



What Child Is This?

Sermon Series: Get Into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas

Sunday, December 9, 2007
Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Isaiah 9:6-7

For about two years now I've had this beard, but for many years before that (off and on) I sported a moustache. I grew my first moustache back in my mid-20's because I wanted to look like a certain movie character, -- the Sundance Kid. I had a full head of hair back then, but unfortunately not even a moustache made me look like Robert Redford.

The movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" came out when I was in high school. Back then friends and I would recite whole scenes of dialogue and especially one phrase. Perhaps you know the one I mean.

As the movie opens, Butch and Sundance and their Hole in the

Wall Gang have just robbed a train owned by E.H. Harriman. They are celebrating with glee when they watch as a shorter train slows to a halt a distance down the tracks. For a breathless moment no one quite knows what to expect. Then the doors of that train fly open and a posse of men on horseback jump out of the railroad cars and ride hard right at Butch and Sundance. The Hole in the Wall Gang abandons the money and takes off. They've outrun posses before and figure it will be no problem. But *this* posse stays right after them.

After a while, Butch and Sundance split off from the rest of the gang, trying to shake the

posse, -- but with no luck. At one point they ride together on the same horse, creating one set of tracks – but still no luck. They exhaust every trick in the book and still this relentless posse stays right on their tail. Over and over at various junctures in their effort to give the slip, astonished and exhausted, Butch and Sundance look over their shoulders and exclaim our favorite phrase, “Who are those guys?”

What Child IS this?

I’m going to tell you right now how to pronounce the Christmas song which is our theme this morning. Look over your shoulder and say, “What Child IS this?” Who tracks us down in this sanctuary this morning? Who came from heaven to relentlessly pursue us year after year after year?

Well, this morning in our text from the book of the prophet Isaiah God himself has given us a lens through which we can clearly see this child. The more we look through the lens the sharper our focus, the way an optician clicks and clicks lens after lens until we see with crystal clarity. So let’s answer the question “What Child IS This?” by looking at the words of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 9, verses 6 and 7: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; -- (and now come four titles) -- and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty*

God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His 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.

Each time we have a baptism here on Sunday mornings we announce the baby’s name. This baby’s name was a real mouthful: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. A seven year old girl heard that and said, “Boy, he’ll never be able to spell that by first grade!”

In the Bible one’s name unlocks the mystery of a person’s being: “What Child is this?”

Wonderful Counselor

Well, first of all, he’s WONDERFUL COUNSELOR.

If you’re in the midst of a crisis, chances are you would give anything to have alongside you a wonderful counselor, a wise friend, or a gifted counseling professional. The author of our Christmas carol this morning found in Jesus his Wonderful Counselor. Let me explain by giving you some background.

“What Child Is This?” is not a hymn; it is a Christmas carol. What’s the difference? A hymn is

something of the order of an official composition endorsed by the church hierarchy which sort of trickles down to the people in the pews. Last Sunday's song was a hymn. "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" is not a Christmas carol; it is a hymn created by the medieval church which got passed down through the centuries.

Christmas carols, on the other hand, don't start with the church, but with the people. They were sort of bootleg songs that began as a protest when the medieval church began to move all singing to trained cathedral choirs. People got tired of all the doleful chants in cathedrals. Out on the streets ordinary Christians began saying "We want some songs for us, songs we can sing and enjoy to celebrate God's gift of His Son."

That's why Christmas carols often don't have a composer. Instead the sheet music says "traditional melody" because we have no clue who the composer was. In fact, originally "carol" meant a dance, a rign dance. The carol, "Angels We Have Heard on High," with it's glo-o-o-o-ria, was originally danced to and so was "The First Noel" and "Good Christian Men, Rejoice." They were all songs to which people danced.

It really moved me to learn that "What Child Is This" was not

written by a church official. It was written by a depressed insurance salesman, William Chatterton Dix. Dix wrote the words and then put it to the Elizabethan tune of "Greensleeves." He was a man bedridden with depression and in his struggle he wrote these words:

*"Why lies he there in such mean estate
where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christian fear; for sinners here
The Silent Word is pleading."*

William Dix saw in this child a God who does not come down on us in our weakness, but who comes down and becomes weak alongside us as a vulnerable baby. This time of year God does not come to us as a hymn; he comes to us as a carol. No matter how you're feeling this morning, right there beside you is a Wonderful Counselor.¹

Oh, but that's only the beginning.

Mighty God

"What Child Is This?" Isaiah goes on to say, "MIGHTY GOD." It's right here in the Hebrew Scriptures. Critics sometimes say, "Well, the Jewish people never expected the Messiah to be God." Next time someone says that, open your Bible to Isaiah's prophecy here of 700 B.C. Or better yet, sing them a few bars of Handel's "Messiah." "And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor," – the what? – "Mighty

God." No new person came into existence at this baby's birth. Rather, the eternal person, the second person of the Trinity, having emptied himself of omnipotence and omniscience and all his godly attributes, but one --- love – came down and was born --- for us.

What does that mean for the fragile psyche of a person battling with depression like William Chatterton Dix, -- that our Wonderful Counselor is also Mighty God? Isaiah tells us just before we get to the list of names. *"And the government shall be upon HIS shoulders."*

Time and again, you and I wind up shouldering burdens only God can carry. And we feel it in our shoulders and our neck, don't we? – all that tension and tightness.

Well, next time you lie awake at night, unable to sleep, worrying, remember what Isaiah says here, *"And the government shall be upon HIS shoulders"* – not your shoulders, not my shoulders, but HIS shoulders. When you remember that, when you say, "Lord, my life is not about me, it's about you," – what happens? You relax, right? The burdens have a way of rolling off our shoulders onto HIS. Then things have a way of falling into proper proportion, into proper perspective.

Everlasting Father

Our Wonderful Counselor is Mighty God with shoulders wider than the universe, and if that weren't enough, Isaiah gives us the baby's next name, "EVERLASTING FATHER."

Everlasting! This baby held eternity in his hands – like a rattle! And that means every challenge you'll be facing next week he's already the Lord of. And "Father" speaks of the infinite tenderness of God.

This past Wednesday night I was here for the Logos Program dinner. One of the dads in our congregation, Chip Comstock, came in after getting off work. His daughter Sarah, who's in sixth grade, saw her dad and ran right over to him. What did Chip do? Did he hold Sarah off at arms length? No! He welcomed Sarah. He picked Sarah right up and held her in his arms. What a wonderful picture of tenderness!

I thought, "Where did I ever get the idea that our Father God is less loving than a dad like Chip with Sarah.

My friends, God welcomes each of us here this morning. If you've been away from church for a while, for a month, or a couple of months, or even a year or more, God will not hold you at arm's length. He welcomes you as his child. He's the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, and

Everlasting Father and He is there for you, -- ready to pick you up and hold you close.

Prince of Peace

And finally, "What Child Is This?"
PRINCE OF PEACE.

How desperately our world needs a Prince of Peace, right? If we need him here at home how much more is he needed in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Israel and Sudan, where soldiers are fighting and children are dying and mothers are weeping. And yet through the mystery of prayer we can lift even these crushing burdens onto the broad shoulders of the Prince of Peace. One day he will reign over all the governments and nations of the world.

Let me conclude with this. Most hymns are a statement. This carol asks a question: "What Child Is This?" As the song goes on, the question grows in power:

*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?*

The next stanza asks "Why does he suffer so much? Why is he homeless?"

*Why lies he in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding?*

*Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading.*

Then, following the questions the answer is in the chorus:

*This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste to bring him laud,
The babe, the son of Mary.*

And now, we who know who this child is, have to respond. How will we respond this week? How will *you* respond this week?

*So bring Him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come peasant king to own Him,
The King of Kings, salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

Make that your prayer.
Let us join with William Chatterton Dix.

Won't you enthrone this child in your heart as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

*Please stand and join me in singing
"What Child Is This?" (Hymn No. 53)*

¹ Thanks to Mary Ellen Ashcroft.