

What's in a Name?

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Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

We're experiencing a baby boom here at Washington Community Fellowship. And for many of these families it is their first child, which makes it a particularly exciting adventure. One of the fun parts about expecting a new addition is choosing a name. Depending on your culture and your personal preferences, your criteria can vary quite a bit. Some people try to reuse names from within their own family line. Some look for trendy-sounding monikers. Some want their child to have a popular name. Others opt for unique. Still others fabricate a name out of almost any combination of pleasant-sounding syllables.

In many cultures names are not just proper nouns but words that have a meaning in everyday vocabulary. I recently visited the American Indian Museum and saw a wide variety of names employed by Indigenous American tribes. Many of these names are linked to the animal world, and they are quite evocative. They make you stop and think.

Take the Cheyenne name, *Leaning Bear*. That's not like *Bob*. Nothing against *Bob*, but *Bob* doesn't evoke curiosity. Nobody wants to know why *Bob* is *Bob*. But I sure would like to know why that bear is leaning.

I don't know if every tribe names their children at birth or if some take a wait-and-see attitude. Otherwise, how do you come up with *Demothi*, which means *Talks While Walking*; or the Crow name, *Sour Stomach*; or the ever-popular *Inteus*, meaning *Has No Shame*.

Some names sound like they're the result of a family that couldn't agree, like *Awan*, which means *Somebody*. And it takes some pretty abstract parents to go with a name like *Cocheta*, which translates as *That Which You Cannot Imagine*.

Often tribal names are based on the circumstances of the child's birth. *Mitena* is an Omaha name meaning *Born at the New Moon*. And *Maralah* signifies *Born During an Earthquake*. That's got to be pretty rare. If we were to name our children after the circumstances of their birth most of them would be called *Enormous Bill at Hospital*.

Hebrew names, as well, carry very specific meanings. *Abraham* is *father of many*. *Isaiah* means *Yahweh is salvation*. *Ephraim* means *fruitful*. So, when the prophet Isaiah gives names to the Messiah, we ought to take note. The prophet does not say, “And his name shall be called Joe Jr., for his supposed father’s name was Joseph.” Nor does Isaiah say, “And he shall be called Flavian, for it just sounds cool.”

The messianic names of Isaiah 9:6 are, in fact, quite unique. They were not shared by anyone else in the Bible. And of the four, only one is repeated elsewhere in Scripture, and that is in the very next chapter of Isaiah. We’ve already seen how these names reflect the deity of Christ, but perhaps none more so than today’s focus, *Everlasting Father*. After all, identifying the *Son* with the *Everlasting Father* in the same verse doesn’t leave much wiggle room. (Isaiah 9:6)

And, yet, when I actually stop to consider this name, two very important questions come to my mind, and perhaps to yours as well. And those are the questions we will try to answer this morning. First, how can the child who will be born and the son who will be given be at one and the same time the Father? Doesn’t that make the connection a little *too* close, kind of confusing the two persons of the Trinity? And the second question is this: how does it change your world and mine to have a Savior who is called *Everlasting Father*?

Let’s see if we can shed some light on this relationship between Father and the Son. We indicated in the first sermon in this advent series that the son who is given in Isaiah 9:6 is not just a son of the nation, but the Son of God, *given* in the John 3:16 sense. And the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Christ was the Son of God. And, yet, the prophecy turns around and calls him the Father. So, how can he be both Father and Son?

On the face of it, it does sound a little confusing, kind of like that old song, *I’m My Own Grandpa*. You’ve heard that one, haven’t you?

[Ray Stevens sings this song at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYlJH81dSiw>]

“Now many, many years ago when I was twenty-three
I was married to a widow who was pretty as can be
This widow had a grown-up daughter who had hair of red
My father fell in love with her, and soon they too were wed.

This made my dad my son-in-law and changed my very life
My daughter was my mother, 'cause she was my father's wife
To complicate the matter, even though it brought me joy
I soon became the father of a bouncing baby boy.

My little baby then became a brother-in-law to Dad
And so became my uncle, though it made me very sad
For if he was my uncle, then that also made him brother
Of the widow's grown-up daughter who was also my stepmother.

Father's wife then had a son, who kept them on the run
And he became my grandchild, for he was my daughter's son
My wife is now my mother's mother, and it makes me blue
Because altho' she is my wife, she's my grandmother too.

Now if my wife is my grandmother, then I am her grandchild
And every time I think of it, it nearly drives me wild
For now I have become the strangest case I ever saw
As husband of my grandmother, I am my own grandpa.

No, this Father-Son conundrum is not one of those kinds of deals. It's not an inter-generational mix-up. It's not a semantic trick. It's what we know as the Trinity—which is a thing theologians say, as if that explains it.

The Trinity is a hard concept to get our minds around, because we don't have any satisfactory analogy. In our experience one person equals one being. So, it's hard to conceive of a being comprised of more than one person.

Biblical revelation started out with the oneness of God. One being, whom people naturally assumed was one person as well. In passages like this we have hints of plurality, but it's not until the New Testament, with the coming of Christ and the Spirit, that we have enough information to update what we know about the nature of God.

Here are the facts. When Jesus, the Messiah comes, he makes claims to deity and demonstrates his supernatural character and accepts worship. And then he sends the Spirit, who also has divine qualities and is worshiped along with the Father and the Son. These phenomena require an explanation.

The Old Testament is very clear that the one God is the only one worthy of worship. So, either these additional persons are impostors or multiple manifestations of the same Divine person or only quasi-divine—or there must be some sense in which God is both one and three at the same time—a Trinity or a *Triunity* if you will.

Jesus proved by his power, his message, and his devotion to the Father that he was not an impostor. These three could not be the same Divine person, simply appearing in different forms at different times, because they interact with one another at the same time and place. In fact, at the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16, Jesus came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and the Father said how happy he was with his Son. All at once.

It's true that there exists a functional subordination of the Son to Father, but that should not be interpreted as an essential inequality. It does not mean that the Son is less divine or that he is an inferior being, just as your child's functional subordination to you does not make them an inferior being. Rather, the notion of sonship is meant to convey an essential equality. In Scripture we see the Father treating the Son as divine and promoting

his worship, something that would, of course, contradict a fundamental principle of the Old Testament—unless the two persons actually belong to the same being.

In the early centuries of the Church there were multiple alternative explanations floating around that sought to resolve this tension. But, in the end, all of them were deemed heretical, because they solved the mystery by slighting either the three-ness or the oneness. Of course, that was not the end of inadequate explanations, but subsequent attempts have been little more than a re-packaging of the same old errors.

I think it's safe to say that the Trinity is a not a doctrine that the Church came up with to make Christianity more transparent to its members or to make it more palatable to the unevangelized. It is not an intuitive solution; it is not the mind's first refuge. It flies in the face of the KISS principle, Keep It Simple Stupid. It is rather, the very set of Scriptural statements about Father, Son, and Spirit that have driven Christians throughout the centuries to embrace this mysterious doctrine, in spite of its intellectual awkwardness. And that, in itself, constitutes *prima facie* evidence that this is the correct solution.

It's important to have some sense of this Trinitarian context before tackling Isaiah 9:6. But we still have to sort out the relationships in this verse, because even if there are three in one, that still doesn't explain why the Son is called "Everlasting Father."

Equality is one thing; equivalence is another. Yes, the language of Isaiah's prophecy underscores the equality of Father and Son. But, no, it is not trying to fuse or conflate the Father and Son by saying that they are one in the same. Even if that had been his intent, prophetic language does not lend itself to such precision. This kind of poetry, given in verse form, is better at generating images and impressions than it is at dissecting theological nuances.

It's interesting to note that Isaiah doesn't say that the Son will *be* the Father; he says that this Son "will be called" the Everlasting Father—just as he will be called each of the other three names that appear in this verse. There's no evidence, however, that Jesus actually was or will be "called" any of these names, in the sense of a proper name—least of all, *Everlasting Father*, a name more naturally associated with a different person of the Trinity.

So, what is Isaiah trying to tell us? As we have seen, biblical names are more than handles; they are descriptive. The point of the prophetic name here is not what people will actually say when they address him, but what he is like.

If you get a promotion and somebody tells you that they are going to start calling you *The Big Kahuna*, it doesn't mean that anyone will ever take you for an actual Hawaiian high priest (which is what the term means) or that anybody will ever say, "Hey, Kahuna! Yeah, you, the big one..." The name is a title designed to say something about you.

In order to better understand the relationship between Father and Son, we have to look to the New Testament, where it is fleshed out. There is a hidden, holy aspect of God that is mysterious and beyond direct human perception. This is the aspect of the Godhead

represented by the Father. John 1:18 says: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

How can this verse say that no one has ever seen God and then turn around and talk about the Son being God and also being known? Because in the first case the reference to God is a reference to the Father. The Son, however, is also God, as the verse clearly says. Therefore, he knows the Father perfectly and is able to make him known.

Sonship implies equality, because a Son must be the same kind of being as his Father. This was patently obvious to the Jews. John 5:18: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him... he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

But Jesus clarified that he was not just a separate but equal God, when in John 10:30 he claims, “I and the Father are one.” Which doesn’t mean that they are identical. In that case it would be quite odd for Christ to speak about the Father in the third person and to converse with the Father in the second person.

So, using the New Testament to interpret the Old, we discover the full meaning of Isaiah’s prophecy: that God the Father and God the Son pertain to the same Divine being and essence, and though the Son is a distinct person with a particular role, he is everything the Father is, including everlasting.

Of course, Isaiah did not understand the full import of what he was saying. Nor could Mary and Joseph have grasped that the helpless child born on that first Christmas was called the Everlasting Father. As the song asks:

“Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is Heaven's perfect Lamb?
The sleeping child you're holding is the great I Am!

On that night so long ago, when God himself became part of the human race, both history and eternity were changed forever. But, more specifically, what does it mean to us today, as followers of Jesus, that he is called *the Everlasting Father*?

Let’s first see how the Christ of Christmas functions in a fatherly way, and then we’ll see how his eternal nature makes that even more special. God’s fatherhood interfaces with us in at least three ways – as progenitor, as protector, and as provider.

Fathers are progenitors, creating offspring. Human fathers are procreators, whereas God is the Creator. And we are indebted to him for life itself. Dt. 32:6, the song of Moses says:

“Is this the way you repay the LORD,
you foolish and unwise people?”

Is he not your Father, your Creator,
who made you and formed you?"

The gospel of John tells us that the Son, too, was involved in creation. In John 1:2-3 we read: He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

The Song of Moses makes it abundantly clear that there is a right way and a wrong way to respond to one's Creator. Because Christ has given us life, both physical and spiritual, we must recognize our dependence on him. And we must respond in obedience and thanksgiving.

Unfortunately, dependence is not our strong suit in this individualistic America, known for its Declaration of *Independence*. Standing up for myself, protecting my rights, doing it my way – that's what our society values. Which makes us prefer a God who can help us get what we want, rather than one to whom we are beholden.

At some point almost every preschooler decides that they are quite grown up enough to strike out on their own without mom and dad. Our daughter got in the car, with the keys, and announced that she was going to drive herself to the candy store— at age two! Of course, we just laughed, because she couldn't even reach the pedals. In contrast, our presumptuous independence against God is not quite so funny, because we can reach the pedals—and get ourselves in as much trouble as a kid driving a car.

As father, God is also our protector. Most of us fear something, something we don't want to face alone. When we were children, we sometimes hid under the covers from the imagined terrors of night. Until dad showed up and the fears magically disappeared—because then we had someone (who at least seemed) all powerful on our side.

Listen to Zechariah 2:8 says that "whoever touches you touches the apple of his eye," and assures us that God will take care of those people. To paraphrase Jim Croce's rule of thumb: "You don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, you don't pull the mask off of the Lone Ranger, and you don't mess with God's elect." Yeah, I know it doesn't exactly rhyme, but it's true. Our father is our protector.

Not only is heavenly Father our progenitor and protector, he is also our provider. Psalm 68:5 calls him "a father to the fatherless." Whatever the lack, whatever the need God is our provider for us. Jesus reminds us that our Father in Heaven knows our need and faithfully provides. But if Christ himself is also called the *Everlasting Father*, then we understand that God will indeed meet all our needs "according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus," as the Apostle Paul tells us in Philippians. The one who multiplied the loaves and fishes can fix your bank account, he can shoulder your debt, he can supply your retirement—if you will simply trust him and follow his leadership.

Fathers are progenitors, they are protectors, and they are providers. That can be true of both human fathers as well as our heavenly father. But when the prophet describes the

coming Messiah as *Everlasting* Father, all of a sudden he places God's fatherhood beyond the scope of human capacity.

Every father wants to be there for his children. I interrupt staff meetings and counseling sessions and just about any kind of activity, when I see my daughter's number come up on my cell phone. Sometimes I have to just say I'll call her back, but I want her to know that I am there for her, and I want her to feel free to call me.

We all want our children to think that we'll always be there for them, but the fact is that we won't. Because we can't. Many of you have lost parents in recent months, and you know that all too well. There is only one everlasting father.

I have known three of my great grandfathers. They're all gone. I had a very close relationship with one of my grandfathers. He died a few years ago. When I was little, I just took my dad for granted, as if he'd always be there. I'm so happy when I get to see him these days, and all the more so because those opportunities are finite. They always were, but we just sort of become more aware as we get older. I thank God for a father who not only loved and cared for me but pointed me to the Everlasting Father, for that is the greatest and most permanent parental legacy of all.

Acting as the Everlasting Father, Jesus Christ gives us not only temporal but eternal life. In John 10:28, in the same passage in which he claims oneness with the Father, he says: "I give them [my sheep, my followers] eternal life, and they shall never perish." If he weren't everlasting himself, he couldn't offer an everlasting relationship.

The Everlasting Father does not change with age. You know, as we get older we at some point realize that we are no longer "with it." And then a few more years go by, and we don't even care. But our Everlasting Father does not go from vigorous to feeble, nor from inexperienced to wise. He never gets out of synch with succeeding generations. His guidance is just as relevant today as it was when he called Abram from Ur of the Chaldees.

Finally, the Everlasting Father has an eternal perspective. He takes the long view of our growth. He doesn't give up on us just because we're going through a bad stretch. According to Philippians 1:6 he is committed to completing what he started in us.

Every parent can look back and wish they had a few do-overs. "If only I'd known then what I know now." But the Everlasting Father is never short-sighted. But My perspective is bound by my own finitude. But God never wises up too late. He is the Everlasting Father.

What's in a name? Quite a bit, as it turns out. *The Everlasting Father*, Isaiah calls him. A surprising name to apply to a tiny baby born in a stable to be raised by pre-modern parents in an era of fear and injustice and spiritual corruption.

What's in a name? A father—a progenitor, a protector, and a provider. But, except for the fact of physical life, this fatherhood is not a relationship that our Savior forces upon us. Rather, it is one that he invites us into. He offers us eternal life. He offers us protection. He offers us provision. If we will simply let him be our father. Have you discovered the joy of dependence on an all-wise and all-powerful father? Or are you stubbornly insisting on making your own way?

What's in a name? Think just a moment about the word *everlasting*. In Washington, DC even short-term associations can be hard to find. Employment opportunities in this global market fracture relationships. An unkind word can end a friendship. A tragic moment can take away a loved one. But Christ, who is himself eternal, offers you eternal life, an unending relationship with him. If you have never accepted that offer, you should do so today.

Jesus offers you his eternal perspective, a wisdom that goes far beyond your own to light life's dark way. And though your appreciation of him will grow as you mature, he will ever remain an unchanging father figure on whom you can always rely.

What's in a name? Quite a lot, and some of it surprising. A name like Everlasting Father that points, not to some kindly codger blissfully chilling in his eternal now, but to a dynamic God-man who entered our world under the most upside-down of circumstances, who feels our hurts, who meets our needs, and whose fondest, forever desire is to be in relationship with a finite, ungrateful, and stubborn soul like me and like you. And he proved it, by becoming one of us, by being rebuffed and rejected by those he came to save, and, finally, by taking his love all the way to the cross.

And now, like the father of the prodigal son, this Everlasting Father waits to welcome his wandering children. If you have strayed from him today, won't you lay aside your pride, receive his grace, and come home?

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