

November 19, 2017

## The Reign That Put The Fire Out

Annette Hill Briggs

Isaiah 9:1-7

*[The Righteous Reign of the Coming King]*

**9** *But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

<sup>2</sup> *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.*

<sup>3</sup> *You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.*

<sup>4</sup> *For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.*

<sup>5</sup> *For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.*

<sup>6</sup> *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

<sup>7</sup> *His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.*

*He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Why do the Christmas Eve liturgies never begin with verse 5?

*For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be tossed into the fire.*

Instead, they always begin at 6:

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

But never,

*For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood.*

Maybe because we cannot bring ourselves to tell the truth about what an unholy, disgraceful mess we've made. It wasn't for nothing that the world required a Savior. Has human sin ever been summed up better than "*all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood*"?

In a letter to his wife Julia in 1862, Ulysses Grant wrote, "Soldiers who fight battles do not experience half their horror. All the hardships come upon the weak, the women and the children. Tossed into the fire."<sup>1</sup>

What fire? I have wondered all this week. Is *the fire* God's last nerve snapping? God's patience no longer wearing *thin* but *through*? Nope. It's the unholy mess before here mentioned: the wars and the greed that drive the mess. The deprivation and the abuse of the innocent. The abuse of power by those in place to lead. *The day is coming*, Isaiah 9 predicts, *when all the makings of the fire will be tossed upon the flames and the whole thing finally turns to ash*. The fire is us, a broken race. The reign of Christ is the reign that puts the fire out.

The book of Isaiah covers 400 years of Bible history, beginning with Isaiah ben Amoz around 783 BCE. He was a near contemporary to Amos. His name stuck to the work of a certain line of prophets who came after. Isaiah was a royal counselor in Judah, to the king and to the people, reminding them that only Yahweh could be trusted to defend Zion – that is, Israel and Judah.

Isaiah once walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem to illustrate his point on the futility of the king's policy of alliances with foreign nations. Remember this, next time I march on Washington. You might not like it, but at least I keep my clothes on!

Assyria had invaded Israel by the time of this writing. The tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had fallen. The question is no longer IF but WHEN Judah will be overrun as well. The faith question is how the people of God shall live from now. . .till then. . .and thereafter. Isaiah 9 speaks of faith beyond the time of war, at a time when the war has not reached the people listening to him. He preaches of the remnant who will survive and the peace to come, before the battle has truly begun – redemption not only in the midst of suffering, but in the dread of suffering not yet upon them.

The prophet speaks to every phase of human experience in the space of a single text. His listeners hear of their salvation before the hammer even falls. He calls them to courage to endure whatever happens with hope and faith. Is it any wonder that Isaiah was Jesus' Bible? the text He quoted more than any other? And the one the Church chose to introduce Him to us: *For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ron Chernow, Grant. (New York: Penguin, 2017) 216

I had so much more planned for you this morning – Bible history, linguistics. I know how disappointed you are that I have such a sore throat. I'm skipping it all to look briefly at Isaiah's four monikers for Messiah: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Each describes the nature of Christ's own self. But also, I am proposing, each describes a quality of the life of faith and our life together as the church.

### ***Wonderful Counselor:***

The one who makes life make sense, who explains it all to me – and not always in words. The one who lives within and alongside us in our lives and life together, teaching us to recognize justice and righteousness and compassion and decency; to honor those things in ourselves and each other; and to tell the truth when and where we find them lacking in this world. *Counselor* is guide and teacher and spirit and presence and truth teller and friend – the companionship of God in a world that doesn't know God. “*Nanny*” is one English translation of the Apostle Paul's word for this – the one who carries us along and teaches us the most basic skills of being human. Mighty Counselor – the One we cannot do without, who also teaches us to walk together through this life, treating each other with gentleness, patience, kindness, decency, encouragement.

### ***Mighty God:***

God is the able one, the one unbounded by all the things that bind us humans: fear and greed, confusion and self-interest. Could it be that our perception of the mightiness of God and the helplessness of humans coalesces into the stalemate of injustice we see everywhere? What if our confidence in God's greatness were matched by faith in God's confidence in us? What if we believed about ourselves what God believes about us? What if we took God at God's word? What if we practiced what we preach – that we are capable of far more with God than we are without God? What if the mightiness of God is meant to be most obvious in the radicality of our faith? in our courage to do things we'd never do apart from faith?

Will Campbell was a Baptist preacher from Mississippi in the 1950's. I want you to read his book *Brother to a Dragonfly*. Brother Will went to work for the National Council of Churches to work on issues of race relations in the South. He got death threats from white citizens' councils all the time, until he decided the Lord meant for him to work and preach among white racist groups. Then it was the liberals who shunned and threatened him.

I appreciated the story Lucas told last Sunday night, about friends of his who are not where liberals think they ought to be in affirming gay and lesbian believers, and yet put their bodies and their reputations between LGBTQ people and ones who would do them harm. “That looks like Jesus to me,” Lucas said. The mightiness of God shows up where justice and compassion and decency are boosted by the faith and courage of believers like you and me. Sometimes I think the church is waiting on God to mobilize some

heavenly D-Day against evil, as if there isn't a well-funded, well-trained, well-supplied army on the ground already. We wait upon the Lord while the Lord is waiting on us.

### ***Number Three:***

When you google "Why do dads. . .?" guess what the #2 hit is? *Why do dads sneeze so loud?* How about #3? *Why do dads hate boyfriends?* Number One is *Why do dads leave?*

**Everlasting Father** is the dad who doesn't leave, ever. Everlasting is a Bible word for the dad who stays and stays and stays and stays. The Everlasting Father is the one who never messes up so badly that he thinks his kids are better off without him. Nothing we could ever do or say can drive away the Everlasting Father. We belong to him no matter what. Every human parent messes up. We all have cause to tell our kids *we're sorry* now and then. Apparently fathers everywhere are sneezing far too loudly.

And moms – guess what moms are doing? If you google "Why do moms. . .?" the #1 hit is *Why do moms drink wine?* Apparently it bothers kids enough to ask. So all of us will fail, but all of us can try to imitate this everlasting quality of God in our walk with one another. I think about it as trying to grow a thick skin while keeping a tender heart. Love people, sharp edges and all, as best we can.

### ***Number Four:***

I don't know if Isaiah chose *Prince of Peace* because it alliterates so well, but it seems unlikely since he didn't work in English. Maybe it was because Old Testament princes were always going to war. In the Christian rendering, Jesus is always the Prince of Peace who went into the heart of human hate and evil, the war between life and death. He was Life. His battle plan, entirely, was submission to the enemy. Verbal, physical and otherwise – utter non-resistance.

I read a fair bit of American military history. Every once in a while an army will retreat and burn everything behind them as they go. Some surrender. None stand and let themselves be overwhelmed without a fight. Yet this was Jesus' plan for peace – to break the back of war at war's own game. Put death to death by letting death do its best against Him, then losing by death's own demise.

Herein is the gospel, friends. Jesus died and we will too. Jesus rose and we will too. It's so, so, so, so tempting to focus on the fire, to locate it precisely and measure its dimensions. But the fire has been condemned to ash already. Christ's reign has put the fire out. Whatever coals still smolder, He has made *us* able to put out. Life has won, and we are saved, and there is nothing left to fear. We've only to believe the Word that tells us we belong to Him.

Would you pray with me?