

And as they do that, they're going to project an image of strength to us. They're going to project an image of competence and charisma in an effort to win our votes.

But I want to point out tonight that God's ways are not our ways or God's ways are at least not our politicians' ways. Because what's the characteristic mark of this Prince of Peace's rule and reign?

From day one, he's marked by lowliness. He's marked by humility. He's marked by downward mobility.

Not only does this Messiah leave behind his heavenly glory, not only does he stoop down to veil himself in human flesh, and not only does he lower himself into this manger throne, but he lives a whole life, a whole lifetime of lowliness.

[17 : 18] And that lifetime of lowliness climaxes on what? On a Roman cross. The ultimate symbol of lowliness, of humiliation, the ultimate declaration that he is, in fact, a nobody and a nothing.

Some of you might say, well, bah humbug to all of this talk. Why in the world would you sour the happiness of Christmas by singing this line, nails, spears, shall pierce him through the cross, be born for me, for you?

Why can't you just leave that to a good Friday? You're kind of like the Grinch, just stealing and ruining our Christmas. Just let us enjoy, just for tonight, a sentimentalized and sanitized version of Christmas with this cute, cuddly little baby Jesus.

Don't we all want that a little bit? No nails, no spears, no cross, no blood, no death. But friends, that would cut the heart right out of Christmas.

We would be forgetting why the world needed a Messiah to be born at all. This Christmas carol is reminding us that the Prince of Peace was born to die. And the way that this Prince will bring peace, the way that he will reconcile us to God will be to take our place as our substitute on that cross.

[18 : 43] That's why the Prince of Peace came, not to bring judgment upon us, but to bear judgment for us so that we don't have to. If you know anything about the prophet Isaiah and you read the whole of his work, you eventually, after you read Isaiah 9, you eventually come to Isaiah 53 where the prophet says this, he, this child to be born, the son to be given, this king with four names, he, was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.

It's because we all, if we're honest with ourselves, have transgressed God's moral law of love that we deserve to be pierced. But, the good news of Christmas is that our Prince of Peace who lies here in such mean a state has been pierced for us instead.

That because we are guilty of iniquities, that's an old word that means because we're guilty of injustices toward one another and toward God.

We deserve to be crushed, but the good news of Christmas is that our Prince of Peace here in this lowly manger where ox and lamb are feeding, he's come to be crushed instead of us.

You see this connection between Isaiah 9 and Isaiah 53? Our Prince of Peace bore our punishment so that we can have the peace. He got the wounds so that we could get the healing.

[20 : 25] And we must not sever this link between Bethlehem and Golgotha, between his cradle and his cross and between the peace that we get and the punishment that he got.

Nails, spears shall pierce him through the cross be born for me for you. That line does not ruin Christmas. That's what gives Christmas its power and its glory.

Because this wonderful counselor, this mighty God, this everlasting father, this prince of peace who has the name above every other name has come in such lowliness, such humility, such downward mobility that's like nothing the world has ever seen from any other politician or any other king.

Amen? Amen? The costliness of his birth, the sacrifice of his death, the peace and the reconciliation with God that he came to win for us is worthy of our praise.

And that's why this carol says, hail, hail, the word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary. To hail means to greet someone with enthusiastic approval and acclaim.

[21 : 42] And I hope you've come to do that tonight. This lowly king who began in a place of such mean estate where ox and lamb are feeding and this lamb who, this lowly king who deliberately went to this place of nails and spears and a cross for you, he's worthy of our enthusiasm.

He's worthy of our approval and our acclaim and our worship tonight. So the child is a king, the king is lowly and just one last thought is that his kingdom is forever.

His kingdom is forever. Look at stanza three of our carol that we're going to sing in a moment. It says, so bring him incense, gold and myrrh, compesant king to own him.

The king of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone him. And this refers to the gospel of Matthew where these magi from the east, these wise kings, these Gentile philosophers came to this manger and to this cradle and it says in the gospel of Matthew that we read a moment ago in chapter two, verse 11, it says, when they saw the child, Jesus, they bowed down and they worshiped him.

Now what's happening in that moment? These kings from the east, they've spent their whole lives studying world history and they know that kingdoms rise and then kingdoms fall.

[23 : 11] They've seen the pattern that every other king that's ever ruled, their rule and their reign is necessarily episodic and necessarily insecure. They've learned that empires are always emerging and then disappearing.

They flow and then they ebb and they know that all the peoples of the world, all the nations of the world are longing and they're waiting for a king who will come to do something about this world.

A king that will come to do something about this place of deep confusion and disorder and war and strife and strain and cruelty and pain and suffering.

And when they finally get to the cradle of Christ, it says that they bowed down and they worshipped him. Why did they do that? Because they've met the child to be born.

They've met the son to be given. They've met the king with four names. They've come and they've encountered this one of whom it's foretold in Isaiah chapter 9 verse 7.

[24 : 21] It says, of the increase 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.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. What a contrast to every other kingdom and every other rule and reign. Can any of us even dare to imagine tonight what it would mean to live in a society of justice and righteousness?

What must it be like to dwell in a kingdom that's run by just procedures which reflect righteous principles? Can you imagine that? It says, of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

This is not a temporary kingdom. It's not going to triumph for a little while and then fall and then be overthrown like every other kingdom. No, this kingdom that's being established is firmly established and it's going to go on increasing until it occupies all the space in the universe until this king comes to rule over all and to banish all that's evil all sin and all death until he comes to reorder our entire cosmos and what will be the result of his rule?

Stability. Security. Of the increase of peace there will be no end. There will be an endless sharing among us of shalom and wholeness and well-being and fulfillment and that, my friends, is going to happen on a coming future day.

[26 : 04] His kingdom is never going to come to an end and unless you and I become a citizen of his eternal kingdom we don't have much of a future.

In fact, we don't have a future at all and so the question tonight is how do I get into and how do I live in his kingdom? And the answer is this line we're about to sing where it says the king of kings salvation brings let loving hearts enthrone him.

And I want to invite you to just do that this Christmas whether that's tonight or over the next 12 days of Christmas to take your place at this manger throne to come to the cradle of this king and to bring him gifts that are worthy of a monarch to bring this sovereign the kind of things that he deserves not least the gift of your heart and the gift of your allegiance and all of your affections because there's no greater Christmas present than receiving this king with four names and there's no greater present that you could give him than to give him your very self.

And so friends I want to say to us let us enthrone him with loving hearts tonight and let's praise him from a glad and a full heart and let's celebrate his birth with everything that we've got and let's go out from here and live as people who follow in the lowly way of our king and go out to spread the peace of our prince of peace and his eternal kingdom to everyone we encounter.

And let's sing this carol together from a place of deep conviction and faith. If you believe it I invite you to stand with me and we're going to offer this carol in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[28 : 02] Amen. Amen.