

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Christmas Eve Sermon

7:00 p.m.

Who Is This Child?

Luke 2: 1-20

Isaiah 9: 2-7

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December 24, 2009

“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.”

Prayer: O Holy God, in the divine Christ-child, may we see you and be led to the deep truth about this night. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Are you like me? Ever been intrigued with oxymorons? An oxymoron is when two words that have opposite meanings are put together, and they make sense! Here’s a famous one: “Jumbo shrimp.” How about “Forgotten memories.” Or, “Found missing.” Here’s an oldie, but a goodie: “Freezer burn.” I like the phrase, “Pretty ugly.” And, here’s one that is a sermon all by itself: “Inactive Christian.” [Think about it...!]

Seems to me that Christmas has some oxymoronic qualities to it, especially when I consider the question “Who is this child?” There are paradoxes associated with the child’s birth we celebrate tonight. The one that stands out right away is the idea that our holy, immortal, infinite, divine God is born for us in the form of a frail, mortal, finite human baby. Couldn’t God have come as a mature, full-grown individual? No, God chose to live in and among humanity. God of the heavens

has come to earth. An oxymoron.

Isaiah, in a marvelous poem, offers the prophecy that a child has been born for us, a son given to us. And, this child is to have authority. That's an oxymoron. How can an infant baby have authority?

It's about potential. It's what the child will grow into. It's kind of like when the young lion cub Simba of *The Lion King* sings that he "just can't wait to be king!" But, Zsa Zu reminds him saying "Not yet!" Potential.

The authority this child grows into is God's authority. It is God's word coming in the words of Jesus. And God's authority trumps all other authority.

It's kind of like the doctor who was running behind on his appointment schedule and decided to speed through town to try and make up lost time. A police officer spotted the fast driving doctor and soon was in pursuit. As the police car got behind the doctor, the doctor waved a stethoscope in the air, trying to give the false impression he was on a medical emergency. And he continued driving. When the doctor didn't pull over, the police car drove up alongside him. The doctor again waved his stethoscope, this time more vigorously. The cop was ready, though. He just smiled, and waved his badge. The doctor pulled over.

Just as law enforcement is a higher authority that trumps other authorities, so

the authority of this child trumps all other authorities (http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2537, retrieved December 22, 2009). It is God's word coming through Jesus.

Now what about Isaiah's word that this child is to be called a wonderful counselor? How can a child be a wonderful counselor? Does he have the necessary wisdom? True, we could attribute this to potential as well, but I think the name 'wonderful counselor' does apply to Jesus as an infant. Who among us does not know that a baby often unwittingly teaches us profound truths, much like a wise, wonderful counselor?

For example, babies teach us how to accept others. This little one, helpless, vulnerable, dependant, and needy, warms our hearts, fills us with compassion, and puts us in the position of loving another person. And, there is something about babies that touches deep needs in each of us, a need to be accepted, a need to be loved, a need to belong.

Every time I hold a baby in my arms and share in that child's baptism, I get moved beyond description at the power of the words we've heard from God in scripture. God says, "I love you. You are my child. I wrap you with everlasting bands of love. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you." The Christ-child brings this love, this 'wonderful counselor' type of wisdom, this acceptance of

others and an awareness that we are accepted by God.

The next two oxymoronic descriptions Isaiah uses are that this child is to be called “Mighty God” and “Everlasting Father.” How are these possible?

I think they are possible when we realize what Jesus taught about God—how God has an audacious love for humanity, how God is mighty to save us, even from the worst that we can do. This holy love brings a special reassurance to each of us. We are reassured that a new, meaningful alternative for living life is offered. We are loved! We don’t have to live loveless lives. We don’t have to live guilt-ridden lives.

And, we are reassured that this love is everlasting. This little baby showed us just how far God was willing to go to make sure that the everlasting love of the Father would be real for each of us. Jesus showed us just how far would God go to make sure that the words, “I promise to be your Emmanuel, your God with you” become our reality... all the time. How far would God go? To the cross... that’s how far.

And maybe that is the point of the child being the Prince of Peace. The baby Christ-child makes the power of love dominate our lives over the power of evil, making for peace. The child faced evil square on, and won... by dying... an oxymoron. But, as a result, God’s love came back stronger than ever, more prolific

than ever, more powerful than ever. This love can bring peace to our often traumatic lives.

I love the story from World War I about the German soldiers and the British soldiers in the trenches on Christmas Eve. The Germans started singing “Silent Night” in German, and the British began to sing back in English. Soon both sides were singing and an unofficial truce was declared as soldiers, under white flags, joined each other in the neutral zone. And they celebrated Christmas together. When they returned to their respective sides, they wouldn’t fire on each other any longer. The enemy now had a face, and it looked like theirs.

Celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace has a way of doing that. This child can break down the barriers and make us more aware of our oneness in Christ (http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustrations_for_installment.asp?installment_id=93000109, retrieved December 22, 2009).

So, who is this child? Consider the oxymoronic qualities of Christmas—he is the Son of God who is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and the Prince of Peace.

And here’s one more oxymoron to leave you with tonight. The child once born in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago is born again in our hearts tonight. Thanks be to God! Amen.