
What Child is This?

Isaiah 9:2-7

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2021 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery and the Rev. Bruce Puckett

What child is this
who laid to rest
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Who angels greet
with anthems sweet,
while shepherds watch are keeping?

What child is this, really? I'm glad you asked Bruce. Why don't you answer it!

You know, this hymn shows us one thing. Can't you see it? It's just another peaceful evening. The world is full of shepherds guiding bouncing lambs through the rolling pastures, while whistling the sweet anthems of angels. It's as if there's not a care in the world. Even the newborn baby Jesus is already sleeping through the night. (All the parents in the room know just how unlikely that is.) It's the stuff of nursery rhymes. But is it the stuff of the gospel? Is it the stuff of reality?

The prophet Isaiah paints a different picture, a more realistic one. Isaiah tells of a world the Christ child will enter that is marked by shadows and obscurity and dissonance. It's a world waiting for illumination and rescue and hope. Yokes of burdens. Bars across shoulders. Rods of oppressors. Boots of warriors and garments rolled in blood. It's bondage and war and loss. It would be hard to hear any sweet anthems in the middle of all this, but it's the reality where we find the child.

It's the reality where we find ourselves, too. Wars are all around. Children shoot children in our streets and shopping centers and schools. Hopeless displays of seemingly hopeless futures. Military drones kill civilian kids in attacks of war. Refugee youth are stranded crossing borders, separated from those who love them. Humanity's wreckage thrown out to die. Deprivation of hope is the heavy load and the bar across the shoulders of our children near and far. Maybe it doesn't feel like it's at your home or in your neighborhood, but crises are all around.

The crises don't only come in the violence around us. The crises come in a justice system that keeps innocent people locked away and in addictions kept hidden with wealth and deceit. The crises come in the silence between relatives no longer on speaking terms and in the sting of loneliness. The crises come in all the pains of a world that is disrupted by sin and in need of rescue. All we have to do is look around or look within ourselves and the crisis, the chaos, the mess, looks right back at us. What child would come to this? What child would be born for this? What child is this, Luke?

This is the humble, holy Christ child, God's courageous son born for us, formed for us in the fire of the Spirit, the same fire that destroys the ways we seek to destroy one another. This child comes because he cares and a God who doesn't care, doesn't count. This child has been born for us right in the midst of our crises and chaos, in the midst of pandemics. This child comes and doesn't shy away from all of our burdens, but he comes to break them, to break our brokenness once and for all.

The prophet Isaiah's oracle is for a king's coronation. And this child is crowned king in the crisis to show who really is in charge. His coronation occurs in the storm, in our mess, in our excrement, and he brings calm right where he is, right where we are, right where you are. His presence is a promise for the future and is a promise for our present because this Christ child has already come. "Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth." He was born so that the world might be re-born.

This saving child bears our burdens as authority rests on his baby shoulders and no one else's. And "his authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace..." What child is this? A child-king with a reign of peace, which means *shalom*, internal and external wholeness, well-being, healing. He is God's Incarnate Wellness Center.

He is the center our peace, which is why the angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace..." When the child is born, the promise of eternal peace is born on earth. You may think the bondage, the war, and the burdens will never end but they will. It is Christ's reign of peace that will never stop. It will only continue to grow, small like a mustard seed, a baby, at first, but then growing to be the greatest of all. Just as the daylight increases and grows in the days ahead, so will the light of this child. What child is this, Bruce?

Well, I'm glad you asked, Luke, because this child has so many names. In just one verse Isaiah gives him four different names. Wonderful Counselor: he's the extraordinary advisor whose wisdom and understanding are beyond comprehension. Mighty God: he's the strong and powerful protector who is godly in all his ways. Everlasting Father: he's the eternal provider from whom generations come forever and ever. Prince of Peace: he's the royal ruler who makes all things whole and leads the world into the right order of *shalom*.

And the scriptures testify to so many more names. Let's just consider a few offered in the four Gospels. In Matthew, the disciples teach us that the child's name is Storm Stiller. In Mark, Jairus makes it clear that his name is Child Healer. In Luke, Mary shows us that the child's name is Lowly Lifter. In John, the woman at the well demonstrates that his name is Thirst Quencher. This is some of what the Gospels call him.

But I wonder what names you call him, Luke?

I call him the Way Maker and the Hope Giver. What do you call him, Bruce?

I call him Burden Bearer and Reconciler. What do you call him, Luke?

I call him a doctor in the hospital room.

I call him a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

I call him a balm for the world's brokenness.

I call him a salve for the world's sickness.

I call him joy increaser.

I call him justice maker.

I call him lover of my soul.

I call him Lord of my life.

I call him helper.

I call him healer.

Redeemer.

Comforter.

Sustainer.

Savior.

There are so many names.

What do you call him?

What do you call him?

What child is this? His name is Jesus. Now that's a name, a child's name, a name above all other names.

Crowned in our crises. You can't impeach him and he won't resign. Jesus. That's our King.

This, this is Christ, the King,

Whom shepherds guard and angels sing:

Haste, haste to bring Him laud,

The Babe, the Son of Mary!