

Advent - Wk 1
“Wonderful Counselor”
11/28/21
Hebrews 4

Introduction

Hey folks, if we haven't met yet, my name is Walker, and I'm on staff here at Citizens. Good to be with y'all.

We are jumping into a new sermon series this week called 'Hope Has a Name' that will take us all the way to Christmas. These four Sundays leading up to Christmas have characterized what we know as the Advent season. This is the season where the church intentionally celebrates the birth of Jesus. Advent is just the Christian word for coming - we celebrate the coming of Christ.

It is probably no secret to you that Christmas is coming. As soon as Labor Day hit, all the marketing pivoted to Christmas. Thanksgiving is just a blip on the Christmas radar.

It is interesting, though, how the world has embraced the celebration of Christmas so whole-heartedly. There's something about this season that promises hope to people. All the marketing, all the shows, all the warm and fuzzies promise that hope is found in the season, the family time, the time off, the gratitude, the 'newness,' etc. Whatever it may be, our culture has bought hook, line, and sinker into the idea that Christmas makes people happy. Deeper than that, the Christmas season is something to hope in. You watch a Hallmark movie, and you hear 'Joy to the World' being sung by the neighborhood choir as the main characters kiss in the Christmas parade as the snow falls... Literally every Hallmark movie ever... This might make you feel good in the moment, but it's shallow.

The message of Christmas for Christians is that hope is not found in the season, the decorations, or the festivities. Instead, hope is rooted in the reality of the Bible. The Bible says Hope is found in a person. Hope is found in the Savior. Hope has a name, and His name is Jesus.

So the season of Advent intentionally remembers that while the Christmas add-ons are good, they are not the 'reason for the season.' Jesus is. Advent is our acknowledgement that Jesus is our only hope in this life.

So over the four weeks of advent we are going to look at one verse - Isaiah 9:6 - that talks about the coming Messiah, reminding us that hope, indeed, does have a name: "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." We'll spend each week looking at each of these titles - Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and Everlasting Father.

This prophecy comes to the people of God in the midst of some dark times. Bad things have happened to them - the Assyrians have sacked their country and destroyed their cities - and they have done bad things - they have been foolish, they haven't obeyed God, and they haven't listened when he's tried to correct them. On top of that, there is more suffering on the horizon.

There is no peaceful falling snow around the fire with hot chocolate. The circumstances are bleak. It's not unlike our own situation. We've had a hard year ** two years. Crazy things have happened to us over this last year. We are beat up, weary, and callous. We have also done some bad things this year. Some of us are carrying the shame and guilt of decisions or actions over this last year. We don't want to reflect on this past year because it means we have to think about all our mistakes.

Like the Israelites, we don't need some ethereal, feel good hope offered to us by our culture's ideas of Christmas. We need real hope. We need Jesus. In the midst of very real pain or our very real suffering, God is showing us where real hope is found. He gives these four titles to us to show us who Jesus is supposed to be to us.

Today, we are going to focus on the title 'Wonderful Counselor,' and to do so, we are going to look specifically on Hebrews 4:14-16 that takes 'wonderful counselor' from a nice idea to a glorious reality:

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Before we dive in, let's pray.

Wonderful counselor. This is the first title given to Jesus in this prophecy, but what does it mean that Jesus will be to us a wonderful counselor? Why is this good news?

Think about the idea that comes to mind when you hear the word 'counselor.' We at least have a category for people like this. Some of us go to counseling. If we don't have a counselor, we at least have a friend or mentor who we call when we need wisdom or advice. Think about your motivation when you call that friend or see a counselor:

- You want somebody to sympathize with you
- You want somebody to make sense of what is happening
- You want somebody to instill some confidence - to tell you you're doing ok

While a counselor or a trusted friend can be a good thing, these people can instill hope in us; our passage in Hebrews 4 shows us a more beautiful picture of who Jesus is to us. He will be an authoritative advisor to whom people will bring problems. Yet, He is different from an earthly counselor or that trusted friend because He has the power and authority to address our deepest problems.

We'll look at the hope that comes from seeing Jesus as our Wonderful Counselor. We'll see how Jesus sympathizes with us, Jesus intercedes for us, and Jesus invites us in and how these should instill confidence in us to come to Him as our wonderful counselor.

Let's look first at how Jesus sympathizes

Jesus sympathizes.

Look with me again at verse 15: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

The word that probably stands out to us is the word sympathy. I don't think we would readily identify Jesus with sympathy. Jesus and powerful, sure. But Jesus and sympathetic? That's weird. Can Jesus be sympathetic? Is Jesus showing sympathy a sign of weakness? Our text shows us why it's actually a very good thing. The sympathy of Jesus is relieving for our weary souls.

The author is conveying that Christ actually shares with our experience. Jesus is familiar with human life, so he understands what we experience. He hurts when we hurt. He rejoices when we rejoice. He laughs when we laugh.

Jesus is able to do this because He took on flesh and lived life as a man. He is not aloof or disengaged like sometimes we wrongly believe. He is acutely aware of the human experience because He experienced it all Himself. He is fully God, AND He is fully man. Don't miss Jesus's humanity. Think about some of these images:

- One year old Jesus having a dirty diaper, and Joseph having to clean him up
- Seven year old Jesus playing with his friends in the neighborhood tripping, falling, and skinning his knee in the street. He comes crying into the house, and Mary has to wash all the dirt out of his cut
- 12 year old Jesus starting to see facial hair for the first time.
- 27 year old Jesus sleeping wrong one night and waking up with back pain.

Think about some of the things we read in the Bible. Jesus gets tired and thirsty. He grows and learns. Jesus grieves and cries. Jesus goes to parties and experiences betrayal. He experiences joy and sorrow. He suffers and feasts.

These images might make us a little uncomfortable, but it's important to understand that Jesus is fully human and experienced the fullness of what it means to be human on this earth. He did not come to earth and just float around, not touching the ground, or not getting into the nitty gritty of life. We get a drastically different picture of Jesus in the Bible.

None of the human experience is foreign to Him. Yet, He does all of this, and He does not sin. This is significant. Jesus endured everything that is part and parcel to being a man. Yet, He was sinless. But, that is not because He was not tempted.

Actually, His entire life - from beginning to end - was one of testing and temptation. We see in the Gospel accounts the temptations He had to endure. The devil tries to twist His own words against Him to get Him to compromise after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. I don't know about you, but I am about ready to compromise after missing lunch. Jesus is tempted to compromise again at the end of His life - let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless not my will but Yours be done. There is temptation everywhere for Him to balk on the plan of God. Yet, Jesus bows His neck against temptation. And not only does He refuse to bend in those moments, He actively defeats the tempter. He has victory over temptation.

Because of this, he can deeply sympathize with our own temptations - He has experienced the fullness of temptation. Listen to this quote from CS Lewis that summarizes it well:

"A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist." – CS Lewis Mere Christianity, pg. 124-125

No human was ever tempted like Jesus was. It is not just intellectual sympathy; it is real, experiential sympathy. This gives hope in the midst of suffering. Jesus's experiential sympathy should warm your heart. He sees you. He is not blind to your suffering. He understands your hurt. He is not blind to your hardship. He knows your temptation. Your prayers do not fall on deaf ears. His heart is moved towards yours. He weeps when you weep, and He rejoices when you rejoice - actually He does those more for you than you do for yourself. He is your advocate. He is your counselor.

When you are tempted or when you suffer, do you run to Christ? Do you ever think about how Christ can sympathize with you? In the face of temptation or suffering, don't go anywhere else. He is full of sympathy, and He wants deeply to meet you in your time of need.

It's gets better than this, though. Not only does Jesus sympathize with us in our weakness, He actually wades into the mess of life and intercedes for us:

Jesus intercedes.

Look with me again at verse 14: **"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."**

A question undergirding much of the Bible is: How can a holy and sinless God dwell with sinful people?

In the Old Testament, God mercifully creates a way through the priesthood. The priest was the one who was to represent the people to God. Once a year, the high priest went into what was called the holy of holies - the place where God appeared and dwelt with His people. The high priest would enter the holy of holies to present a sacrifice to cover the sins of the people. This was a daunting task. All of the purity laws had to be followed to a 'T,' otherwise the priest would die in the presence of a holy God. A rope would be tied to his ankle to pull him out if that happened. Yet, this is how a holy God was able to dwell with sinful people.

So when we read in our text how Christ is the great high priest, this is revolutionary. It is saying that Christ Himself is superior to the old priesthood. The old way of priestly sacrifice to cover the sins of the people was only done in part - and it had to be constantly repeated. Now, Christ has done fully what the old priests could only do partly. The people of God no longer have to come with their sacrifices to be accepted before God. Jesus is both the priest - the one representing people to God - and the sacrifice - the covering for sin. And He does both of those perfectly. Now, all that is required is trust in Him. Through Jesus, your sin is fully dealt with, and anybody who trusts in Christ can have access to God. Jesus's death is a once and for all sacrifice for sin, and He gives us access to God!

This is what our text means when it says He has passed through the heavens. Because of Jesus, there is nothing off limits to us. When He dies, Jesus tears the dividing veil that used to separate man from God in two, giving you and me access to God if we trust in Jesus. He passed through the heavenly places, securing a place for us. Now Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. His priestly work of representing His people before God is completed. He is the once and for all sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, and He has given us full access to God through faith in Him. There is finality.

Isn't this what we are looking for in a counselor or a trusted friend? We want somebody to tell us we are ok. Someone to help us deal with our guilt and shame. Here's the thing though, those folks can only tell you those things. Jesus actually does it. Only Jesus can take away your sin. Only Jesus can deal with your shame and guilt. He entered into the Holy place to secure a place for you and to assure you of God's love.

It is better for you to come to Jesus with your sin. In fact, the Bible says, you must do it. Rather than trying to clean yourself up before you come to Him, rather than performing for His love and attention, rather than beating yourself up for the bad things you've done, rather than running far from him - come to Him. His mercy is sweet. There is freedom found in Christ. You don't have to carry the burden of making yourself worthy of God's love - Jesus has already done that. He has dealt with your sin, and He sits at the right hand of the Father advocating on your behalf.

He can be trusted as our wonderful counselor because He answers our burning questions: Am I ok? Am I good enough? Jesus actually emphatically says, "No." We're not, but He is. He is the answer. He takes our sin and gives us His righteousness. It is through Him - his sacrifice and his representing us to the Father - that we have access to God. And we don't have to tip-toe around, fearful; we can boldly come to Christ because of His invitation:

Jesus invites

Look with me again at verse 16: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Our text has been building a case - why can I trust Jesus as my wonderful counselor? In verse 16, there is a pivot to show us how to respond in light of what we have come to know about Jesus. We have seen how Jesus sympathizes with our human experience - nothing we go through is foreign to Him. And we have seen how his sacrifice and priestly ministry are good news for us - He has dealt with our sin and represents us before God. In light of those things, He invites us to come, trusting that we'll be received as sons and daughters.

If we trust in Jesus - that He has done these things we've talked about - we can freely come before God. This is the only condition - trust. We can come freely, not because of what we have done but because of what He has done. If we trust in Him, His righteousness is attributed to us as ours. If we trust in Him, His acceptance in God's sight is given to us.

A month ago, we wrapped up a series on the fruit of the spirit. One of the continual truths we saw was that all that Christ has, you have. What is true of Christ is true of you. Our text tonight is saying the same thing - the love the Father has for the Son - an unbreakable, eternal, never ending love - is the same love the Father has for You if you trust in Christ. Do you hear that? The Father loves you with the same love He has for the Son if you trust in Christ. What is true of Christ is true of you!

This changes everything. Because Christ is accepted in God's sight, those who trust in Jesus are accepted in God's sight. We can come freely and confidently to the throne of grace and expect to be received. When you come, your title in the eyes of God is no longer 'sinner.' Your title is 'saint.' Your title is 'son.' Your title is 'daughter.'

My parents have two basset hounds that are hilarious creatures. They are simultaneously cute and gross. The bigger one's name is Duke. Picture Dopey the dwarf in dog form, and that's Duke. My parents love Duke so much they feed him from the table. I'm not talking about the occasional scrap here and there, I'm talking legit human food: cheese, steak, eggs. He loves it. And he looks like he loves it, too. Well, there is this time each night where it clicks with Duke that he has not had his daily allotment of human food. Doesn't matter if he just pounded a bowl of dog food, once the realization is there, he's all in. So he moans. And he moans. And he moans until somebody recognizes his plight and gives him human food. Makes sense though - once you've tasted how good a steak is, why would you ever be content with that dry dog food stuff...

We do this, too. Think about how once you've had good wine or had a sommelier explain to you what kind of wine you like, the two buck chuck from trader joe's doesn't taste so good anymore

But for whatever reason, we don't do this with Jesus. Our text shows us how Jesus invites us to be our wonderful counselor because He sympathizes, intercedes, and invites, but we don't let him actually do it. We do a version of the sacrificial system - it just looks different. We bring our own sacrifices to God to try to deal with our sin and earn His favor. Think about how we approach God:

- Hey God, I know I did that thing earlier, but did you see how I really sacrificed for you by going out of my way to help that person? We perform for God.
- Hey God, I know I have that thing that you don't like, but haven't I made so much progress with it? Look how I have put in the work and changed! We clean ourselves up for God.
- Hey God, I keep struggling with that thing, and I'm just the worst. I can't believe it. I'm terrible. How could you love me? We beat ourselves up for God.
- Hey God, I know I've messed up, but I can't really come to you right now. The best thing for me to do is to distance myself right now, God. We avoid God.

All of these things are actually different versions of the same problem. We don't trust that he sympathizes with our weakness. We don't trust that he is in our corner. We don't trust that He is the only One who can fully and finally deal with our sin that we might be accepted by God. We don't trust that in Him, we have full access to God.

Most of my Christian life has been spent wrestling with this idea. I generally believe that Jesus is powerful, but the idea that He is actually in my corner, sympathizing with me, and advocating on my behalf to the Father is a different story. Does Jesus care? Does Jesus see me? Does Jesus understand what am I going through? Can Jesus really relate? How does Jesus help in my very real, very hard suffering? Does Jesus do anything about it?

In my mind, there is a constant debate over Jesus's thoughts about me. Generally, I believe He is disinterested with me. When I sin, I think He is frustrated with me or that I am a burden to Him. He has set forth the standard for me to follow, and when I don't do those things, He rolls his eyes at me: "Can you believe this guy? With how good I have been to Him, he goes and does this??"

So I work for His affection, I clean myself up before Him. Or I wallow in my self-pity, thinking that somehow my pity party will win the attention of God. Once I've tried all of those, I'll distance myself. I'll run from Him. None of those things answer the burning question of how I can relate to God and deal with my sin. These attempts only increase my anxiety.

Our text invites me and invites us to stop striving. Jesus can be trusted as our wonderful counselor. This brings relief because you no longer have to worry about handling your sin on your own. Jesus's sacrifice is sufficient for it. It also brings excitement to know that you will be accepted in God's sight as a son or a daughter. You can come confidently to the throne of grace, not because of anything that you bring to the table, but because of what He has done on your behalf. What is true of Christ is true of you.

Will you confidently trust that He has done the things our text says, and will you confidently trust Him as your wonderful counselor?

Pray.